CHAPTER THREE

SLAVERY AND THE CAUSES OF THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION IN PLANTATION BRITISH AMERICA

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Only a minority of British American colonies joined Massachusetts in revolt against Britain in July 1776. Depending on how you count colonies, there were either 27 or 31 colonies in British America when Thomas Jefferson wrote the Declaration of Independence. Only thirteen contiguous colonies in British North America needed to explain why they had dissolved “the political bonds” connecting them to Britain and justify why they claimed “the separate and equal status to which the Laws of Nature and of Nature’s God entitle them.” Colonies north of New Hampshire and colonies in the Atlantic Ocean and the Caribbean stayed loyal to Britain. This loyalty was what British ministers expected. In particular, they assumed that all colonies in which slavery was the primary social and economic institution would be too afraid of slave rebellion and were too dependent on British troops to risk making grandiloquent assertions of liberty. Slavery would keep these “yelp[er]s after liberty,” as Samuel Johnson contemptuously described American planters, quiescent.¹ What surprised ministers was not that so few British American colonies joined Massachusetts in armed rebellion, but that the people of Boston and its surroundings were able to attract so much support from southern colonies where the social structure was radically different from the relatively poor and homogeneously white social structure of the American North. They expected the empire to divide over revolution, but expected the break in the imperial “snake,” as depicted in Benjamin Franklin’s famous woodcut “Join or Die,” to occur further north along the chain of colonies than it in fact did.

This chapter explores why the break in the colonial chain of colonies occurred as far south as it did, and it explores what it meant for the plantation societies of colonial British America that the break happened between the northern and southern halves of slave societies, rather than somewhere near the Mason–Dixon line—the line that marked the major political dividing line in the independent United States before the American Civil War. This question is hardly unexplored. Nevertheless, it is a question whose answer is usually invested with a degree of teleological determinism. Historians usually ask why the southern mainland colonies joined the rebellion
as if this result was foreordained rather than a result that careful contemporary observers had every reason to think unlikely, especially in South Carolina and Georgia, where slave populations were large. Historians also look at the plantation colonies of the British West Indies during the American Revolution and ask why these colonies stayed loyal, rather than explore whether they might have joined the Revolution.

I examine this question by reversing these assumptions, paying particular attention to South Carolina and Jamaica as the colonies whose choice of loyalty in the War for American Independence could most easily have been made differently. If fear of slave rebellion was so determinative of British West Indian attitudes during the American Revolution, making them loyal even when they were sympathetic to American republican ideology, why did such fear not also force South Carolina to stay loyal? Conversely, if, as is increasingly historical orthodoxy, South Carolina was impelled into revolution precisely because it wanted to control its slave population and doubted British intentions in this respect, why did similar assumptions not work in Jamaica and encourage Jamaican planters to join the rebellion?

These are not minor questions. That Virginia would join the revolution is reasonably explicable. Republican sentiment was very strong in Virginia; the planter elite wanted to assert their moral authority against the British government as a way of shoring up support for their political rule among restless poorer whites; and economic distress had made Virginians anxious about the harm that British actions were doing to their economy. South Carolina’s revolutionary orientation makes less obvious sense. South Carolina’s decision, however, to join its northern brethren was momentous both in how the War of Independence ended up, and also in the resulting commitment of the United States to black chattel slavery as a constitutionally-approved institution. Although South Carolinian planters and merchants may have had their doubts about the wisdom of their decision to join northern rebels during the War of Independence, given the viciousness of warfare in the South, its decline into internecine civil war, and the massive disruption that war created within the plantation economy and within the slave system, the rightness of their decision to rebel was confirmed by events after the Revolution, when they consolidated their power within the new state and nation, and when the institution of slavery was made a central support of American republicanism. Jamaican planters, on the other hand, had reason to regret their choice to stay loyal, as their loyalty was rewarded, as they saw it, by British betrayal, as abolitionism moved from being a minor to major social movement from the mid 1780s.

My principal contention in this chapter, and one that is at odds both with current historical orthodoxy and with the assumptions that British governors made about the political options open to planters in societies with large slave populations, is that planters were less incapacitated by fear of what slaves might do to them if they rebelled than is commonly supposed. That they had a wary worry about slave violence is clear. So, too, it is clear that enslaved people took advantage of the fog of war to pursue their own agendas at the expense of planters during the War for Independence. In the end, however, planters were not paralysed by fear of slave rebellion, especially before the events in Saint Domingue in the first few years of the nineteenth century showed planters the capacity of black soldiers to effect serious damage to planters’ property and persons. In 1776, British American planters had no reason to think that a slave rebellion, of which there had been remarkably few
in British American history, and only one (Tacky’s revolt in Jamaica in 1760) that had posed a significant threat to planter power, would not be easily overcome. A slave rebellion, even a serious one, was part and parcel of plantation life, similar as a disruptive event to a hurricane, and, like a hurricane, it was an event that caused temporary disturbance, rather than being a threat to the very viability of plantation systems.

At bottom, why Jamaica, Barbados, and Antigua chose to be loyal, and why Virginia, Maryland, Georgia, and South Carolina decided to join with the rebels in Massachusetts, is due to hard-headed calculations about whether British actions were sufficiently outrageous that they compromised planter’s wealth, autonomy, and heightened sense of their own liberty. In the West Indies, planters chose to stay loyal because their anger over British actions was not especially pronounced, their relationship with Britain was more satisfactory than in the thirteen colonies, their economies were booming, the number of residents who were born in Britain (and who continued to have connections in the metropolis) was very high, and because they believed that the costs of rebelling far outweighed any gains. In the Chesapeake and South Carolina, by contrast, planters were not only convinced that British actions were attacks on their liberty, autonomy, and independence, but they were also sure that, if they did not resist these attacks, they would be reduced to the abject slavery that they made their own slaves suffer. The causes for Revolution remain, in my view, constitutional rather than derived from racial, class, or sectional conflicts. Large slave populations and resentful Indian populations played a part in shaping political leaders’ decisions about whether to decide for or against rebellion, but more important than these considerations was republican ideology and constitutional concerns about the extent to which British actions were violating customary constitutional assumptions.

II

On October 26, 1775, William Henry Lyttleton, Member of Parliament for Bewdley and a former governor of both South Carolina and Jamaica, and thus a man with expertise and experience with the psychology of planters and the nature of plantation society in British America, gave a notorious speech to the House of Commons. Foreshadowing what John Murray, Lord Dunmore, the last royal Governor of Virginia, was going to do just two and a half weeks later, Lyttleton outlined a strategy whereby the southern and island colonies of British America could be isolated from the northern colonies. Comparing the thirteen colonies to a chain, he noted that the most northern colonies, with their abundance of white residents, were the part of the chain least likely to break under British pressure to reform. The weaker parts of the chain, Lyttleton suggested, were those that corresponded to the southern colonies of South Carolina and Georgia, where the white population was close to being outnumbered by the black enslaved population.

Making an implicit criticism of the futility of the Coercive Acts as a means of bringing Massachusetts to heel, Lyttleton argued that Britain should concentrate on separating the vulnerable southern colonies from their alliance with northern colonies. He was convinced that Britain could turn the racial demography of the southern colonies against rebellion. South Carolina and Georgia, he believed, were paralysed
by fear of what their enslaved population might do to them if given the chance. Lyttleton suggested that Britain should use British troops stationed in America to stand firm against outbreaks of settler patriotism. He argued that a few regiments should be sent to the southern colonies of British North America, which were weak “on account of the number of negroes in them,” with the understanding that “the negroes would rise, and embrue their hands in the blood of their masters.” Moreover, he advocated that these troops be augmented by using rebel slaves who had run away from their plantations, and by exploiting the military obligations of the few free people of color in the two colonies, he believed that southern planters were so afraid of slave rebellion that a show of force on the British side, especially if it included a touch of racial antagonism, would quickly bring the southern provinces to heel. This view was commonly shared. The most prominent patriot in the colony, and the leader of Charlestown’s Sons of Liberty, Christopher Gadsden, had expressed concern about South Carolina’s ability to support its northern brethren given the threat that the large enslaved population of South Carolina posed to the colony’s security. Writing to Boston radical Samuel Adams, Gadsden admitted that South Carolina was “a weak Colony from the Number of Negroes we have amongst us and therefore exposed to more formidable Ministerial Tricks.”

Lyttleton’s idea was a prime example of such a ministerial trick. The large slave population in the southern colonies could be used as a means of causing divisions within British North America. His idea was not taken up by his fellow members of parliament in London. By the time news of the speech had reached Charlestown, however, news of the even more inflammatory proclamations made by Lord Dunmore in neighboring Virginia had greatly alarmed white Southerners. Faced by increasing numbers of rebel forces, Dunmore had pre-empted the political process by declaring war against the patriots on November 7, 1775. A week later, he promised freedom to the slaves of rebels who might run away from their masters and join the royal cause. Hundreds of slaves defected to Dunmore, allowing him to form and arm a Royal Ethiopian Regiment. South Carolinians were doubly worried because they had just foiled, or so they believed, a potential slave insurrection in June 1775, which they argued had been developed into a conspiracy by a wealthy free black ship pilot, Thomas Jeremiah. Jeremiah had been tried, convicted, and executed, the execution (hanging followed by a public burning of the body) occurring on August 18, 1775.

Lyttleton’s plan was ingenious but likely to backfire, which may have been the reason it was not taken seriously in London, even if it was taken seriously in the colonies. Several historians, most notably Robert Olwell and Woody Holton, have argued that rumors of British attempts to stir up enslaved people and Native Americans, so that they would take up arms against South Carolinian and Virginian planters, merely confirmed planter beliefs in ministerial wickedness. It firmed up their conviction that the best way to protect their investment in slavery was to join rebellion against a government that seemed to threaten the continuation of slavery in the South. What Lyttleton was suggesting, and what Dunmore soon after proposed, was ample confirmation that their fears about British ministerial intentions were correct.

But one can understand why Lyttleton thought the way that he did, given his personal history as governor of two of Britain’s important plantation colonies. Between 1756 and 1760, Lyttleton had been governor of South Carolina, where his time had been largely taken up with dealing with the threat that Cherokees posed
to the colony’s security. In 1762, Lyttleton transferred to Jamaica where he had an unpleasant time, being involved in an acrimonious dispute with the Jamaica Assembly over questions of privileges. Lyttleton ended up on the wrong side of this dispute, being recalled to London in 1766, with the planters triumphant.\footnote{16}

His tumultuous governorship of Jamaica was overshadowed, however, by events that occurred just before his arrival. In May 1760, Jamaica was rocked by the most serious slave conspiracy in its history, Tacky’s revolt, an island-wide slave rebellion that probably came close to destroying white rule on the island. The revolt was skillfully put down by the Jamaican-born governor, Henry Moore, who in 1765 followed Lyttleton’s public service career in reverse, moving to New York just in time for the Stamp Act riots, where he was largely successful in steering a cautious path between satisfying American radicals and doing the responsibilities of a British colonial governor. Moore and his fellow Jamaicans responded to the defeat of Tacky and other slave rebels with a ferocity that appalled metropolitan observers, torturing to death dozens of the principal conspirators and transporting hundreds of others to the Mosquito Coast. For the next few years, Jamaicans reworked their laws so as to prevent such an event from occurring again and concerned themselves intently with security issues, spending vast sums on rebuilding fortifications, agreeing to pay for large numbers of imperial troops to be sent to the island, and looking nervously at their tenuous relationship with Jamaica’s two communities of Maroons (independent African-American societies which occupied Jamaica’s mountainous interior)—their ostensible allies, but allies that white Jamaicans knew could easily turn into formidable enemies.\footnote{17}

Tacky’s revolt came as a surprise to Jamaican planters, but not to British governors. The most impressive mid-eighteenth century Jamaican governor, Edward Trelawney, had assumed that white Jamaicans would eventually destroy themselves through their reckless over-stocking of slaves in a plantation economy where excessive mortality meant that the white population increased only marginally decade to decade. Moreover, like most governors of Jamaica, he lamented the Creole residents’ inattention to defense matters and thought their military abilities, as manifested in colonial militias, were shockingly poor. His main concern, however, was with Jamaicans’ slave management practices. In secret memoranda to the Board of Trade, he argued against allowing slavery to be introduced into the Mosquito Coast, a Central American possession of Britain that had been taken from the Spaniards, and which was essentially a colony of Jamaica because the institution of slavery there would follow the Jamaican pattern and would attract Jamaicans who were eager to become planters, but who lacked the resources to do so in Jamaica itself. Experience showed, he believed, that Jamaicans were the worst slave managers in the world: cruel and careless in equal measure. Expanding slavery outside the island would almost ensure a slave revolt, especially in a small, isolated beachhead on the Spanish Main, surrounded by Spanish colonies only too eager to cause harm to the British Empire by provoking mistreated slaves into rebellion.\footnote{18}

Trelawney also expressed his misgivings about British slaveholding in the colonies in a prescient 1746 publication, An Essay Concerning Slavery. The essay was written anonymously, but recent research suggests that the author was the Jamaican governor.\footnote{19} Trelawney warned white Jamaicans of the likely consequences of relying too heavily upon an expanding slave population in a society where there were fewer
than 10,000 whites and approximately 100,000 slaves, with thousands more arriving each year in the booming Atlantic slave trade. There were too many slaves in proportion to white settlers, the author argued, and “If some Stop [were] not . . . put to” the “Rage that Planters have for buying Negroes” and better “Care or Conduct . . . used in the Management of them, the Island must be over-run, and ruined by its own Slaves.” It was no surprise, therefore, that planters were “not only alarm’d by every trifling Armament, but under the greatest Apprehension frequently from their own Slaves.”

Trelawney’s principal concern was with the security of white settlers. Not only did they buy too many Africans for comfort, they were driven by “a narrow Selfishness, and total Unconcern for every Thing that doth not regard their immediate Interest,” and they took far “too little Care to manage these Negroes.” Their recklessness meant that they were “playing with Edge-Tools, which they could not manage.” They needed legislation because they “should be prevented from cutting themselves.” But Trelawney also speculated on the effect of such actions on enslaved people. He presumed that Africans would eventually not stand for how badly they were treated: “Are Men’s Lives so to be sported with? Are Men to be so much at the Mercy of another Man? Are the lives of human Creatures, I say, to be play’d with in such a Manner, such as a giddy thoughtless Planter thinks fit?” Planters thought, he argued, that Africans did not care for liberty as much as did Britons. They thought that “Negroes are not of the same Species with us, but that being of a different Mold and Nature, as well as Colour, they were made entirely for our Use, with Instincts proper to the Purpose, having as great a Propensity to Subjection, as we have to command, and loving Slavery as naturally as we do Liberty.” Sarcasm dripped from the pen: how could Britons “who know the Value of Liberty, who prize it above Life,” believe such foolish notions? Britain needed to stop the slave trade to the British colonies so that Jamaica did not become torn apart by a massive slave conflagration.

Tacky’s revolt in Jamaica in 1760 seemed the fulfillment of Trelawney’s warnings. It seemed to confirm that plantation societies in the Americas were inherently unstable and that eventually they would succumb to slave rebellion. Events in Dutch Berbice in 1763–4, where slave rebels not only seized the reins of government but also kept European forces and white planters at bay for several years, seemed to show the inexorable direction in which the plantation system was heading. The violence of the slave system, it was thought, sowed the seeds of its own destruction. The future was apocalypse. Sooner or later intrepid slaves would throw off their chains, kill their masters, and transform the plantation social structure so that the plantations would be destroyed and barbaric (to European minds, at least) African kingdoms would be established. The apocalyptic vision was put forward most graphically in the great bestseller of the 1770s, Abbé Raynal’s *Histoire philosophique et politique des deux Indies*. In sections probably written by Denis Diderot, claims were made that all humans needed to be treated with dignity, and that the injustice of the slave system was such that inevitably a black Spartacus would arise to wreak bloody vengeance on the planters who mistreated their slaves so badly. Many other Europeans believed that slave rebellion was bound to come. In 1737, for example, Samuel Johnson’s friend, Richard Savage, wrote a poem about West Indian slavery in which he sympathized with “Afric’s sable Children,” inflicted with “nameless
Tortures.” He ended the poem with a blood-curdling (to white West Indians, at least) prediction that “yoke may Yoke, and Blood may repay.”

Contemporary historians have tended to accept this essentially eschatological reading of the inevitability (and the rightness) of slave rebellion. It is a matter of faith among modern historians that enslaved people never accepted their lot, that they resisted and rebelled whenever they could, and that, when given half a chance, they “grasped the opportunity to escape and live in freedom.” In this reading, the Age of Revolutions not only placed slavery on the ultimate road to extinction, even if that road was paved with many false turnings before the end of the road was reached. It also was an age in which enslaved people, as intensely interested in philosophical and political debates about the nature of liberty as were their masters and mistresses, used the opportunity of revolutionary ferment in the Atlantic world to advance their own freedom. Planters, therefore, were “playing with edge-tools,” to use Trelawney’s phrase, when they not only talked about abstract ideals of liberty, but also attempted to put those ideals into action.

Resistance against slavery by slaves is taken by most historians of both slavery and also of the American Revolution in the South and the Caribbean as a given. They imbue slaves with higher values than those that their masters’ presupposed. Philip Morgan, for example argues, in a major work on Southern slavery, which ends with a treatment of the revolutionary period, that what slaves wanted was to oppose the dehumanization inherent in their status and to “force masters to recognise their humanity.” With this “independence,” slaves could create an autonomous culture that reflected their “cultural creativity.” Slaves, he averred, had “an unquenchable human spirit” despite the “psychic toll” that “the unbridled domination and naked exploitation” inherent of slavery wrought on them. He concluded: “Subject to grinding daily exploitation, caught in the grip of powerful forces that were often beyond their power to control, slaves nevertheless strove to create order in their lives, to preserve their humanity, to achieve dignity, and to sustain dreams of a better future.”

For Ira Berlin, the revolutionary years in the Americas gave blacks “new leverage” in their perpetual struggle against their owners, the war offering them “new opportunities to challenge both the institution of chattel bondage and the allied structures of white supremacy.” The Haitian Revolution, in particular, proved that one could not keep enslaved people down forever. The brutality of the St. Domingue slave system meant that it could not last. As Franklin Knight argues, “a system like the Caribbean slave system bore within itself the seeds of its own destruction and therefore could not last indefinitely.” Indeed, historians are inspired by the Haitian Revolution to make extravagant claims for its world importance. Laurent Dubois, for example, claims that “If we live in a world where democracy is meant to exclude no-one, it is no small part because of the actions of those slaves in Saint-Domingue who insisted that human rights were theirs too.” For Robin Blackburn, who makes the most powerful argument for the international importance of the Haitian Revolution as “a triumph for the revolutionary concept of ‘the rights of man’,” the “Haitian Revolution channelled mass longing for freedom into a ban on slavery” and resulted from slaves’ instinctive realization that “individual resistance was limited and very risky, such that the freedom they sought could not be won without collective support.”
This growing consensus over what enslaved people wanted from life—freedom at any cost, and a freedom that is remarkably similar to twenty-first-century liberal democratic conceptions of what freedom means—and an increasing assumption that any revolution in the Age of Revolutions can be largely measured by whether blacks achieved or did not achieve freedom, has had considerable implications for the historiography of the causes and consequences of the American Revolution and of the War for American Independence in the plantation colonies of British America. At the same time that the Haitian Revolution is lavishly praised as the fulfillment of the most radical impulses of the revolutionary spirit, the Southern leaders of the American Revolution are increasingly faulted for their hesitance in following through on the logic of revolution to extend liberty to “all men.” They are also criticized for failing to act on the principle that if every person was “created equal” then the proper task of revolution was to abolish slavery.

From this consensus, a number of conclusions follow. First, just as Lyttleton and Dunmore assumed, fear of slave rebellion must be of paramount importance in the thinking of Southern and West Indian planters in deciding on revolution. Second, the revolution must have destabilized slave systems throughout British America, mainly due to the actions of slaves themselves in creating rebellions, engaging in resistance and, for the first time, devising intellectual ideologies of antislavery and African-American identity. Third, the American Revolution might have set in train the beginnings of abolitionism not just in North America but also in Britain and possibly France. Fourth, the American Revolution should be judged on what it achieved for black people, rather than on what it achieved for white men. Finally, in creating the conditions whereby Jefferson’s dream of an Empire for Liberty became in reality an expanding empire of slavery, the American Revolution can be seen as a failure. That failure was not immediately apparent, as the succession of Virginia and New England presidents tried fitfully to live up to the emancipatory possibilities of the American Revolution in the first fifty years after the Declaration of Independence. But the failure was made manifest in the election of Andrew Jackson, now seen not as the inaugurator of democratic politics, but instead as an especially egregious example of the worst type of Southern racist planter and Indian hater.

III

The problem with stirring words about the “unquenchable human spirit” of slaves who exhibited a widespread “quest for individual and collective freedom,” and who only needed a “spark” from the “altar of 1776” to initiate their eventually successful aspirations for universal rights is that there is little evidence, first, that slave resistance was especially widespread either before, during, or after the Age of Revolutions, or, second, that planters were as concerned about slave revolt as contemporary British ministers or modern historians imagine them to be.

The extent of slave rebellion in eighteenth-century British America was not great. Historians have tried very hard to find slave rebellions but they have not found many that significantly interrupted colonial life. Some important colonies, such as Virginia, Maryland, and Barbados had no slave rebellions in the eighteenth century. South Carolina was relatively free from slave revolts, with the only one of consequence occurring in 1739, when a force of somewhat less than 100 slaves rebelled,
killed between 20 and 30 whites and fought a pitched battle with militia, which they lost comprehensively. Perhaps 200 slaves lost their lives as a result of the conflict. The Stono Rebellion terrified whites in Charleston, but it never posed a major threat to the security of the colony. Indeed, its most important effect was to shore up the slave system, with lawmakers in the following year devising an extremely harsh slave code that gave planters near total power over slave property. Four years earlier, a slave conspiracy in Antigua was discovered before it was to go into effect. It had the potential, if it had actually occurred, to destabilize this small island, but, as with most slave rebellions, it was stopped before it started. Easily the biggest and most dangerous slave revolt was Tacky’s revolt in Jamaica, when thousands of slaves in several parts of the island erupted into rebellion, killing a considerable number of whites, torching plantations and imperiling the very safety of the island. Unlike Stono, it was subdued only with great difficulty and through the Jamaican state using a combination of local white militia, British sailors and soldiers, and Maroons to overwhelm slaves.35

That slaves rebelled at all is remarkable, given the ferocity with which slave rebellions were put down by white planters able to exploit the full panoply of state-sanctioned violence on their behalf. But they seldom rebelled often enough to cause planters serious concern. By 1776, no planter in Virginia or Barbados, and virtually no South Carolinian planter except for long-lived planters with long memories, would have experienced slaves taking collective action against them. Even in Jamaica, where there were a series of small rebellions in the late seventeenth century, another small rebellion in 1765 and a foiled slave conspiracy in 1776, and the major revolt of 1760, long periods—the first sixty years of the eighteenth century, for example—passed without a slave revolt. The Age of Revolutions, moreover, did not see rebellions increase. Indeed, as David Geggus has pointed out, the frequency of rebellions and conspiracies in the British Caribbean reached an all-time low between 1776 and 1815. During the American Revolution itself, the British Caribbean was particularly quiescent, despite suffering hardship and famine as a result of the disruption of supplies from North America after 1778 and multiple hurricanes in the 1780s. Slaves took advantage of the war in the American South to run away in large numbers, and they made small gains in the nature of their working lives, gains that were quickly destroyed as violence on the plantations dramatically increased in the immediate post-war period, when planters sought successfully to restore traditional patterns of control and deference. But no slave rebellions occurred in the midst of planter disarray and slave hardship. The closest slaves got to rebellion were a few quickly discovered and harshly punished conspiracies in 1774 and 1775 that may or may not have been more than rumor.36

Nevertheless, even a rumor of a slave conspiracy was enough to cause slave owners great concern. An actual slave revolt, such as Tacky’s Revolt in 1760, caused “great Terror and Consternation.” Thomas Thistlewood, a slave overseer who had been caught in the middle of the Revolt, and whose Jamaican diary provides graphic evidence of how terrifying a slave revolt could be for white people, gave some idea of how much slave owners feared slave insurrection. He was convinced that it was only good fortune that had prevented slaves from achieving their aim: to set fires “in many places at once,” so that “all the Whites who Come to help Extinguish them, were to be Murdered in the Confusion.” He thought that another revolt would
soon follow. Dining with a fellow overseer in October 1760, he was told by his companion of an old proverb “which frights many people: One thousand seven hundred and sixty three, Jamaica no more an Island shall be (not for the whites).”

Those colonists who had not experienced a major slave revolt were sometimes inclined to downplay the horror of such an event. Barbadians, for example, had been “so long exempted from insurrections,” that they “do not appear to harbour any considerable suspicions on that head,” and they felt “but little of that corporeal dread of blacks which seems to pervade some of the islands.” Jamaicans were not so complacent. They continued to worry about slave revolt during the 1760s and 1770s. Indeed, they used their fear of slave revolt as an ostensible reason not to join with North Americans in rebellion. In words that echoed what their bête noir, William Henry Lyttleton, was to express a year later, the Jamaica Assembly noted in a formal petition to the British Crown protesting British actions in British North America, that they could not express their discontent as violently as colonists were doing on the mainland because their fear of slave rebellion and their dependence on British defence had reduced them to such a “weak and feeble” state that they could not offer physical resistance.

One should not overestimate, however, the extent to which Jamaicans and other Americans were paralysed by fear of slave rebellion. Jamaica was quite willing to resist British authority and to express its hostility to British actions in forthright language when it wanted to do so. When the Board of Trade remonstrated with Jamaica about legislation passed in the immediate aftermath of Tacky, the Jamaican Assembly was indignant in its reply. The Assembly declared that “they are by no means disposed to submit their sentiments to the determination of their lordships nor ever will, at any time, suffer them in any respect to direct or influence their proceedings whatsoever.” The language that it used in the extensive controversy between the Assembly and Lyttleton in the mid-1760s was similarly extreme and uncompromising. Nicholas Bourke’s dazzling defense of settler rights against royal authority contrasted Jamaicans as “men zealous for the constitution and liberties of their country” with Lyttleton’s supposed support for “the absurd and slavish Doctrines of DIVINE and HEREDITARY RIGHT and PASSIVE OBEDIENCE and NON-RESISTANCE.”

Moreover, Jamaicans had little reason to think that a slave rebellion had much chance of being successful. Tacky had shocked them, but the rebellion was put down with maximum violence, and the measures instigated in the aftermath of Tacky to keep slaves in check and to ensure white solidarity were remarkably effective in keeping whites in Jamaica safe. White Jamaicans experienced a number of revolts after Tacky and before the Declaration of Independence, but they had put them down easily, bloodily, and with relatively little loss of white life. As far as Jamaicans were concerned, violent repression worked, at least so far as it killed those slaves prepared to rebel and gave to other slaves contemplating rebellion a stark warning of the torments that awaited them if they rebelled. Slaves contemplating rebellion did so, therefore, in the knowledge both that their enterprise was likely to fail and also that the result of failure would be a grisly death by slow torture. Given the small likelihood that a slave revolt would succeed, slaves who rebelled were therefore opting for a form of self-destruction. Many more slaves chose not to seek self-destruction through rebellion, but instead sought release from enslavement through
suicide. Thistlewood recorded ten suicides in his diaries between 1768 and 1782, making suicide the leading cause of recorded slave deaths next to infectious disease. Militarily trained colonial governors were contemptuous of the martial spirit of white Jamaicans, while civilian governors found Jamaican methods of slave management highly deficient. But white Jamaicans were sufficiently martial and well-disciplined to be able to cow their slaves into submission. One of the primary explanations for white success at keeping blacks down was their ready recourse to strategies of terror. Jamaican slavery was especially brutal even by the elevated standards of New World cruelty. Planters reveled in incorporating sadistic methods of inflicting pain and humiliation into their frequent punishments of slaves. They created a police state where whites enjoyed a form of absolutism based on their monopoly both of the coercive powers of the state, and also of the ideological advantages of having white skin. There was no pretense that whites governed through any form of consent. Indeed, blacks were imagined to be so far outside the social system that it was impossible to conceive of ways whereby any fiction that slaves consented to their treatment was possible. White Jamaicans were absolutist tyrants with a torturer’s charter that allowed them to do whatever they wanted. As the historian Bryan Edwards put it, the occasional planter kindness “affords but a feeble restraint against the corrupt passions and infirmities of our nature, the hardness of avarice, the pride of power, the sallies of anger, and the thirst for revenge.”

Terror worked as a strategy for controlling enslaved people. It was particularly effective as British American slave societies transformed their slave structures so that the large integrated plantation containing hundreds of slaves presided over by a small number of well-rewarded, capable, and viciously brutal white managers became the dominant institution. The first half of the century marked the nadir of black life in the Americas, with Jamaica being a notoriously brutal locus of slave activity. The plantation regime needed raw power to sustain it and planters mobilized the apparatus of coercion in the service of this new regime. Slavery had always been brutal in British America but the level of violence exercised against Africans dramatically increased as the size of slave labor forces increased.

It was not just in Jamaica that slavery became especially brutal in the first half of the eighteenth century. Ira Berlin has described this process for the Chesapeake. After 1700, Berlin explains, “Chesapeake slaves faced the pillory, whipping post, and gallows far more frequently and in far larger numbers than before.” Moreover, the punishments meted out to slaves were not only cruel, but increasingly ingenious. Punishments were invented intended to humiliate and demoralize, such as when William Byrd II forced a bedwetting slave to drink a “pint of piss.” In addition, there were grotesque mutilations for criminal infractions and gruesome tortures leading to executions for those slaves caught after daring to rebel. Christopher Tomlins has shown how a similar process of debasement and dehumanization can be traced in increasingly draconian slave codes in South Carolina. Successive restatements of slave laws showed increased and almost obsessive fixation on calibrating the degree and nature of bodily penalties—whippings, burnings, mutilations, and hangings. Penalties in turn became increasingly severe. The statute of 1740 reiterated and deepened the coercive measures that the state held over slaves.

But it was indeed worse in the islands. Jamaica had always been an incredibly violent place. In the seventeenth century, pirates were subjected to gruesome executions
white servants were treated with great harshness. Africans, however, got the worst of the treatment. Matters probably got worse rather than better for slaves in the early eighteenth century. Even defenders of white planters admitted that they used abnormal levels of cruelty against slaves. Planters delighted in inventing forms of torture to accompany executions. Indeed, they reverted to using method of punishment, such as castration and burning by slow fire, which had lost favor in Britain since medieval times. Moreover, slave masters went out of their way to humiliate slaves and deny them their humanity. Knowing how much importance, for example, that slaves placed on having their bodies buried intact, planters regularly destroyed their bodies by burning or beheading slaves convicted of crimes. The rector of St Catherine Parish noted in 1751 that planters’ policy of seeking “to deprive [negroes] of their funeral rites by burning their dead Bodies, seems to Negroes a greater punishment than Death itself.”

Planters used both physical terror and also the mental apparatus of terror to keep slaves firmly under control.

IV

The conventional explanation for why Jamaica did not rebel in 1776 is that it couldn’t. Its commitment to slavery, and its geographical position as a British island in a sea surrounded by French and Spanish enemies, meant that it relied on British troops for defense to an extent unparalleled anywhere else in British America. The conventional explanation, however, is not very convincing. For many historians, the threat of slave insurrection is sufficient explanation for why Jamaica did not rebel. Planters, it is argued, thought that declaring support for the American revolutionaries would have exposed them to massive risk as numerically dominant slave populations that had shown a willingness to rise up against white power before would have taken advantage of dissension within white ranks and sought their own kind of independence.

Jamaica was probably less vulnerable to attack from the outside than is usually assumed. The history of eighteenth-century conflict in Jamaica, and Jamaica’s difficult terrain suggests that subduing rebellious forces, even when there was an army already established in the island, was difficult. The rebel slaves of 1760 were subdued with difficulty. The Maroons in the long first Maroon War, which lasted well over a decade in the 1720s and 1730s, were never beaten. Jamaica had to come to terms of peace with them in 1739, rather than force them to surrender. Attacking Jamaica from the outside was even more difficult. The historical experience of European involvement in the Caribbean, especially after the advent of persistent outbreaks of yellow fever from the 1690s onwards, was that the malign disease environment was the central fact shaping geopolitics in the region. John McNeill’s path-breaking study of the geopolitics of fever in the eighteenth-century Caribbean shows how intra-European armed struggles were fought mainly in landscapes undergoing rapid environmental change, and in which the impact of debilitating fevers, especially yellow fever, were the principal factors determining the outcome of events. An invading army could only succeed if the island was small, had poor fortifications, and if victory was won very quickly. If a European army was forced into a siege against determined defenders with good fortifications for any extended period, then yellow fever would do its work. The easiest way to destroy a European army in the eighteenth
century was to send it to the Caribbean. Jamaica’s malign disease environment would have kept it safe, just as South Carolina’s malarial environment preserved it from British takeover. Despite being an island in the Greater Antilles surrounded by Spanish and French foes who aspired to take the island over, Jamaica never suffered a successful invasion while in British hands. Indeed, when the British took Jamaica in 1655, when it was a poorly defended and sparsely populated outpost of the Spanish Empire, it was to be the last time that a European took a large island from another European power and kept its territory safe.

Jamaica did not rebel because it did not want to rebel, rather than because its fear of slave rebellion kept it subservient. Jamaica, unlike the North American colonies, was Loyalist in outlook, not revolutionary. One reason for its Loyalism was demographic. Jamaica was an immigrant society, where a substantial minority of the white population had been born in Britain. With so many British people in its free population, it was hardly surprising that many people identified instinctively with Britain, rather than with North America. In mid-1776, Jamaican overseer Thomas Thistlewood recorded, with approval, the toast of a fellow immigrant overseer in favor of British success against the American rebels: “John Hartnole’s wish to the No: Americans. Cobweb Breeches, hedgehog Saddles, jolting Horses, Strong Roads & tedious Marches, to the Enemies of Old England.”

Loyalist sentiment went beyond a reflexive commitment to Britain, expressed in loyal addresses to the Crown and patriotic toasts. It was also reflected in antagonism to North American pretensions, especially about the assumptions of liberty held by the residents of New England. By 1776, dislike of New Yorkers had grown into outright antagonism. As Isaac De Pinto, a Jamaican Jew writing in France, commented, one “only had to read the history of New England . . . to take notice of the temper and character of its inhabitants.” New Yorkers were “fanatics and barbarians,” devoted to violence and naturally imperialist. All the lands to the south of America, including French and Spanish America, as well as Jamaica, should fear if America became independent under the control of New Yorkers, because “by reason of their great population and natural hardiness,” and because they were “in want of metals in general, and of bullion in particular,” they would seek to “invade and subjugate Mexico and Peru.”

Moreover, unlike Virginia, which was suffering economically following the credit crisis of 1772 with its wealthiest planters in particular suffering severe financial hardship, Jamaica was prospering as never before in the crucial years leading to the Declaration of Independence. There were few economic reasons encouraging rebellion and many economic factors compelling loyalty. For white Jamaicans, the years between the Seven Years’ War and the American Revolution were, as George Metcalf concluded, “a brief golden age for the plantocracy.” Without an especially impressive resource base (the island is small, mountainous, and not well connected to European shipping routes), it had become the leading sugar exporter in the British Empire by the early years of the eighteenth century. On the eve of the American Revolution, when individual wealth was highest, Jamaica was as important to Britain in terms of wealth as a large British county such as Lancashire or Sussex. The beneficiaries of this wealth creation were Jamaican planters. They took advantage of Jamaica’s natural advantages in the production of a high value commodity export to establish a highly profitable system of slave management in which they successfully manipulated complex
agro-industrial technology, a complicated integrated trade network, and, most importantly, a brutal method of labor exploitation that ruthlessly used and discarded overworked, badly fed, and abused slaves of African descent.55

White Jamaican planters were powerful in Jamaica in part because they had influential allies in Britain. There were perhaps as many as seventy West Indians, with Jamaicans prominent in that number, in the House of Commons. They were much more closely connected into the higher reaches of British society than were North Americans, creating a West Indian fraternity not replicated among the North American colonists. Transatlantic brokers served as essential conduits between Britain and Jamaica, facilitating Jamaican access to imperial power and ensuring the smooth transit of Jamaican produce into British ports. From the 1730s to the 1770s, the West India interest in Britain enjoyed singular success in relation to legislation involving the West Indies. The main reason for their success was that their concerns fitted well with government policy. The islands retained their preferential tariff on sugar and rum despite its costs to consumers because it conformed to prevailing mercantilist theories and because the government was convinced that the West Indian islands were essential to imperial power. That the West Indies willingly submitted to imperial policies when the North American colonies so fiercely resisted such policies also aided their case, encouraging British ministers to reward such “dutiful” colonies with discriminatory legislation.56

South Carolina may not have had the political clout of the West Indies, but it had a similar social structure, especially in its low country area which was famously “more like a negro country” than a European one.57 It was also prospering economically as the Revolution approached.58 South Carolina’s large and growing population of whites in its backcountry made a difference to calculations but the center of resistance to Britain was located in the plantation areas of the low country, areas which resembled very closely the British West Indies in socio-economic character.59 Why, then, did South Carolina rebel when its richest and most influential residents had so much to lose from revolution? The subsequent events in the South after British invasion in 1780 were sufficient cause to make wealthy planters stay loyal in 1776. South Carolina’s plantation society was placed under severe strain as the colony descended into violent civil war and as Britain concentrated its most concerted military efforts on besieging Charleston and in disrupting South Carolina’s lucrative export trade in rice. It was only the debilitating effects of malaria on Lord Cornwallis’s troops that preserved patriots’ precarious security.60

Constitutional issues seem to best explain South Carolinian intransigency in the early 1770s. Before 1770, South Carolina tracked Jamaica in its constitutional pretensions. In the Gadsden election controversy of 1762, South Carolinians successfully got rid of a governor they did not like, just as Jamaicans did four years later with Lyttleton. Unlike Jamaica, however, South Carolina was involved in another bitter dispute with Britain over constitutional issues in the Wilkes Fund controversy between 1769 and 1775.61 As Jack P. Greene argues, the controversy was “instrumental in bringing South Carolinian politicians to a full realization of the nature of the political challenge involved in Britain’s new colonial policy.”62 It was the bridge to revolution. But no such bridge developed in Jamaica. The difference between the two colonies was that in South Carolina the Wilkes Fund controversy encouraged local politicians to think hard about the imperial situation. In Jamaica, by contrast,
the constitutional concern was with local parochial politics. As Andrew O'Shaughnessy distinguishes the two parts of the British America empire in the 1770s, North Americans were concerned with the power of Parliament, while West Indians thought mostly about prerogative struggles with the Crown.63

South Carolinians were not instinctive revolutionaries. They had a political culture based on a lobbying tradition that emphasized the importance of “interest” over “deference” as a basis for establishing political harmony. By contrast, Virginia had a political culture in which “deference” worked more intensively. That political culture of “interest” worked very well in South Carolina. The province’s whole experience in the mid-eighteenth century had been that of a favorable child within the empire. It made South Carolina’s elite leadership reluctant revolutionaries, the most conservative of all patriots. They did not share the revolutionary ideology so powerful in Virginia and Massachusetts. They came to believe by 1774, however, that the Crown was acting against South Carolina’s interests.

Jamaica never shared that belief. Moreover, unlike South Carolinians, Jamaicans were never invited to join in North American Continental Congresses. In was in these inter-colonial environments that South Carolinians both encountered other colonials who had grievances against the Crown, and also where they learned that their particular kind of lobbying tradition—a tradition that encouraged South Carolinians to embrace radical behavior in which they were very willing to threaten to withdraw from negotiations if some benchmark demands were not met—worked very effectively in forcing northern delegates to acquiesce to South Carolinian positions. That position worked extremely well in 1774, when South Carolina insisted that if rice was not excluded from the list of goods that were subject to non-importation agreements, they would walk from the Continental Congress. It continued to be the South Carolinian political strategy in dealing with opposition from other colonies and states until secession in 1861.64

In contrast to Jamaica, where the threat of slave revolt was used as an excuse to stay out of the conflict, planters in South Carolina supported independence as a way of protecting slavery from perceived British attacks.65 Indeed, as Bob Olwell and J. William Harris argue, slavery itself provided a vital impetus in the decision towards revolution. As events would later prove, it was South Carolinians, rather than Jamaicans, who were to be proved correct in their assumptions. By declaring for revolution, white South Carolinians, despite some hair-raising moments during the Revolutionary War when slaves were a potential destabilizing threat to political survival, ensured the survival and solidification of their principal social institution. It took a Civil War, rather than metropolitan decree, for South Carolina to be forced to give up slavery.66

One question remains. If fear of slave rebellion played less of a role in shaping Southern and island attitudes in the decision for revolution, surely the ideologies of republican liberty expressed in the Declaration of Independence, the clear evidence shown by slaves in their actions during the War for Independence that they thought sentiments about liberty also referred to their condition, and the example of Northern colonies in adopting schemes of gradual emancipation should have forced those
Southerners who fought for liberty between 1776 and 1783 to reconsider their position on slavery? How could liberty for republican Americans be compatible with the entrenchment of slavery in the American South? For a few slave owners, most notably Virginians, including most prominently George Washington, the only president to manumit significant numbers of enslaved people (albeit only after he died), the contradictions between fighting for liberty and holding slaves in bondage were sufficient to lead them to manumit slaves.  

The main effect of the American Revolution on slavery, however, was to support its continuation and to allow its expansion into the Deep South. The Constitution was a resolutely proslavery document; the numbers of slaves manumitted outside the Chesapeake was pitifully small; and racially exclusionary policies towards blacks became ever more rigid and ever more easily enforced in the new republic. If the themes that the founders proclaimed to be the themes of the Revolution—the extension of universal and unalienable rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness throughout the world—were actually true, the inability of the founders to cut out the cancer of slavery from the new nation suggested that the American Revolution was a counter-revolutionary disappointment. Gary Nash makes a particularly strong argument along these lines. He notes that the American Revolution was an only limited inspiration internationally. Its only importance was as a colonial revolt by settler elites, not as an example of a campaign for liberty, as Americans imagined. The inability and unwillingness of most Southern founders to confront Carolinian slave owners over slavery was, Nash argues, a betrayal of revolutionary principles. Jefferson was the most prominent and disappointing example of cowardice, reduced to arguing that the fate of slaves had to be left to “the workings of an overruling Providence.” That this sort of equivocation over slavery was a rejection of the principles of 1776 was clear to the one true revolutionary, Thomas Paine, who lamented the retreat of Americans from “a new system of government in which the rights of all men should be preserved.”  

Nevertheless, this is not necessarily how Southern whites saw matters. Their version of liberty was negative liberty, in the definition made famous by Isaiah Berlin, meaning freedom from interference by other people. They counterpoised that idea of liberty to an idea of slavery, which was based upon the idea of constraint. Key to both liberty and slavery was the idea of human agency: it was people themselves who determined whether they were to be free or to be slaves. This notion that humans, rather than providence or luck, determined status helps explain why slave owners used the discourse of slavery so often in explaining why they needed to resist British attempts to take away their liberty and thus make them “slaves.” It was a very short step from believing that human agency kept people free, to believing that those people who were enslaved were slaves because they were unprepared to resist. The relative paucity of slave rebellions in eighteenth-century British America was not just important for reasons of security. It was important ideologically. When slaves did not resist their condition, they implicitly accepted it, according to slave-owner opinion. Slave owners were sure that, if they were in the same position as their slaves, they would prefer to be killed rather than accept enslavement. Of course, such thinking elided the reality of slave lives and the near certainty that rebellious slaves would face a much worse fate when a rebellion failed than was ever likely to befall a planter protesting against British ministerial wickedness. But Southern willingness
to attribute agency to humans allowed them to blame their slaves for their predicament. The moral burden of slavery could be easily passed under such thinking from the slave holder—who had shown his virtue in the American Revolution by standing up to tyranny—to the slave—the abject accepter of his or her fate and someone unwilling to die for freedom. Ironically, this meant that the only slaves whose humanity could be recognized were those rebels willing to be tortured to death rather than live as slaves. Slave rebellions in the Caribbean elicited a wave of sympathetic literature from slave owners about dying slaves who could be seen as “men” only when suffering and being killed.\textsuperscript{69}

Slave owners in the new republic found it easy to incorporate slavery within republican forms of government. Their understanding of liberty strengthened the institution’s ideological underpinnings by providing an argument for the protection of property.\textsuperscript{70} Few slaveholders thought that slaves were anything other than property. Colonists had opposed Lord Mansfield’s rulings in the \textit{Somerset} case of 1772, which they saw as an infringement of settler rights over property, by asserting that Africans did not belong to the realm of free-born Britons. Thus, they had no rights that needed to be recognized. African slaves, whom it was often argued were not made slaves in America, but had also been slaves in Africa, had “no natural right of their own country [to] Liberty.”\textsuperscript{77} Independence from Britain allowed those slaveholders who had become American to put this racially exclusive idea of liberty into practice. Slave owners joined the new republic in order to protect slavery: the general recognition of property rights in humans was the \textit{sine qua non} of union. Their racist understanding of who was and who was not entitled to liberty allowed them to simultaneously expand white liberties while ensuring that the powers of the state would be used to raise formidable barriers to outside interference with slavery. Revolutionary ideology was thus easily exploited to support the continued racial exploitation of people of African descent in the new American South.\textsuperscript{72}

\section*{NOTES}

1 Samuel Johnson was a conservative thinker who both believed that American republicanism was cant, and also that American slavery was morally reprehensible. For a good discussion of his views, see James G. Basker, “‘The Next Insurrection’: Johnson, Race, and Rebellion,” \textit{The Age of Johnson}, 11 (2000), 43–9.

slavery and the American Revolution


6 The conflagration in St. Domingue that followed after French planters’ opportunistic use of the French Revolution to accelerate political change in St. Domingue seems at first glance to demonstrate the foolishness of planters starting revolutionary change in societies with large slave majorities. The planter revolt was quickly followed by agitation from petit blancs and free people of color for more self-determination, and then was followed from August 1791 by a massive slave revolt in the northern province of St. Domingue, which eventually led to the destruction of France’s richest plantation colony. But what happened in French St. Domingue can be distinguished from what happened fifteen years earlier in British America in three ways. First, the French planters did not initiate rebellion but responded to events that occurred in the metropolis. Second, the white position in St. Domingue was made perilous less by slave revolt than by its inability to reach an accommodation with St. Domingue’s large and powerful free colored class, the most important such group in the Americas, and a group that had no counterpart in any slave society in British America. Third, the pivotal event in turning colonial rebellion in St. Domingue into a revolution such as the world had never seen since ancient times was a fierce battle between white republicans, free colored royals, and imperial sailors that resulted in the destruction of the city of Cap Français on June 20, 1793 and in the death of thousands of people. The Haitian Revolution, we are beginning to realize, occurred for highly peculiar and contingent circumstances that make it hard to compare with other revolutions. For crucial works in English, see Jeremy D. Popkin, You Are All Free: The Haitian Revolution and the Abolition of Slavery (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010); David Geggus, Haitian Revolutionary Studies (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2002); John Garrigus, Before Haiti: Race and Citizenship in French Saint-Domingue (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006); and Malick Ghachem, The Old Regime and the Haitian Revolution (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012). For works that place more stress upon the agency of slaves in the start of the Haitian Revolution, see Laurent Dubois, Avengers of the New World: The Story of the Haitian Revolution (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004) and Robin Blackburn, The American Crucible: Slavery, Emancipation and Human Rights (London: Verso, 2011).

Lyttleton’s plan possibly echoed the famous “Join or Die” woodcut made by Benjamin Franklin and published in the Pennsylvania Gazette on May 9, 1754, responding to the Albany Congress of 1754, where Pennsylvania’s Joseph Galloway proposed a plan of union uniting all the colonies of British North America into one body. Franklin depicted eight regions of British North America as a snake, cut into segments, making a point both about colonial disunity and also on how a unified set of colonies would be stronger than they were at present. Recycled in the lead up to the Revolution, the cartoon proved a powerful visual commentary on the need for organized action against British ministerial excesses. For Franklin and his desire for American unity, see Gordon S. Wood, The Americanization of Benjamin Franklin (New York: Penguin, 2004), 105–52.

British ministers tended to see New England as an exceptional region that could be differentiated from the rest of British America by its poverty, religious fanaticism, and martial spirit. These prejudices played a significant role in shaping the disastrous implementation of the Coercive Acts in Boston. Julie Flavell, “British Perceptions of New England and the Decision for a Coercive Colonial Policy, 1774–1775,” in Flavell and Stephen Conway, Britain and America Go to War: The Impact of War and warfare in Anglo-America, 1754–1815 (Gainesville: University Press Of Florida, 2004). For the Coercive Acts, see David Ammerman, In the Common Cause: The American Responses to the Coercive Acts of 1774 (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1974).


For the views of an outraged South Carolinian in Britain, see, for example, Ralph Izard to “A friend in Bath,” 27 October 1775 in Anne Izard Deas, ed., Correspondence of Mr. Ralph Izard of South Carolina . . . (New York: Charles S. Francis, 1844), I: 135.


Holton, Forced Founders; Robert Olwell, “Domestick Enemies’: Slavery and Political Independence in South Carolina, May 1775–March 1776,” Journal of Southern History 55 (1989), 21–48. A powerful counterargument that suggests that “excessive emphasis on the racial motive could lead to the erroneous notion that the southern parts of America would not have joined their northern neighbors had the southern peoples been as predominantly white as those in the middle or New England provinces” has been made in Higginbotham, “Some Reflections on the South in the American Revolution, 662.


[Anon], An Essay Concerning Slavery and the Danger Jamaica Is Expos’d to from the Too Great Number of Slaves . . . (London, 1746), 22, 37.

Ibid.


Berlin, Generations of Captivity, 99.


Ada Ferrar, “Haiti, Free Soil, and Antislavery in the Revolutionary Atlantic,” AHR, 117 (2012), 40–66; Deborah Jenson, Beyond the Slave Narrative: Politics, Sex, and Manuscripts in the Haitian Revolution (Liverpool, 2011); Laurent Dubois, Haiti: The Afterskocks of History (New York, 2012). But, as David Nicholls reminds us, we should not read too much into Haitian constitutional forms: all rule in Haiti has always been autocratic. Nicholls, From Dessalines to Duvalier: Race, Colour and National Independence in Haiti (New Brunswick, NJ, 1979), 57–60.


38 William Dickson, Letters on Slavery (London, 1789), 93, 107.

39 The Humble Petition and Memorial of the Assembly of Jamaica to the King’s Most Excellent Majesty in Council (Philadelphia, 1774).


49 Craton, Testing the Chains, 81–98.


51 Burnard, Mastery, Tyranny, and Desire, 94.

52 Isaac de Pinto, Letters on the American Troubles, trans. from the French (London, 1776), 35–46, 72, 83.

53 Emory G. Evans, A “Topping People”: The Rise and Decline of Virginia’s Old Political Elite, 1680–1780 (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2009), 111–16.


In 1769, the South Carolina Assembly gave a large monetary gift to the radical British politician John Wilkes. It was an act of provocation following the Townshend Acts. By voting money to support a radical opponent of the Crown in Britain, the Assembly was showing its support for such actions in the colonies. It was also stating that it was not only New England that could engage in radical action. It led quickly to conflict with a governor and imperial government displeased with such provocation. Jack P. Greene, “Bridge to Revolution: The Wilkes Fund Controversy in South Carolina, 1769–75,” Journal of Southern History 29 (1963), 19–52.

Ibid., 51.

O’Shaughnessy, Empire Divided, 131.


One fact which made South Carolina different from Jamaica was that, by the 1760s, South Carolina had started to have a naturally increasing slave population. It was no longer dependent on the Atlantic slave trade and thus had more freedom of action than did Jamaica, where the slave trade was vital to its economy. For the shift to a naturally increasing slave population in the American South, see Philip D. Morgan, Slave Counterpoint: Black Culture in the Eighteenth Century Chesapeake and Lowcountry (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 82–84. Nevertheless, even though South Carolina and Georgia were able to cope (just) without access to fresh slaves from Africa in the War for Independence, they remained as devoted to the institution as Jamaicans. The Revolution merely interrupted, rather than stopped, a veritable orgy of African slave-trading. See Ira Berlin and Ronald Hoffman, eds., Slavery and Freedom in the Age of the American Revolution (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1983), 49–171.

Harris, Hanging of Thomas Jeremiah; Olwell, “Domestick Enemies;” Burnard, “Freedom, Migration and the Negative Example of the American Revolution.”

James Sidbury, Ploughshares into Swords: Race, Rebellion, and Identity in Gabriel’s Virginia, 1730–1810 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).


