

# DEATH OR LIBERTY

AFRICAN AMERICANS  
*and*  
REVOLUTIONARY AMERICA

*Douglas R. Egerton*



Death or Liberty

Also by Douglas R. Egerton

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(With Alison Games, Kris Lane, and Donald R. Wright)

DOUGLAS R.  
EGERTON

Death or Liberty  
*African Americans  
and Revolutionary America*

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Printed in the United States of America  
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*For the women in my life,  
Alison  
Hannah  
Kearney*

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

ONE OF THE FEW virtues of getting older is the large number of good friends and wise colleagues that one acquires along the way. Young scholars instinctively wish to chart their own intellectual path, and perhaps in some fashion I did. But having passed the half-century mark, I am increasingly aware of how much books are collaborative efforts. The present volume, designed as it is to pull together a series of interrelated strands of previous scholarship, never could have been written were it not for the large number of articles, monographs, anthologies, and published documents that have preceded it into print. It has been my good fortune over the years to become acquainted with most of the writers who have crafted these studies, and it is my better fortune that so many of them agreed to read sections of this book.

Richard S. Newman and Carol Berkin read the early chapters, as did Peter P. Hinks and John Ferling. All provided me with detailed and shrewd suggestions for revision, and I should probably here say that if I did not always follow their recommendations, it is only due to my stubborn determination to see matters my way. All of my previous writings have focused on Virginia or South Carolina, so I am particularly lucky to know the two leading specialists regarding slavery and freedom in New York and New Jersey, Graham Hodges and Shane White. Both provided detailed comments on sections pertaining to the northern states and caught more than a few errors. The company and good humor of Graham, a fellow resident of the Burned-Over District, help to make the cold winters of central New York more fun. Gary Nash also read portions that pertain to the North, and his encyclopedic knowledge regarding black life and white law in Pennsylvania and Massachusetts improved those chapters immeasurably.

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My daughters, Kearney and Hannah, neglected to read a single page of the manuscript, and they fail to hide their boredom when I launch into yet another long story about somebody long deceased. But they are perfect in every other way. Alison Games read the entire manuscript, filling the pages with perceptive comments, penetrating questions, and indecipherable scribbles. That is not, of course, why I am so grateful to her, but she would wish me not to embarrass her by stating my reasons here. In any case, she knows why.

Death or Liberty

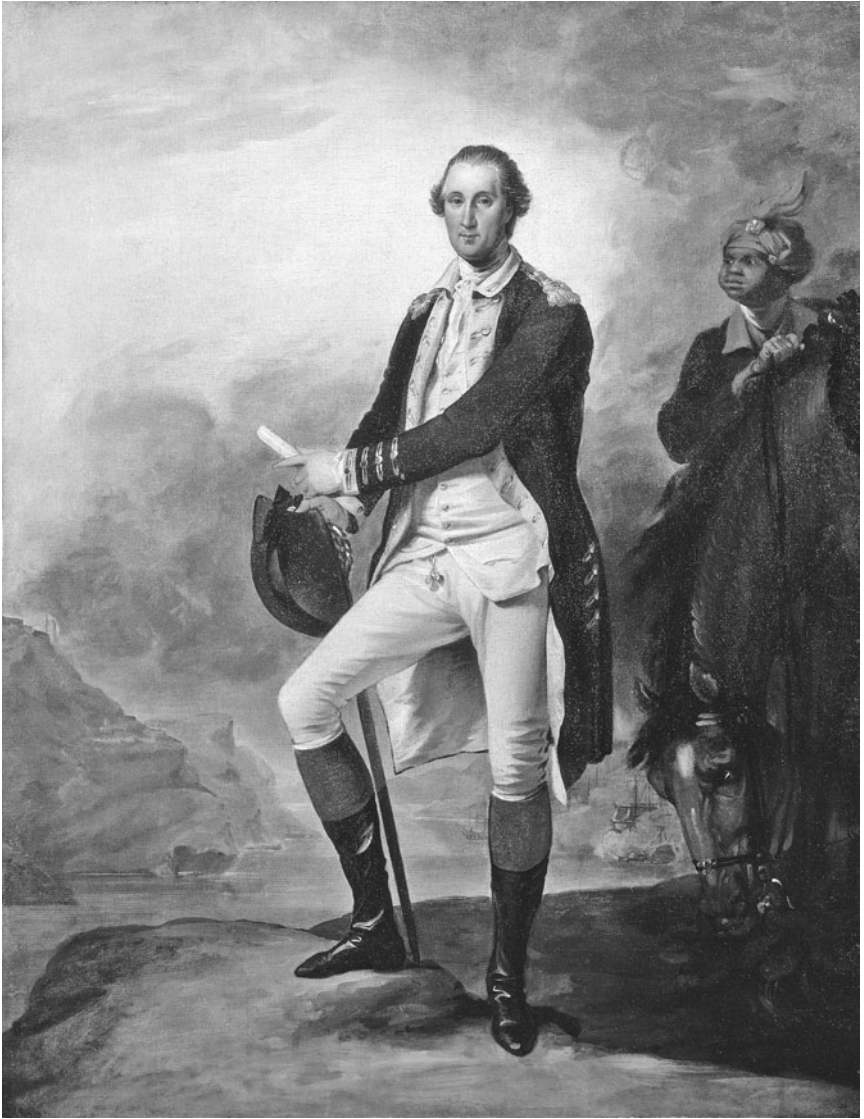
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## The Trials of William Lee

*A Life in the Age of Revolution*

THANKS TO PORTRAITISTS JOHN TRUMBULL and Edward Savage, he became one of the two most recognizable slaves of the late-eighteenth-century Atlantic world. But if, unlike most enslaved Americans in the age of revolution, William Lee was captured on canvas, he was typical of bondmen in other ways. Lee lacks both a precise birth date and birth year. He first appeared in the public record in 1768, when his new master, George Washington, recorded the purchase of a teenage boy, “Mulatto Will,” from Mary Lee, for the sum of £61. In recent years, a memorial erected at Mount Vernon that marks Lee’s burial plot announces that he was born “circa 1750,” which means that he was about eighteen when he first walked through the gates of Washington’s plantation. Lee himself may not have known the date, just as he may not have known the name of his (obviously white) father. Mary was the widow of Colonel John Lee of Westmoreland County, and if she sold Will to erase a living, breathing reminder of her husband’s nocturnal visits to the slave quarters, she would not have been the first Virginia widow to do so. But certainly nothing speaks more eloquently about the dehumanizing nature of slavery than the fact that the single most recognized slave in Revolutionary America lacks an identifiable birth date and recognized parentage.<sup>1</sup>

The young officer who purchased William, fresh from his successes during the Seven Years’ War (known in the colonies as the French and Indian War), was riding through his home county of Westmoreland. Washington either heard of the estate sale at a roadside tavern or read a handbill. The ambitious planter, busily acquiring laborers for his estates, noted four slaves for sale. Two of the young men, Will and Frank, were mixed-race brothers, but the



Although William Lee can be found behind Washington in a number of paintings, he is most visible in John Trumbull's *George Washington*, completed in London in 1780. *Metropolitan Museum of Art*.

other two, Adam and Jack, were “Negro boy[s].” Like many slaveholders, Washington believed that white blood not only lightened the skin but enlightened the mind, and he preferred to employ “yellow-skinned” servants within his home. Although habitually short of cash, Washington agreed to pay three times as much for Will and Frank as for Adam or Jack. While

Adam and Jack were banished to the fields, Frank Lee was dressed in the garb of butler and installed in the living quarters in or near the big house. Older bondmen taught Will to care for his master's clothes and hair—and, rather more important, to quietly anticipate his every whim.<sup>2</sup>

Washington's early attitudes toward slavery were typical of a man of property bred in the colonial Chesapeake. With the death of his half brother Lawrence in 1752, Washington had inherited the estate of Mount Vernon, and with it, eighteen slaves to add to the eleven he had received upon the death of his father ten years before. His marriage to Martha Dandridge Custis, a wealthy widow, further augmented his holdings in human property, whom he managed as his own. Over the years, the enslaved population at Mount Vernon continued to grow, through both natural increase and purchase. By 1774 Washington had invested the princely sum of £2,000 in captive labor, and paid taxes on 135 slaves. Twelve years later, despite losses during the war, the number had risen to 213. The purchase of Will and the three other young men was typical of Washington's buying habits during this period, as he preferred those bondpeople "not exceeding" twenty years of age. "Let there be two thirds of them Males, the other third Females," he instructed Daniel Adams, who conducted his purchases. "All of them to be straight Limb'ed & in every respect strong and likely, with good Teeth & good Countenances."<sup>3</sup>

Each morning, Washington rose early to survey his lands, but William rose earlier yet to lay out his clothing for the ride. On one occasion, Lee accompanied his master, and Washington, whom Thomas Jefferson later praised as the "finest horseman of his age," was pleased to discover that Lee exhibited a natural affinity for the saddle. Like all Virginia gentlemen, Washington enjoyed the hunt, and in addition to his duties as valet, William was placed in charge of the hounds. George Washington Parke Custis, Martha's grandson, later described Lee as a "fearless horseman" who galloped "at full speed, through brake or tangled wood." Lee was "sturdy, and of great bone and muscle," and when mounted upon Chinkling, his favorite jumper, with a French hunting horn slung across his back, Lee raced after the foxes "in a style at which [other] huntsmen would stand aghast." The two men often hunted together three times a week. But traditional conventions of race and servitude, together with Washington's studiously mannered behavior, kept them from ever forming—or at least acknowledging—the sort of friendship that might have arisen had Lee been born free and white.<sup>4</sup>

The growing crisis with Britain brought new responsibilities for Washington. For Lee, as was the case with most African Americans, the rift brought new opportunities. The blending of egalitarian ideals with the disruption of war emboldened slaves throughout the colonies to claim the same liberties as



white Americans. In the fall of 1774, as Washington put his affairs in order before leaving for the spring meeting of the Second Continental Congress, he invested fifteen shillings “for shoes, etc.,” for Lee, as it would hardly do for his valet to arrive in Philadelphia wearing the scuffed boots of a huntsman. Prior to 1775, few Virginia-born slaves saw much of the world beyond their master’s gatepost, but the chaos of war altered the lives of thousands of bondpeople. As Lee and Washington galloped north, William’s strange life grew stranger still in that he was flying *with* his master, rather than from one.<sup>5</sup>

On the long road to Philadelphia, William had time to think. Lord Dunmore, the last royal governor in Williamsburg, was about to offer freedom to any slave or indentured servant who would carry a musket in the service of King George. Washington’s estate would make an attractive prize for the redcoats. The general’s nervous overseer admitted that the slaves at Mount Vernon regarded liberty as “sweet.” There “is not a man [among] them,” he admitted, “but wou’d leave us, if they believ’d they could make their escape.” For white Americans, Britain was the very symbol of political oppression, but for those in servitude, English pickets meant liberation—if also the expectation of military service. Before the war’s end, nearly fifteen thousand Africans and African Americans accepted Dunmore’s offer; five thousand more, the majority of them from the nearly all-white New England states, fought on the Patriot side. Still others simply took advantage of the confusion of war to slip away from their masters’ service. In a city such as Philadelphia, Lee might vanish into a back alley while on an errand for Washington and then either ride north to join the British or try to pass as a free man. But for the past seven years he had labored as a house valet, a comparatively easy post for a slave. If he failed in his escape, Lee would almost certainly be sold into the fields, and so he had to weigh his options—and his loyalties—with enormous care.<sup>6</sup>

Any thoughts William had about making a run for his freedom may have been stayed by disquieting rumors within the black community that most of the bondmen who reached British lines were employed as military laborers. For every slave like New Jersey’s Titus, who rose through the ranks and achieved the honorary title of Colonel Tye, dozens more dug trenches, cooked meals, and polished boots. Whether they found themselves in Loyalist or Patriot ranks, the casualty rates were ghastly, as white officers on both sides regarded them as little more than cannon fodder. This William discovered in June 1778 at the Battle of Monmouth Court House. Lee had “assumed unofficial command” of the slaves and valets of all the general officers, and as the day was hot, Lee and several other slaves rode to the top of a nearby hill to enjoy the cool breeze and watch the British maneuvers. Just as Lee

extended his telescope to survey the field, a British artilleryman, mistaking the bondmen for Washington and his senior staff, opened fire. A six-pound ball crashed into the sycamore tree they stood beneath, “scattering but not injuring Billy Lee and his fellow servants.” Washington smiled thinly as the slaves fled down the hill, but Will perhaps thought the incident somewhat less humorous.<sup>7</sup>

One subtle sign that his travels about the north had an impact on “Mulatto Will” was his quiet determination to be treated as an adult, which meant the adoption of a surname. Although North American slaves occasionally adopted family or occupational names for use among themselves, few masters wished to bestow upon their human property the sense of dignity a surname implied. In Washington’s kinship-conscious Virginia, family connections conferred respect and rank, so slaves were denied both. Like many of the fortunate sons who peopled Mount Vernon, young George Washington Parke Custis customarily referred to the far older valet by the name of “Billy.” Before the Revolution, Washington often listed his manservant in account books as “my boy Billy,” but after the war, the general noted his valet had taken to “calling himself William Lee.” Interestingly, while the vast majority of freedpeople in the north selected the family surname of their former master, William evidently embraced the name of Lee, as a symbolic tie either to the plantation of his birth or to the man he suspected of being his biological father.<sup>8</sup>

Lee’s newfound sense of self-assurance appears also to have manifested itself in his choice of a spouse, as well as in his determination to have her by his side. Under Virginia law, slave families enjoyed no legal standing, but black Americans forged lasting relationships nonetheless, and wise masters recognized the calming influence of stable families in the quarters. During the summer of 1784, Lee approached Washington about Margaret Thomas, whom he regarded as his wife. While in Philadelphia, Lee had fallen in love with Margaret, who had been a slave at the time and evidently was hired out to Washington’s household (what the general dubbed his “family”). Margaret was now free, and she and William begged Washington to finance her journey south. The general thought little of Margaret’s character—or perhaps he did not wish to share his valet’s time—but admitted that they were “attached (married he says).” Given the fact that Lee had “lived with [Washington] so long & followed [his] fortunes through the War with fidelity,” the general could not “refuse his request.”<sup>9</sup>

One would like to know the end of that story, but no evidence indicates that a Margaret Thomas or Margaret Lee ever resided at Mount Vernon. But then, as she was free, there would be no reason to expect to find her in Washington’s account book. History is the past, but the past recovered

imperfectly, restored to life inadequately. Like the vast majority of slaves in early America, neither Margaret nor William ever learned to read or write, and so their story comes to us secondhand, filtered through the quill pens of an elite white man who little cared to understand slave culture but had no wish to pry into the private lives of the people he owned. One assumes that Margaret came to Virginia, but given the pressures of a marriage in which the husband served at the beck and call of his busy master, the marriage may not have lasted. Or perhaps Margaret, like many black women in the early Republic, died young, for no visitor to Mount Vernon in later years mentions Lee having a spouse.<sup>10</sup>

Shortly before Lee took Margaret as his wife, the war had ended at Yorktown. With his usual sense of historical flair, Washington took leave of his senior staff by saying, “The work is done, and well done,” before calling out, “Billy, hand me my horse.” Having laid down his sword for the last time, the former general, like men of power and influence up and down the Atlantic coast, turned his energies to rebuilding his long-neglected businesses. Thanks to his brother’s shares in the Ohio Company, together with the bounties he accrued during his years of military service, Washington owned more than 63,000 acres of trans-Appalachian land. Over the next few years, he spent springs and summers surveying his western holdings, and as always, Lee rode at his side. On April 22, 1785, while dragging heavy measuring chains, Lee tumbled over a rock and “broke the pan of his knee.” He could “neither Walk, stand, or ride,” so Washington was forced to construct “a sled to carry him on.” Washington had hoped to spend several more weeks in the west, but Lee’s mishap, he recorded in his diary, “put a stop to my Surveying.”<sup>11</sup>

Lee continued his duties by hobbling about the mansion with a crutch or a cane. Despite the constant pain in his knee, William proved as proud as Washington proved needy. Many of the first president’s biographers have been dismissive of William Lee’s contribution to Washington’s household. One scholar has insisted that as valet, “Will was a privileged servant with duties hardly extending beyond serving a master who needed little personal service.” Without a hint of irony, however, the same writer conceded that after he laid out Washington’s clothing for the day, Lee then “brushed his master’s long hair.” Washington himself grouched that the early-rising Lee was “ruined by idleness.” Echoing that sentiment, another scholar has applauded Washington for being “willing to put up with Billy Lee’s afflictions,” as well as for paying the unwaged, enslaved surveyor’s “medical bills without an audible murmur.”<sup>12</sup>

The complaint that men and women who drew no wages were habitually “idle” and unmotivated was heard in parlors all across the new nation. Nor

are there records of anyone at Mount Vernon who sympathized with how Lee dealt with his constant pain. In an era without modern painkillers or wheelchairs, William medicated himself with ample doses of rum, earning the censure of his austere master as well as modern scholars. Without admitting that Will functioned admirably upon a shattered leg, one biographer observed only that Lee had “a gift for procuring” enough liquor to “get him drunk by evening.” In this, the crippled William was unusual, since rural slaves drank far less than other laborers in early America, but also because attentive masters such as Washington demanded a sober labor force.<sup>13</sup>

Despite his master’s admonitions, Lee continued to drink. The rum, his bad leg, or both severely limited Will’s mobility, yet Washington, perhaps hoping to force his valet into sobriety, continued to send him on errands. In March 1788, he dispatched Will to Alexandria to collect the mail. A late snow had fallen, covering the town’s brick walks. Unstable under the best of conditions, Lee fell again and “broke the Pan of his other Knee.” No longer able to perform even the simplest task that required movement, William was now trained at “making Shoes.” At about the age of thirty-eight, Lee was broken, “slow, and [in] sickness.”<sup>14</sup>

Lee was still able to travel by carriage, and his master, despite his determination to maintain psychological distance from others, nevertheless found William’s company comforting at difficult moments. In early 1789, as he prepared to leave for his inaugural in New York City, Washington paid a farewell visit to his mother. The relationship between the general and Mary Washington had ever been strained, and with Mary Washington suffering from breast cancer, her son understood that this was to be his final goodbye. Since Mary’s home in Fredericksburg was but a short day trip, Washington required no valet for the visit. There was no plausible reason for Lee to accompany his master other than that Washington desired an old and familiar face. Slavery produced a host of complicated relationships, and perhaps none is harder for the modern mind to fathom than the strong, if decidedly unequal, partnership of these two men.<sup>15</sup>

Two days later, on the morning of April 16, the president-elect, William Lee, and aides David Humphreys and Tobias Lear boarded the coach for New York. Lee’s responsibilities included procuring lodging for the group on the way north and preparing for the crowds who gathered at every stop to cheer Washington’s passage. The labors proved too much for Lee, and by the third day Washington decided to leave him in Philadelphia for medical treatment. “Will appears to be in too bad a state to travel at present,” Lear observed. Although Lee was in the habit of “dress[ing] his knee himself” and so was “in no need of a Doctor,” Lear doubted that he could “possibly be of

any service” in New York and recommended his return to Mount Vernon. But Lee insisted on joining the new president. Following consultations with Dr. William Smith and Dr. James Hutchinson, Lee’s legs were fitted with steel braces that not only allowed him to travel but also enabled “him in some measure to walk” again. On June 22, much to the astonishment of Lear, Lee arrived in New York City “safe & well.” He “seems not to have lost much flesh by his misfortunes,” Lear added.<sup>16</sup>

Like many slaves who appeared briefly in the public record only to vanish again, Lee disappeared from Washington’s correspondence thereafter. Circumstantial evidence, however, indicates that William remained at the president’s side during his first term, which meant that “as a Butler as well as a Valette” he witnessed the parade of politicians and diplomats through his master’s parlor. Did Lee have occasion to meet the squabbling secretaries of state and treasury, Thomas Jefferson and Alexander Hamilton, or perhaps their enslaved domestics, including Jefferson’s quadroon brother-in-law James Hemings? We know only that early in his second term, Washington instructed Lear to obtain “a substitute for William.” Nothing short of Lee’s “excellent qualities” and “good appearance” would do, Washington added. The famously reserved president briefly hinted that he would miss the companionship of his longtime retainer before retreating behind a curtain of complaints about how black domestics were more a burden than a blessing. Lear chose a young slave named Christopher as Lee’s replacement, and by the spring of 1794, William was again cobbling shoes in Virginia.<sup>17</sup>

As he approached the end of his life, Washington resolved to at last cease his ownership of other humans. In his final will, drawn up in July 1799, he proposed to free all of the slaves held under his name. Washington stipulated that aged slaves and those without parents were to be “comfortably clothed and fed” by his heirs, and young slaves were to be educated and “brought up to some useful occupation,” so that they could survive in a free society. The final clause pertained to William Lee. As “a testimony to my sense of his attachment to me, and for his faithful services during the Revolutionary War,” Lee was freed immediately, paid an annuity of \$30 each year for the remainder of his life, and allowed to remain in his cabin at Mount Vernon.<sup>18</sup>

Even by the prescribed regulations of early American legal documents, the phrasing is curious—and says much about Washington’s legendary sense of reserve. Despite thirty-one years together in the saddle, in the war, and in the presidency, Washington mentioned only Will’s “sense of attachment” to *him*, rather than his own affection for Lee. The Virginian, living in a society that prized composed, rational behavior, refused to reveal his true sentiments, even in his dying document. Could the man who wished not Martha but

only William Lee to accompany him as he paid a final visit to his estranged, dying mother regard him as just another slave, or was Washington's "sense of attachment" for William a sentiment he dared not express? One need not suggest that Lee, if given a choice, would have remained enslaved, or that Washington's generally humane treatment of his human chattel at Mount Vernon justified his ownership of black Americans, to recognize that the shared intimacy of lives lived together in the big house sometimes allowed for tangled relationships that transcended race and class.<sup>19</sup>

Following his master's death and his own liberation, Lee remained at Mount Vernon. As a free man, Lee was able to come and go as he pleased, but like many of those emancipated by the Revolution, he was too impoverished and too aged and too ill to journey far. Although still a working plantation, Mount Vernon (and the president's tomb) became a common stop for sight-seers. Travelers who wished to see the last of the Revolutionary generation or hear tales of the war often stopped by Lee's cabin. Artist Charles Willson Peale found William cobbling shoes in one of the plantation's outbuildings, and the two "sat alone together and talked of past days." Lee continued to drink to ease the pain in his legs, and when suffering delirium tremens was bled by a former slave, an aged mulatto named West Ford. Ironically, as was the case with the similar agonies performed on Washington by Dr. James Craik, West Ford often took too much blood and weakened his already sick patient. On one occasion in 1828, when "Westford [*sic*] was sent for to bring Billy out of a fit," Custis remembered, the "blood would not flow. Billy was dead!"<sup>20</sup>

William Lee's long life, although privileged and unique in so many ways, mirrored the fate of tens of thousands of Africans and African Americans during the turbulent thirty-seven years that spanned the Revolutionary era. From the end of the Seven Years' War in 1763 to the election of slaveholder Thomas Jefferson as president in 1800—the period of time covered by this volume—blacks waged their own struggle for independence. As America's white citizenry demanded liberty on the basis of natural rights and then took to the field of battle to uphold that demand, slaves such as Lee began to assert their own rights to freedom. William Lee rode beside Washington throughout the war and witnessed every campaign, from Boston to Yorktown, and like many a military servant, he was an attentive observer at each night's fireside talk of individual rights and equality. Before the century was over, the Revolution, together with the changing economy of the northern states, served to eradicate slave labor in half of the new Republic, just as it weakened it in Lee's area on the border of the South, where practical men like Washington began to diversify and plant wheat beside the more

labor-intensive tobacco. William exemplified that remarkable transformation as well, for he died a free man, the beneficiary of his master's will. But no state moved to enfranchise freedmen or recompense them for decades of hard labor. William reflected that unhappy saga too. In his old age he lived an impoverished existence as a crippled alcoholic, and as he sat on the steps of his small cabin, amusing visitors with old stories of past glories and promises unkept, Lee personified a Revolution that spoke in bold terms but at best limped slowly down the path of human rights.

Not all historians, of course, would agree that the founding generation ultimately failed to practice what they preached, or that the two decades after the 1783 Peace of Paris amounted to a counterrevolution regarding black Americans. Indeed, the belief that the war with Britain marked a progressive social upheaval in black life was first advanced not by a modern apologist for the founding fathers but by Benjamin Quarles in his pioneering *The Negro in the American Revolution* (1961). Writing at a time when many white Americans were determined to deny black Americans their basic legal rights, Quarles was understandably anxious to demonstrate the black contribution to America's victory in 1781. African American involvement, his book implicitly suggested, established their right to American citizenship, both in 1776 and in 1961. Far from being absent during the struggle with Britain, black Americans "welcomed the resort to arms," Quarles argued, and "quickly caught the spirit of '76." Since then, a good number of formidable scholars have agreed. For all of their failings, they insist, white revolutionaries consciously abandoned a hierarchical world that reserved political power for men of gentle birth. As Gordon Wood argued in *The Radicalism of the American Revolution* (1991), the founding fathers consciously forged a philosophy that rendered inevitable the abolitionist crusade "of the nineteenth century and in fact all our current egalitarian thinking."<sup>21</sup>

But would William Lee agree? Would untold thousands of men and women like Lee have found anything radical about the decades in which they lived? Or would they have found the American Revolution sadly wanting and white Patriots deeply hypocritical? It may not be enough, perhaps, to judge the Revolution by what it meant to antebellum reformers, to the Civil War generation, or even to us; rather, we may need to judge it by what it meant to people such as William Lee, or Colonel Tye, or Elizabeth Freeman, or Richard Allen, or Gabriel. Their voices need to be heard, and their lives are the subject of this book.

The present volume re-creates the last four decades of the eighteenth century, as white and black Americans first struggled to assert their rights against a distant empire and then struggled yet again to define what it meant

to be an American and a citizen, as well as whether a republic based upon the consent of the governed was a fraud so long as one-fifth of the population remained enslaved. Early on, as Americans articulated a sense of their natural rights, there was reason to hope that the growing crisis with Britain might result in the death of unfree labor. Virtually overnight, an institution that existed throughout the British Empire came under assault from activists of both races who grasped the ideological problem with calling themselves the “slaves of King George” yet literally holding other men and women as chattel (or being themselves enslaved). As the nation took up arms, black Americans in both camps—and a majority of African Americans ultimately cast their lot with the British—expected the conflict to result in national manumission. Should Britain prove successful in putting down the revolt, Parliament would owe a debt to thousands of black Loyalists. But if the united colonies won their independence, a new government founded upon natural rights could not easily deny liberty to formerly enslaved Patriots.

Yet deny it they did. The first part of this book explores the ways in which republican ideology and the chaos of war so weakened slavery that every northern state moved against the system by 1804, while the final six chapters chronicle the dashed hopes of black Americans. With the return of peace, white Patriots did not merely fail to enact national reforms consistent with the lofty rhetoric of the late 1760s and early 1780s. Having achieved *their* independence, most whites quickly retreated from the principles announced in the Declaration as they sought to rebuild their war-ravaged economy through the exploitation of unwaged black men and women. Although slavery gradually disappeared in the northern states, few sections of the Republic recognized African Americans as citizens or allowed them to vote during the years covered by this volume. Instead, former revolutionaries tabled practical schemes for gradual emancipation in Virginia, embedded slavery within the nation’s Constitution, crafted legislation allowing southern masters to recapture fugitives in search of liberty in the North, and defined racial categories in the country’s first immigration statute. America’s Patriot elite knew exactly what they were doing. As Patrick Henry conceded, there was little doubt that slavery was “repugnant to humanity.” But like his enemy Thomas Jefferson, he declared it impossible to free his bondpeople due to “the general inconveniency of living without them.”<sup>22</sup>

Black Americans, however, were hardly passive victims of white authority, and although it would be false to ignore the dynamics of power and policy, it would be equally artificial to ignore what African Americans did for themselves during these decades. As it became clear that most politicians and masters had little intention of following through on their egalitarian



statements, black activists pushed back hard against the rising tide of racism. Although no black American in these years was ever able to cast a ballot, former bondpeople and even those still enslaved helped to shape the politics of the early Republic through their demands and actions. As Virginia bondman Jack Ditcher insisted in 1800, “We have as much right to fight for our liberty as any men.” When they could, enslaved Americans were dramatic actors in their own saga, and this book attempts to tell that part of the story too.<sup>23</sup>

William Lee was unusual for the connections he formed and for being among the minority of black Americans to benefit from the Revolution. Yet in so many other ways, his existence was typical of most slaves in North America during the age of revolution. The course of his long life epitomized the hopes and expectations of black Americans as well as the final, crushing disappointments of the era. As he rode west from Yorktown, Lee, like most slaves, had prayed that the independent Republic would fulfill its promise of freedom and liberty to all Americans. Lee’s proud adoption of a surname, his demand that he be allowed to marry a free woman of Philadelphia, and even his elegant clothing reflected the optimism and self-sufficiency typical of his generation. So too was his manner of liberation characteristic of Chesapeake bondpeople, since Washington was just one of many planters who found it problematic to free his slaves during his lifetime. Long before Lee’s death in 1828, it was all too clear that the Revolutionary generation had failed to embrace the opportunities offered by independence—and perhaps had doomed the Union to civil war. The number of enslaved Americans rose steadily over the years, from roughly 351,000 in 1760 to 893,041 by 1800, 35,946 of whom resided in the North. Even Gordon Wood has conceded that by the end of the Revolutionary era, despite manumission in the northern states, there were “more slaves in the nation than in 1760.” Lee died a tragic symbol of the Republic, crippled by its inability to live up to its own Revolutionary ideals, and half free at best.<sup>24</sup>

## Equiano's World

*The British Atlantic Empire in 1763*

**A**LMOST FROM THE TIME they learned how to walk, enslaved children learned how to lie. Wise parents taught their children how to behave when confronted by their owner, or indeed by any white person. Children had to understand the hard rules of life if they hoped to avoid ill-treatment. As they grew older, black adolescents faced far worse than a backhanded slap if they failed to master the art of obsequience. When spoken to, clever youths smiled, gazed quietly at their feet, and most of all dissembled.<sup>1</sup>

As both boy and man, Olaudah Equiano told more than his share of lies. He told so many contradictory stories that even today it remains unclear which were true and which were fictions crafted for self-protection or for propaganda. According to his 1789 autobiography, *The Interesting Narrative*, Equiano was born around 1745 in what is today southeastern Nigeria. At the age of eleven, he and his sister were kidnapped by three African slave catchers. After being sold and resold, Equiano was at length bought by European traders, who shipped him to Barbados. Sale into the English sugar islands usually meant a short life of backbreaking labor, but after only two weeks, Equiano was sold again, this time to Virginia, where he spent less than a month performing a child's task of "weeding grass, and fathering stones." Then once more his luck changed. Michael Pascal, a lieutenant in the Royal Navy, bought some naval stores from Equiano's master and while there took a liking to the boy. Pascal purchased Equiano, rechristened him Gustavus Vassa (after the former king of Sweden), and set him to work as a cabin boy aboard the *Industrious Bee*.<sup>2</sup>

While in Pascal's service, Equiano visited much of the British maritime world. During the Seven Years' War, the boy met General James Wolfe, who

intervened to spare him “a flogging for fighting with a young gentleman.” Equiano was in Quebec in 1759 when the British won on the Plains of Abraham, only to lose “the good and gallant” Wolfe to French shells. With the battle won, he sailed for England along with most of the fleet. Curiously, Equiano wrote nothing about the sprawling splendors of London, but ironically, having perhaps been the victim of African kidnappers, he joined Pascal in putting together a press-gang to refresh their depleted complement.<sup>3</sup>

At this point Equiano’s tale took another curious turn. While in London he met “the Miss Guerins,” two young evangelicals who fretted over the boy’s soul. Informed that he faced eternal damnation, Equiano too grew “uneasy” and asked to be baptized. Pascal at first demurred, since many masters—and perhaps more than a few naval officers—regarded Anglican notions of Christian brotherhood as dangerous for impressionable cabin boys. But at last he gave way, and on February 9, 1759, Equiano was baptized at St. Margaret’s Church, Westminster. Picking up his pen, the clergyman dutifully recorded these words: “Gustavus Vassa a Black born in Carolina 12 years old.” If true, Equiano was no African but an American-born creole—a person born in the Americas but not of American ancestry—and he was even younger than Pascal presumably realized, since his birth year would have been 1747. Further complicating matters, fourteen years later, in 1773, when he joined the crew of the *Racehorse* during its search for the Northwest Passage, “Gustavus” told the captain that “So. Carolina” was his “Place and Country where born.”<sup>4</sup>

So Equiano was lying to somebody; the only question is to whom. Perhaps he lied to Pascal about his age to escape the Virginia fields. Perhaps he lied to the minister at St. Margaret’s due to long years of habit, although doing so just prior to baptism should have struck him as a peculiar way to achieve salvation. But by the time he boarded the *Racehorse*, he had been free for seven years, having purchased his liberty in July 1766. Perhaps he was so conditioned to creating fictions in hopes of keeping body and soul together that he saw no reason to speak the truth even when free. After all, he remained a man of color in an Atlantic world dominated by slavery. But either his early life was a tissue of lies or the stories of an idyllic childhood in Essaka that he later described in *The Interesting Narrative* were complete fabrications. In the end, Equiano’s mysterious story serves as a reminder of the unreliability of the words of Africans and African Americans filtered through the pens of whites. Symbolic of this complexity is the fact that the only known painting of Equiano—as opposed to the engraved frontispiece that appeared in the first edition of the *Narrative*—may not be him at all. Although the portrait was previously attributed to Joshua Reynolds, art scholars now note that the clothing worn in it suggests the painting was done before 1765. Perhaps



*Portrait of a Negro Man* (left), attributed to both Allan Ramsay and Joshua Reynolds, is widely used in biographies of Equiano, but specialists date the painting to 1757–60, at which time Equiano was a boy. *Bridgeman Art Library*. The frontispiece (right) from Equiano's 1789 autobiography, *The Interesting Narrative*, is the only definitive portrait of the author. *Library of Congress*.

the well-dressed African who has proudly gazed at a generation of modern readers is yet another black man whose identity is lost to history.<sup>5</sup>

With his multiple and changing identities, Equiano came into contact, as he sailed from port to port, with other men and women who would choose their own identities—African and creole, black and white. They would spend the next four decades waging a war for American independence, or fighting for their freedom by picking up a musket in the name of King George, or trying to decide what liberty meant to them and to their country. Indeed, Equiano's personal saga provides ideal bookends for this larger saga. As a boy, he served in the Seven Years' War, a conflict that reshaped the map of the Americas and rendered the Revolution inevitable. By the time he died in London on March 31, 1797, while still in his early fifties, Equiano was active in the transatlantic antislavery movement. In between he had known General Wolfe, young Horatio Nelson, and abolitionists Thomas Clarkson and Granville Sharp. His fabrications notwithstanding, Equiano's astonishing life illuminates a most astonishing time.<sup>6</sup>

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Normally the most astute of observers, Equiano said little about his brief journey to Canada. He described the "magnificent spectacle" of the English ships "dressed with colours of all kinds" and marveled as the marquis de

Vaudreuil, the defeated “French governor and his lady, and other persons of note, came on board our ship to dine.” His autobiography contains not a single word about meeting another black person, enslaved or free, during the short period he spent in Canada in 1759. Perhaps that is not surprising. Of all the corners of the British Empire that the young mariner ever visited, what had been New France prior to the 1763 Peace of Paris had the lowest percentage of enslaved people. Yet if what the English renamed the Province of Quebec was, to borrow the words of historian Ira Berlin, a society with slaves rather than a slave society, there were still roughly 3,600 unfree workers residing in the colony. Most were aboriginal people, but at least one-third were Africans and their offspring. According to the 47th Article of Capitulation of Montreal, which protected slavery in the now-British colony, the war changed nothing in regard to unfree labor.<sup>7</sup>

Although primarily designed for France’s Caribbean sugar islands, the elaborate 1685 royal decree known as the *Code Noir*, or Black Code, established the policies that regulated the relationship between masters and slaves in *all* French colonies. Drafted by Jean-Baptiste Colbert, the code was ostensibly designed to convert African souls and protect unfree labor from the excessive demands of cruel masters. In reality, the Black Code made but a few cursory references to instruction “in the Roman faith” before transferring control of Africans to French colonists and overseers. The code forbade priests from “conducting weddings” if the slaves lacked their masters’ permission, yet ruled that all black children born of relations between slaves were to be slaves as well. Africans could not carry weapons or even “large sticks,” and the list of punishments was both lengthy and gruesome. Runaways would have their ears sliced off and their shoulders branded with the fleur-de-lys; recidivists were to have their hamstrings severed. The code frowned on masters “torturing or mutilating” their human property but allowed whites to “chain [blacks] and have them beaten with rods or straps” if necessary. Since the severity of slave laws in different areas correlated to the percentage of blacks in those places, it is logical to assume that the brutality allowed by the code was more common to the slave societies of the Caribbean than in New France, yet the *Nova Scotia Advertiser* carried runaway slave notices similar to those found in every English newspaper to the south. Just to clarify that it indeed applied in New France, in 1701 Louis gave his formal consent to slavery in Canada, authorizing “its colonists to own slaves [in] full proprietorship.”<sup>8</sup>

Accustomed to the endless varieties of slavery that existed around the Atlantic world, Equiano was silent on the multiplicity of jobs performed by slaves in Canada. Unfree labor itself was simple enough to characterize—French philosophe Charles de Secondat, the baron of Montesquieu, famously

defined it as “the establishment of a right which gives to one man such power over another as renders him absolute master of his life and fortune”—but the enormous range of tasks carried out by enslaved workers would stagger modern readers, who frequently assume that slaves only picked cotton. As was typical in Britain’s northernmost colonies, most blacks lived in or near towns; just over three-quarters resided in urban areas, with more than half of all slaves in Canada crowded into Montreal. Some African Americans labored along the docks, while others worked in the fisheries, but most were *domestiques* (many of them the light-skinned children of French fathers and African women). Given the region’s short growing season, less than one-quarter of all slaves in Canada plowed the fields.<sup>9</sup>

As the relatively small number of blacks in Canada indicates, there was no serious trade of Africans up the St. Lawrence. Although the French had shipped a good many *panis*, or aboriginal slaves, to their Caribbean holdings as punishment, no reciprocal traffic in Africans developed over the course of the century. Many *domestiques* arrived with their masters from the sugar islands; typical were Toussaint, who accompanied his mistress, Milly Daccarette, from Martinique, and François, who shipped in from Saint-Domingue in 1752 with his widowed owner, Marie Cheron. The spoils of war provided a second source of slaves. In July 1745, toward the start of what Anglo-Americans dubbed King George’s War, King Louis XV decreed that English-owned runaways were to be sold to French masters, with proceeds accruing to the monarchy. Although the war did not end until 1748, New England smugglers took advantage of the edict to sell enslaved crewmen to their enemy. Captain Nathan Whiting disposed of three men, including Zabud June and Jacob Toto, on Cape Breton Island, and William Pepperrell of Maine, commander of the expedition against Fort Louisbourg, either lost as a runaway or sold his slave Catto shortly after the Anglo-American expedition captured the garrison on June 17.<sup>10</sup>

Below the St. Lawrence lay New England. As was true further north, Britain’s New England colonies were home to very few Africans. Slaves were never more than 4 percent of the region’s population, and only Rhode Island, with roughly three thousand slaves in 1763, boasted a black population that was more than 6 percent. The harsh climate proved especially inhospitable to Africans, who suffered from pulmonary infections during the long winters, and it was not conducive to growing large-scale staple crops. As the mortality rate of captive Africans was twice that of white immigrants, prospective masters preferred to buy the labor of English indentured servants. Should white servants die, the capital invested in their labor was less than that required to purchase African bodies. Some New Englanders also regarded reliance upon



Britain's northern American colonies, 1763.

unfree labor as ungodly, since what remained of their former Puritan ethos demanded steady toil on their own part. Idle hands of an indolent master class were the devil's workshop.<sup>11</sup>

Not that Calvinist sensibilities, which by the mid-eighteenth century were in any case quite faded, completely prohibited slavery. African slavery was legal throughout New England, just as it was in every other colony in British America in 1763. James Otis Sr., a sixty-one-year-old justice of common pleas in Boston, owned several slaves, as did wealthy shipper John Hancock. So too did Parson William Smith, whose daughter Abigail planned to marry young attorney John Adams the following fall. Exactly how many blacks resided in New England at the end of the Seven Years' War remains a mystery, and what data do exist may have been deliberately falsified. In Massachusetts, Governor Francis Bernard reported that in 1763 the colony was home to 200,000 people—not counting Native Americans—of whom 2,221 were “negroes and mulattoes.” But since slaves were counted solely for purposes of taxation, Bernard suspected that canny masters underreported their holdings. Even assuming some fraud, this means that Massachusetts was less than 2 percent black, a figure that remained constant throughout the Revolutionary era.<sup>12</sup>

Befitting the patchwork quality of the British Empire, pieced together through consistent conquest but sporadic settlement, the laws governing unfree labor in the New England colonies varied considerably from the *Code Noir* of the newly obtained Province of Quebec. At first glance,

Massachusetts's 1641 Body of Liberties even appeared to ban slavery. "There shall never be any bond slaverie, villinage or captivitie amongst us," admonished Article 91. But then followed the exceptions, which included "lawfull captives taken in just warres," as well as "such strangers as willingly selle themselves or are sold to us." Since the reference to "strangers" derived from Leviticus, which permitted Hebrews to purchase slaves "from among the strangers who sojourn with you," this clause bore a biblical stamp of approval. The allusion to "just warres" was also weighted with tradition, as English hostilities with the Algonquians dating back to the Pequot War of 1637 had provided settlers with a steady supply of slaves. Long before the end of the Seven Years' War, New England settlers had defined "strangers" as the ultimate outsiders: Indians and Africans. The Body of Liberties, however, never denied New England slaves the rights to marry, read, or assemble, as did the laws in Britain's southernmost colonies.<sup>13</sup>

As in Canada, slaves in New England tended to live in or near urban areas and were disproportionately owned by the wealthiest families. In Connecticut, home to approximately five thousand bondpeople in 1763, half of all lawyers and public officials owned slaves. So too did roughly two-thirds of those who held estates valued at more than £2,000. Most white New England slaveholders were farmers, and contemporary newspapers suggest that the minority of blacks who lived in the countryside performed a wide variety of tasks. Sale advertisements described blacks as "brought up in husbandry" or "understanding the farming business exceedingly well." Yet the majority of New England slaves worked within the household. Antoine Court, a French visitor, noted that "there is not a house in Boston, however small may be its means, that has not one or two" slaves.<sup>14</sup>

Slaves were particularly numerous in Rhode Island, a colony with excellent harbors but little arable land. As a result, Rhode Island ports quickly took the lead in building and fitting out the vessels that carried captive Africans to Britain's southern and Caribbean colonies. By the end of the Seven Years' War, ships owned by merchants in Bristol, Providence, and Newport accounted for 60 percent of all black cargoes to English America. Newport alone housed a population that was 18 percent enslaved, making it one of the most demographically black cities in North America. Newport contained several exceptional rum distilleries, and its merchants became celebrated on the west coast of Africa for the quality of their liquor. As Captain George Scott lamented to his Newport investors from Africa, his error was to fill his hold with anything but liquor. "Had we laid out two thousand pounds in rum, bread, and flour, it would have purchased more [humans] in value than all our dry goods." Merchants poured the profits into elegant mansions and, ironically,



benevolent ventures. When the College of Rhode Island was founded in 1764, two of the signatories on the charter were John and Nicholas Brown, whose family-based company in Providence had been deeply involved in the Atlantic slave trade since 1736; at length, the university would be renamed after Nicholas Brown Jr.<sup>15</sup>

Since most New England slaves were not agricultural workers, historians of the region's economy continue to debate their purpose. Some argue that Africans and their offspring were critical to the economic development of northern seaports, a difficult proposition to sustain given the small number of blacks found in these colonies. Others insist that enslaved domestics fulfilled no useful economic purpose apart from serving as visible emblems of authority for urban elites. Most slaveholding New England households were not merely wealthy, however. What set them apart from other prosperous families in the region was the fact that the men who headed them conducted much of their work away from their homes. Merchants, public officials, and attorneys required either highly trained domestics to run their residences in their absence or menservants to accompany them while about on business. Such was the lot of Adam, the slave of Joshua Hempstead of New London, Connecticut. As a businessman and attorney who served also as a justice of the peace and probate judge, Hempstead used Adam to conduct a wide variety of household chores in his absence, including fulfilling Hempstead's yearly obligation to work on the public highways in town. Enslaved domestics such as Adam indicate that New England's economy was hardly dependent upon unfree labor, yet by allowing their masters to pursue new opportunities and careers, they were playing a vital role in the region's transformation from a barter economy to a capitalist market economy.<sup>16</sup>

What remains beyond debate is the impact these sparse numbers had on the retention of African traditions in New England. Surrounded by an overwhelming white, Protestant majority, and even living within their masters' households, blacks in Britain's northernmost colonies had little opportunity to practice African traditions or forge a culture of resistance. The hope of fashioning a viable African society became marginally more possible by midcentury, as slavers sold small numbers of Africans—rather than creoles from the Caribbean—into New England. But even then, black customs were inevitably influenced by British cultural practices. Starting around 1740, slaves in Boston and Newport began to celebrate Negro Election Day, or “Nigger 'Llection.” Possibly a rite of spring in its inception, the festival came to include a parade, dances, games, and in some towns a banquet, during which slaves elected one of their own as king or governor. Slaves enjoyed the “unmolested use of the Boston Common, with an equality of rights and

privileges with white people.” The dances approximated a West African ring dance, but the election of a black administrator, who then appointed a lieutenant governor, justices of the peace, and sheriffs, clearly owed a debt to English political culture. Although the elected slave exerted no actual power over white authorities—or perhaps because of that fact—most masters tolerated the “Negro’s hallowday” and granted their slaves a few days off. One Salem master recorded that he gave “Scip[io] 5s. and W[illia]m 2s 6d,” while the Warwick owner of the E. & C. Greene Company scribbled into his account book that he had “8 days lost [due to] Negro Election.”<sup>17</sup>

To the west of Rhode Island’s profitable ports lay New York, where visitors rarely failed to comment on its large contingent of Africans. Although precise data for colonial New York are even harder to obtain than for New England, by the mid-1760s the five southern counties around the bustling port had a black population of approximately fifteen thousand. In later decades, nearly 40 percent of the white families in the city owned at least a single slave. As that percentage was even higher than in South Carolina, some have argued that portions of the city, such as the Dock Ward, constituted a true slave society—with its concomitant mentality of people as things, as belongings—rather than merely a society that owned slaves. As one visitor observed, “[I]n the vicinity of New York, every respectable family had slaves, negroes and negresses who did all the drudgery.” With an enslaved population of more than 20 percent, New York was second only to Charles Town as the blackest city on the English-governed mainland. Together with western Long Island, New York City and its environs was more reliant upon unfree labor than any other colony north of Maryland.<sup>18</sup>

By the war’s end in 1763, Africans and their descendants had lived in Manhattan for exactly 150 years, since the Dutch captain of the *Jonge Tobias* abandoned Jan Rodrigues, a “black rascal,” on the island. As a result, the enslaved population was a blend of African captives, Caribbean-born laborers, and New York creoles. Prior to the start of King George’s War in 1745, 70 percent of the slaves brought into New York came from the Caribbean, which meant that most blacks arrived on the docks with some knowledge of English language and culture. But in the two decades prior to the Peace of Paris, white New Yorkers reversed this pattern by importing 70 percent of their slaves directly from the African coast. Four or five vessels made the voyage each year, typically in search of young Africans who could be trained for household labor. “For this market they must be young, the younger the better if not quite Children,” insisted one New York merchant. “Males are best.” Even during the brief intervals of peace in the Atlantic basin, the traffic was a dangerous one. The captain of the *Sarah and Elizabeth* was chased away from

the African coast by a larger French slaver as he was loading his cargo and was forced to return to New York with but nine slaves. Several years later, when the Seven Years' War formally ensued, high insurance rates dampened the trade. One of the few who tried, John Lewis of the *Catherine*, lost his cargo in 1761 when the captives below decks rose in revolt.<sup>19</sup>

The legal code that bound enslaved New Yorkers to their masters was derived in part from the Massachusetts Body of Liberties, yet it was also an amalgamation of ancient and modern codes that typified slave law across the Americas. When the English seized New Netherlands from the Dutch in 1664, the victorious authorities devised a set of laws named (like the renamed colony) after their patron, James Stuart, the Duke of York. The Duke's Law parroted the Massachusetts statute by promising that "no Christian shall be kept in bond slavery." In that decade, of course, most unwaged laborers in the colony were white indentured servants, and much of the code was devoted to keeping apprentices bound to their masters. Only in 1702, as the number of Africans in New York began to rise, did the colonial assembly pass an amending Act for the Regulating of Slaves, beginning with a preamble designed to clarify the proper relationship between master and slave: "Whereas many mischiefs have been occasioned by the too great liberty allowed to Negro and other slaves, it shall be lawful for any master to punish their slave for their crimes and offenses at discretion not extending to life or limb."<sup>20</sup>

Despite such statutes, white masters feared young bondmen, and by the eve of the Revolution, black women were the majority of the city's enslaved population. But as in other northern seaports, the demographic implications of this urban labor were not readily visible, for slave culture tended to be hidden within waterfront taverns or down twisting city alleys. In colonies such as Virginia, slaves resided in rural quarters, which meant that after the day's labor was performed, bondpeople congregated to eat, talk, sing or pray, and slumber with their spouses and children. In New York City more than half of all urban masters owned but a single slave, and even the wealthiest merchant typically owned just two or three bondpeople, so black New Yorkers tended to live in separate households from their spouses. Masters flattered themselves that because their slaves lived in close proximity to one another, it mattered little that a male butler resided in one merchant's attic, while that slave's wife lived four blocks away in another merchant's basement. As one seller put it, he preferred to auction his enslaved couple as a family, but "a few miles separation will not prevent the sale." Historians continue to insist that northern slavery was of a milder variety than that found in South Carolina or Jamaica, and in many ways it was, yet a young bondman who could visit his family only on Sundays might not have agreed.<sup>21</sup>

As in New England, enslaved New Yorkers fused European holidays with West African traditions. This became easier following the importation of large numbers of Africans after midcentury. Originally the religious holiday of Whitsunday or Pentecost—Pfungsten in German—New York’s Pinkster was practiced anywhere there was a healthy Dutch cultural presence. “All the various languages of Africa, mixed with broken and ludicrous English, fill the air, accompanied with the music of the fiddle, tambourine, the banjo, [and] drum,” noted one observer. Another described the election of “Old King Charley,” a “Guinea man” from Africa, who rode at the head of a parade astride his master’s horse before dismounting to lead a “Congo dance as danced in their native Africa.” Charley then demanded tribute from each tent placed along the parade. In another example of the racial world turned upside down, Charley charged each black man’s tent one shilling, but each white man’s two.<sup>22</sup>

Festivals that permitted slaves even a small amount of liberty were rare moments and much to be prized. Most slaveholders frowned on any celebration that weakened the supremacy of the master class, and they understood that holidays like Pinkster—in which domestics might be absent for several days—gave blacks an opportunity to make a run for their freedom. This even Equiano discovered in 1765, when his ship first touched Philadelphia’s docks. His owner, Robert King, allowed him to market a few goods of his own, and Equiano promptly “sold [his] goods there, chiefly to the Quakers.” As Philadelphia was the most populous city in British America, with an enslaved labor force of nearly 10 percent, King feared that Equiano might simply vanish into the city’s numerous back alleys. Equiano responded indignantly that had he chosen to flee, he could have escaped in any number of ports. “I thought that if it were God’s will I ever should be freed,” he insisted, “whilst I was used well, it should be by honest means.”<sup>23</sup>

Perhaps because of this, Equiano said little about meeting other slaves while in Pennsylvania. Had he done so, he might have noted that in Philadelphia as in New York City, the vast majority of masters owned just one or two slaves. But there the similarities ended. The entire colony of Pennsylvania was then home to roughly 4,500 enslaved men and women; by comparison, New York colony had four times that population of Africans and creoles. In Pennsylvania, blacks constituted only 2.3 percent of the overall population, whereas New York was 13.9 percent black. In New York, however, slavery had spread far into Long Island and up the Hudson River Valley, which accounted for the larger number of blacks. In Pennsylvania, as in New England, slaveholding was predominantly an urban affair. Philadelphia merchants and shopkeepers owned one-third of the city’s slaves. Philadelphia’s