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New York Burning: Liberty, Slavery, and Conspiracy in Eighteenth-Century Manhattan¹

Dataset Article

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¹ The text of this article has been abridged from Jill Lepore, *New York Burning: Liberty, Slavery, and Conspiracy in Eighteenth-Century Manhattan* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005), xii, and Appendix A, also available at <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/V1WI8Y>. Ellipses have been omitted in the abridging process. Minor alterations have been made for clarity and consistency, such as silently capitalizing "Black" and adopting the term "dataset" in place of "database"; other changes have been documented in brackets.

Description

Over a few short weeks in 1741, ten fires blazed across [New York C]ity. Nearly two hundred slaves were suspected of conspiring to burn every building and murder every white. Tried and convicted before the colony's Supreme Court, thirteen black men were burned at the stake. Seventeen more were hanged. Another eighty-four men and women were sold into yet more miserable, bone-crushing slavery in the Caribbean. This dataset contains demographic information about the City of New York in the 1730s and 1740s, compiled for research into an alleged slave rebellion in 1741. Data in this [collection] is largely taken from the legal proceedings, especially Daniel Horsmanden's *Journal of the Proceedings*, published in 1744. At the very end of his *Journal*, Horsmanden included a five-page "LIST of NEGROES committed on Account of the Conspiracy." Using that list as a starting point, I attempted to reckon with the world in which those Black men and women lived and died, and to find out more about them than their names and fates, not only by conducting a close literary and cultural reading of the *Journal*, but the traditional sources and methods of social history: censuses, tax lists, court records and maps. Horsmanden wrote lists; I built datasets.

Beginning with a closer inspection of Horsmanden's own "LIST of NEGROES," I attempted to analyze the names of enslaved people named in the proceedings in 1741, in 1712, in runaway ads, and, as a control population, in a census of slaves from Ulster, Dutchess, and Westchester Counties, taken in 1755. The 1755 slave census, containing the names of slaves outside of New York City, is the best available control population. If it represents a reasonable approximation of the names of slaves living in New York itself, the results are telling: while slaves with African names represent only 4% of the general population, they represent 13% of those named in the 1741 conspiracy, 14% of the city's runaways, and 19% of those involved in the 1712 revolt. Five of the thirteen men burned at the stake in 1741, or 38%, had African names.

My aim in laboriously reconstructing the city was to detect patterns in the conspiracy, the fires, the confessions and the trials that were otherwise unobservable by reading Horsmanden's *Journal* and restoring that document to its literary, legal, and cultural context, as important as that context is to any understanding of the events of 1741. [Out of the broader set of datasets in the Harvard Dataverse, select data from *App_b--accused.xls*, *Person.xls*, and *Runaway.xls* has been integrated into *Enslaved.org*, as well as as some content from *FinalOutcomes.xls*.]

Dates of Data Collection

2000-2005

Dataset Languages

English

Geographic Coverage

New York

Temporal Coverage

1730-1741

Documents Types

Register

Criminal Document

Sources

Horsmanden, Daniel. *Journal of the Proceedings in The Detection of the Conspiracy FORMED BY Some White People, in Conjunction with Negro and other Slaves, FOR Burning the City of NEW-YORK in AMERICA, and Murdering the Inhabitants*. New York, 1744.

For additional sources, see Lepore, *New York Burning*, Appendix A and the Methodology below.

Methodology

Two hundred and seventeen slaves and free blacks are mentioned in Horsmanden's *Journal*, along with four hundred and fifty-eight whites: defendants, justices, lawyers, jurors, witnesses, owners of accused slaves, victims of arson, and bystanders. I began by entering all of these people, with any information that could be gleaned about them from the *Journal*, in the dataset's People table. I then turned to censuses and tax rolls, to understand the city's population as a whole.

Complete citywide censuses that identify individuals by name and list households by age and race are woefully lacking for mid-eighteenth-century New York. Because individuals are not named in any surviving censuses from 1703-1790, tax lists proved a more usual source of identifying individuals. New York City tax assessment rolls for the early eighteenth-century are extant through 1734. The 1730 tax assessment roll, containing the name, ward, property description, assessment and landlord for each of 1902 taxpayers was entered in the dataset by research assistant Kathryn Lindquist, from a transcription made by Julius M. Block, Leo Hershkowitz, and Kenneth Scott and published in the [*New York Genealogical and Biographical Record*] 95 (1964): 27-32; 166-174; 195-202.

New York City censuses, usually divided by race and sometimes by age and ward, are available for 1698, 1703, 1712, 1723, 1731, 1738, 1746, 1749, 1756, and 1771. They can be found in Evarts B. Greene and Virginia D. Harrington, *American Population before the Federal Census of 1790* (New York, 1932), 97-8. The 1731 and 1738 censuses were corrected according to

corrections offered by Robert V. Wells ("The New York Census of 1731," *New-York Historical Society Collections* 57 [1973]: 255-9) and Gary Nash ("The New York Census of 1737: A Critical Note on the Integration of Statistical and Literary Sources," *William and Mary Quarterly* 36 [1979]: 428-35). Nash's corrections to the 1737 census are crucial, and can be corroborated by observation of the mathematical errors propagated in the ward totals, as they appear in E.G. O'Callaghan, *The Documentary History of the State of New-York* (Albany, 1851), 4: 186. The original of the 1737 census is in the Public Record Office, C.O. 5/1059/69. Additional population data can be found in Ira Rosenwaike, *Population History of New York City* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1972), 6-13.

City officials also commonly excluded the Outward from city regulations, but I chose to include the Outward because its neighborhoods, Harlem and the Bowery, were crucial sites of slave "frolics" and also housed the city's small population of free blacks. As a guide to the population of New York in 1741, the 1730 tax list is invaluable, but it presents an obvious problem: it is eleven years out of date. Moreover, the 1730 tax list does not include Montgomerie Ward, which wasn't created until the city received a new charter in 1731. To better approximate the population in 1741, the manuscript 1734 tax list, of 2026 records, was also entered into the dataset, again, by the indefatigable Katie Lindquist. Key individuals who do not show up on the 1730 tax list do turn up on the list in 1734, including, for instance, Daniel Horsmanden, who arrived in New York in 1732. Between the two tax lists, there is only small variation in either individual or total wealth (total wealth in 1730 was £34,910, in 1734, £36,029). That there was little change over the four years between 1730 and 1734 makes me reasonably confident in using the 1734 tax list to describe the city in 1741. In general, however, where I assigned residential wards to particular slave owners, I tried to find evidence beyond the 1734 tax list to corroborate that assignment.

While the tax lists are useful in painting a portrait of the population of the city as a whole, they also help trace the lives of individuals. The two tax lists allowed me to identify property-holding city residents by both ward and wealth. Although neither tax list includes street addresses, tax assessors assessed property on a door-by-door basis, and proximity on the tax rolls reflects geographic proximity. The tax lists also provided a route to learning taxpayers' occupations and ethnicity when Joyce Goodfriend generously shared her painstaking identification of over two-thirds of the 1730 taxpayers by occupation and ethnicity. Lindquist also entered this data into the dataset. Scattered occupations were also taken from David Valentine, "List of Citizens Admitted as Freemen of the City of New York, from 1749 to the Revolutionary War," *Manual of the Corporation of the City of New-York for 1856* (New York, 1856), 477-502; as well as from other miscellaneous sources. I also entered additional biographical information for many of the 458 white trial participants from biographical encyclopedias (the *Dictionary of American Biography*, the *Encyclopedia of New York City*, and the *American National Biography*), as well as from print and on-line genealogical reference tools, including Ancestry.com and the *New York Genealogical and Biographical Register*. I also checked the list of white trial participants against a surviving list of the city's militia companies (printed in O'Callaghan, *Documentary History*, 4: 211-226), which I entered in the dataset, along with the list of city firemen appointed in 1738.

Public offices held were taken from E. B. O'Callaghan, "Officials of the Province of New York, 1630-1775," O'Callaghan Papers, New-York Historical Society; and from David T. Valentine, *Manual of the Corporation of the City of New-York for 1854* (New York, 1854), 400-440.

After my reading of the *Journal* led me to suspect a link between the slave conspiracy and the Zenger trial, I began tracking the party affiliations of people involved in both episodes. Among the most important sources for identifying political sympathies were: 1. "Names of those agreeing to sustain Colonel Morris," James Alexander Papers, Rutherford Collection, NYHS, Box 2, page 75. This is a list of 296 men who supported Lewis Morris. 2. Candidates for elected office with known party affiliations, especially in the 1734 Common Council elections and the 1737 Assembly elections. 3. The Zenger jury. 4. Signers of a petition on behalf of James Alexander, MCC 4: 314. 5. Members of the grand jury who found in favor of Alexander's good character, MCC, 4: 326. 6. A list of men prepared to pay Zenger's Bail, November 23, 1734, James Alexander Papers, the John Peter Zenger Trial Collection, NYPL.

While census totals document the number of Blacks living in New York, and identify them by ward, age, and sex, there is no named census for slaves in the city, and nothing that serves as the equivalent of the 1730 and 1734 tax lists in providing additional information about blacks. The 1703 census reports the totals of slaves by age and sex within households, without supplying names, but it is far too outdated to be useful. No named census of slaves exists except for a provincial census taken in 1755, from which the New York City records are entirely missing ("Census of Slaves, 1755," in O'Callaghan, *Documentary History of New York* 3 [1850], 843-868). The Black men and women mentioned in the investigation in 1741 is the best name-census available (although seven are referred to by their owners' names only). I entered all of these named and anonymous individuals into the dataset, keyed to their owners. And, as names were in many cases almost all that I knew about some slaves, I classified their names by type: African, Biblical, Classical, Dutch, English, Literary, Masters (for slaves who appeared to have been named after former owners), Nouns, Place, Spanish, and Unclassifiable. I then built two related tables, containing the names of 1) slaves who participated in the 1712 revolt, and 2) runaways. I also classified those names by type. Participants in the 1712 revolt were taken from Kenneth Scott, "The Slave Insurrection in New York in 1712," *NYHSQ* 45 (1961): 62-7. Research assistant Paul McMorrow located and photocopied advertisements for runaway slaves in five newspapers, spanning the years 1725 to 1752: 1. *New York Gazette*, 1725-1744. 2. *New-York Weekly Journal*, 1733-1751. 3. *New York Weekly Post-Boy*, 1743-1747. 4. *New-York Evening Post*, 1744-1752. 5. *New York Gazette*, 1747-1752. A total of 253 ads for runaway slaves and servants appeared in New York City newspapers from 1733-1752. Since many of these ads were placed by owners outside of New York, who suspected their slaves or servants might have run to the city, most were not relevant to my inquiry. I did enter seventy-five advertisements for runaway slaves and servants from New York City.

Beyond these sources, much than can be known or guessed about the nature of the enslaved population of the city comes from what is known about the slave trade itself. The vast majority of the trading directly with Africa did not begin until the late 1740s: "records can be found for

seventeen vessels that engaged in only twenty-one voyages over the period 1715-1747” (James G. Lydon, “New York and the Slave Trade, 1700 to 1774,” *WMQ* 35 [1978]: 377, 383-4, 387-8.). New York merchants’ increased involvement in the African trade can be easily charted using *The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade*, a database of records of 27,333 voyages from 1595 to 1866, or about 70 percent of the trade. According to Lydon’s data, taken from the naval and customs records, as well as newspaper reports, there was very little activity before 1748. And, even after that point, New York merchants’ involvement in the trade was minimal, never amounting to even two percent of the total tonnage of the city’s overseas trade. But about a quarter or a third of the city’s community of about 300 or 400 merchants took part in the trade. Where possible, I have identified which New York merchants were involved in that trade, as a number of these men or their slaves were also involved in the conspiracy trials. Of those slaves imported to New York, probably about a fifth to a quarter of the total imports remained in the city, although New York merchants only began exporting slaves in any large number in 1750.

I entered every legal proceeding contained in Daniel Horsmanden’s *Journal* into a table in the dataset, keyed to the People Table. I entered more than a thousand records: every appointment to a jury; arrest, accusation, arraignment, plea, opening or closing statement to a jury, judgment, examination, confession, deposition, trial testimony, verdict, sentence, cross-examination, execution, discharge, and pardon, beginning April 21, 1741, the opening of the Supreme Court session, and ending with August 29, 1741, John Ury’s execution. I also pasted the full text of confessions, trial testimony, and court motions, taken from a digital version of the trial proceedings, available at a Library of Congress’s American Memory website, “Slavery and the Courts.” Because I was interested in following patterns of accusation, I entered all accusations in a separate, searchable Accusations Table. For each slave mentioned during the investigation, I assigned one of nine “Final Outcomes”: 1. Unknown 2. Confessed but not Arrested 3. Mentioned but not Accused 4. Accused but not Arrested 5. Accused but not Found 6. Discharged 7. Transported 8. Hanged 9. Burned. Final Outcomes were coded with numbers 1 to 9, for increasing order of severity.

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Data Links

Dataset Repository: Harvard Dataverse <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/V1WI8Y>

Linked Data Representation: *Enslaved.org* [Summary Visualization](#)

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