

CHAPTER SIX

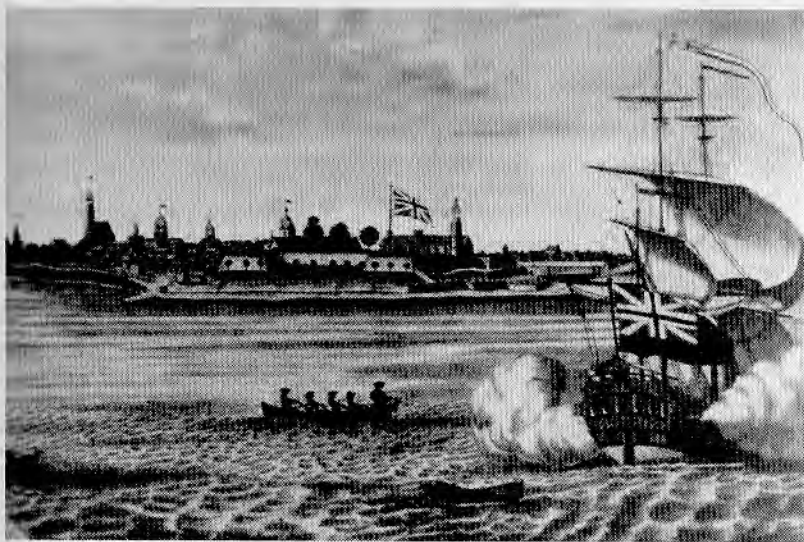
“The Outcasts of the Nations of the Earth”



AT THE HEART of the New York Conspiracy of 1741 lay a love story. The lovers were John Gwin (or Quin), “a fellow of suspicious character” rumored to be a soldier at Fort George, and “Negro Peg,” “a notorious prostitute” who lived at John Hughson’s waterfront tavern on the west side of Manhattan. Gwin paid Peg’s board at Hughson’s and joined her there many a night, climbing on top of a shed and through her open window. During one of these late-night meetings he gave her a ring, a pair of earrings, and a locket with four diamonds. Eventually Peg bore his child, whose color was a matter of considerable gossip and debate around town. Some said the baby was white; others insisted that it was black.<sup>1</sup>

John Gwin had long been a regular at Hughson’s, and not only because he visited Peg. He often showed up with “a good booty”—speckled linen, stockings, even a worsted cap full of silver coins—that he gave to the tall, gaunt Hughson, who in turn fenced the purloined goods. Gwin’s friends at the tavern were always glad to see him, for they knew of the man’s generosity. Since aliases were common along the waterfront, where strangers and their secrets came and went with the tides, they also knew that Gwin and Peg were called by other names: Gwin, an African American slave, was known as Caesar, at least to his owner, John Vaarck. “Negro Peg” was the twenty-one- or twenty-two-year-old Margaret Kerry, though she was also known as the “Newfoundland Irish beauty.” Another thing tavern-goers knew was that Gwin and Peg were deeply involved in plotting what was later called the “most horrible and destructive plot that was ever yet known in these northern parts of America.” For it was at Hughson’s that they and dozens of others planned a “general insurrection” to capture the city of New York.<sup>2</sup>

Saint Patrick’s Day, 1741, was a day for remembering that Saint Patrick had abolished slavery in Ireland. A revolutionary arsonist named Quack set fire to New York City’s Fort George, the chief military installation of



A view of Fort George and the city of New York, 1735.  
*I. N. Phelps-Stokes Collection, Miriam and Ira D. Wallach  
Division of Art, Prints, and Photographs, New York Public  
Library, Astor, Lenox, and Tilden Foundations.*

the colony and one of the greatest fortifications in all of British America. The fire smoldered all night and on the following day exploded into billowing bursts of ocher and orange. Violent March winds carried the flames from the governor's mansion to the Church of England chapel, the army barracks, and the office of the general secretary of the province. Flying sparks and burning debris wafted above the wooden houses that sat just beyond the walls of the fort, threatening the city with conflagration. A shift in the winds and a sudden rain shower halted the spread of the blaze, but the damage had been done: the very heart of royal authority in this important Atlantic port now lay hollow and smoldering in ashes.

It was the first and most destructive of thirteen fires that would terrorize the city of eleven thousand in the coming weeks. When Cuffee, a slave owned by city eminence Adolph Philipse, was seen leaving the premises of the tenth fire, the cry went up that "the negroes were rising." A vast dragnet caught almost two hundred people, black and white, many of whom would be investigated and tried over the next several months. Peg,

Hughson, and others were charged with "conspiring, confederating and combining with divers negroes and others to burn the City of New-York and also to kill and destroy the inhabitants thereof." The conspiracy had been organized by soldiers, sailors, and slaves from Ireland, the Caribbean, and Africa, whom the officials called "the outcasts of the nations of the earth."<sup>3</sup> Disrespected by the mercantile oligarchy of New York, they were not without a mutuality of respect among themselves.

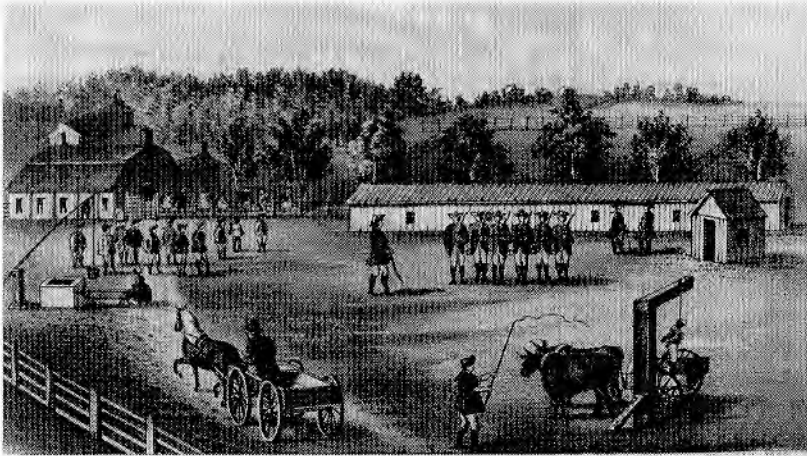
The outcasts had met regularly at Hughson's, where they exercised "the hopes and promises of paradise." Here the dispossessed of all colors feasted, danced, sang, took oaths, and planned their resistance. The enslaved Bastian remembered a table overflowing with "veal, ducks, geese, a quarter of mutton and fowls" from the butcher shops in which several of the conspirators worked. Others recalled the raucous, joyous fiddling, dancing, and singing for which Hughson's was famous around town. Yet others emphasized the subversive conversation, followed by solemn oaths: Gwin asking a recruit "whether he would join along with them to become their own masters"; Cuffee saying "that a great many people had too much, and others too little"; Hughson announcing that "the country was not good, too many gentlemen here, and made negroes work hard." At Hughson's tavern, the rebels practiced a simple communism. Those who had no money were entertained "at free cost"; they "could have victuals and drink for nothing." Hughson told them, "You shall always be welcome to my house, come at any time." Bastian, exiled for his role in the rebellion, fondly recalled, "We always had a good supper and never wanted for liquor." Here, once again, was a world turned upside down, a place where Africans and Irish were kings, as they would be in the larger society after the uprising. In New York, they believed, "there should be a motley government as well as motley subjects."<sup>4</sup>

New York's people in ruffles were terrified of the conspiracy, for reasons both local and global. A severe winter had made the city's poor workers more miserable and more restive than usual. Trade, the lifeblood of New York, had stagnated in recent years, deepening divisions within the ruling class and creating an opening for revolt from below. Danger had also threatened from afar after the merchant mountebank Robert Jenkins waved his severed ear before the astonished bigwigs of Parliament, who then declared war against Spain (the aptly named War of Jen-

kins' Ear, 1739) and required the rulers of New York to supply both food and six hundred recruits (nearly one in six of the city's able-bodied white men) for the war effort. Imperial authorities had thus depleted New York's food supply as well as its defenses against French and Iroquois aggression from the north, Spanish privateers from the south, and domestic rebels from within.

The fires caused great damage to property, and New York's rulers made sure that there was ample human carnage to pay for it. On six afternoons and evenings between late May and mid-July, thirteen African men were burned at the stake. On six mornings between March and August seventeen more people of color and four whites were hanged, including John Gwin and Peg Kerry, whose romance came to an end on the gallows. John Hughson was also hanged, and his corpse, with Gwin's, gibbeted in chains and left to rot. Seventy people of African descent, among them Bastian, were exiled to places as various as Newfoundland, Madeira, St. Domingue, and Curaçao. Five people of European origin were forcibly sent off to join the British army, then at war against Spain in the Caribbean, where the conditions of soldiering life likely made theirs a delayed sentence of death. Sarah Hughson, the tavernkeeper's daughter, who was banished from the city for her own role in the conspiracy, took Gwin and Peg's baby to parts unknown.

The events of 1741 have long been controversial. The New Yorkers who lived through them argued fiercely about exactly what had happened and why, and since that time historians have done likewise. Indeed, the uniquely detailed record of the plot owes its existence to the dissension that surrounded the original events. After some expressed doubts about the conspiracy and the prosecutions, Judge Daniel Horsmanden of New York's Supreme Court compiled "the notes that were taken by the court, and gentlemen of the bar," and published them in 1744 as *A Journal of the Proceedings in the Detection of the Conspiracy formed by Some White People, in Conjunction with Negro and other Slaves, for Burning the City of New-York in America, and Murdering the Inhabitants*. His purpose was not only to prove the "justice of the several prosecutions" but also to sound, for the public benefit, a warning about the rebellious ways of slaves and to erect "a standing memorial of so unprecedented a scheme of villainy."<sup>5</sup>



*The hanging of an African in New York, c. 1750.*  
 Manual of the Corporation of the City of New York (1860).

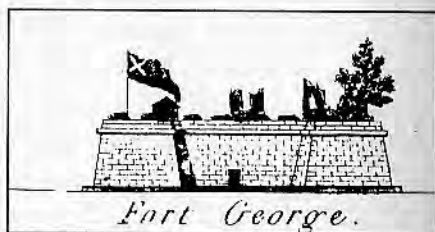
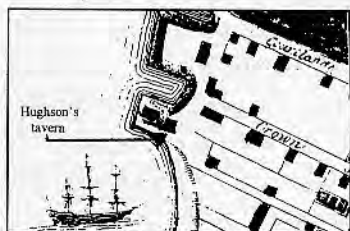
Contemporary accounts of the episode expressed three basic positions in the debate, which prefigured the views taken by modern interpreters of the events of 1741. Some historians have followed an anonymous writer of 1741 who maintained that there never was a conspiracy, and that the whole affair resembled the hangings for witchcraft that had taken place in Salem, Massachusetts, in 1692.<sup>6</sup> Others have echoed the belief of William Smith, Jr., son of one of the prosecuting attorneys at the trial, who wrote that the conspirators wanted only “to create alarms, for committing thefts with more ease.”<sup>7</sup> A third major interpretation, offered by T. J. Davis in *A Rumor of Revolt: The “Great Negro Plot” in Colonial New York* (1985), proved the original prosecutors right in claiming the existence of a dangerous conspiracy. This view holds that blacks and whites gathered and drank illegally, fenced their goods, and plotted against their masters at Hughson’s tavern. They sought for themselves money and freedom, revenge against particular powerful people (not all “white people”), and the destruction by fire of certain areas (not the entire city). The rebels had grievances and plans to redress them, but no genuinely revolutionary objectives.<sup>8</sup>

This chapter argues that a revolutionary conspiracy, Atlantic in scope, did develop in New York, though it was not the “popish plot” imagined

by Horsmanden, who saw the affair as having been orchestrated by a disguised priest. It was, rather, a conspiracy by a motley proletariat to incite an urban insurrection, not unlike the uprising led in Naples by the fisherman Masaniello in 1647. It grew out of the work of the waterfront, the organized cooperation of many kinds of workers, whose Atlantic experiences became the building blocks of the conspiracy. The rebels of 1741 combined the experiences of the deep-sea ship (hydrarchy), the military regiment, the plantation, the waterfront gang, the religious conventicle, and the ethnic tribe or clan to make something new, unprecedented, and powerful. The events of 1741 can thus be understood only by attending to the Atlantic experiences of the conspirators, in the villages and slave factories of the Gold Coast of Africa, the cottages of Ireland, the Spanish military outpost of Havana, the street meetings of religious revival, and the maroon settlements of the Blue Mountains of Jamaica and their surrounding sugar plantations.

### THE WATERFRONT AND THE CONSPIRACY

The events of 1741 began along the city's docks. As valuable outposts of empire, New York and other Atlantic ports garrisoned soldiers to protect their cities and propertied people against enemies within and without. Soldiers such as William Kane and Thomas Plumstead, both stationed at Fort George, drilled, guarded, loafed, and grumbled their way through rounds of life endlessly governed by the soldier's quietest but most common enemy: boredom. As bustling centers of transatlantic trade, the seaports contained masses of workers who labored in the maritime sector of the economy, sailing, building, and repairing ships, manufacturing sail, rope, and other essentials, and moving commodities by boat, by cart, and by the strength of their backs. People of African descent, almost all of them enslaved, were especially important to the waterfront, representing about 18 percent of the city's population and fully 30 percent of its workers. Brash and Ben, for example, worked together on the Hudson loading timber, while Mink labored at his owner's ropewalk. Cuff's merchant master sent him down to the docks to work with a white boy to "sew on a vane upon a board for his sloop." The Spanish "negroes and mulattoes" involved in the conspiracy were all sailors, as were the slaves



*Map of Manhattan, with details of Hughson's tavern and a burned-out Fort George. A Plan of the City and Environs of New York, 1742-4, by David Grim. Collection of the New-York Historical Society.*

Ben and London. Quack worked with soldiers on a new battery near Fort George.<sup>9</sup>

After work these soldiers, sailors, and slaves retired to the dram shops, taverns, and "disorderly" houses along the waterfront "to drink drams,

punch and other strong liquors," often staying "till two or three o'clock in the morning, . . . drinking, singing and playing at dice." Here they told tales, sometimes tall, sometimes true, among which were the stories of an uprising that had shaken New York in 1712. Here, too, they cursed, caroused, fought, danced, and created constant public disturbances, after which they often awoke in the basement of City Hall, in jail. Mutinous soldiers and sailors had been a problem for New York's rulers for several decades, prompting numerous acts of legislation to contain and punish their unruly ways.<sup>10</sup>

The rebels of 1741 traveled along the wharves for secret meetings, gathering at Hughson's, at Comfort's on the Hudson, and "at the house of one Saunders, upon the dock." The docks and taverns, like ships, were places where English, Irish, African, Native American, and West Indian persons could meet and explore their common interests. The authorities could not easily circumvent the flow of subversive experience, for a port city was hard to police. There were always "some strangers lurking about the city"—people such as Sambo, described as "a tall negro living at John Dewit's (a stranger)." Always there were "Vagrant and Idle persons" to be found, and "obscure people that have no visible way of subsistence," for the growth of the cities, and especially of their maritime sector, depended upon a mass of desperate but necessarily creative proletarians' being forced to work for wages in order to keep body and soul together. Everyone knew that a combination of such people was not only more likely in a port city, but more dangerous than it might be elsewhere to the concentrated, established power of a cosmopolitan ruling class.<sup>11</sup>

The waterfront taverns were the linchpins of the waterfront economy, the places where soldiers, sailors, slaves, indentured servants, and apprentices met to sell illegally appropriated goods and pad their meager or nonexistent wages. Tavernkeepers sometimes encouraged such trade by extending so much credit that bills could be settled only after goods were taken and submitted as payment. New York's rulers passed legislation to limit the amount of credit tavernkeepers could offer to workers, especially soldiers and sailors. The latter were especially important to illegal trade because they not only sold stolen goods but also purchased them, and conveniently disappeared when their ships set sail. Other bills were meant to halt the flow of pilfered goods ("Cloathing, or any other



Goods, Chattles, Wares, or Merchandizes”), promising double restitution or jail for offending tavernkeepers. New York’s comprehensive slave code of 1730, “An Act for the more Effectual Preventing and Punishing the Conspiracy and Insurrection of Negro and other Slaves,” also acknowledged the subversive potential of the waterfront economy: its first article prohibited any “trade or Traffick” with a slave without his or her master’s permission, “on forfeiture of trebel the Value of the thing or things traded.” Lieutenant Governor Clark noted—almost prophetically—that illicit transactions promoted “an habit of idleness, that may in time prove ruinous to the whole Province if not prevented.”<sup>12</sup>

None of the threats against tavernkeepers who traded with soldiers, sailors, or slaves worried John Hughson. His house was the perfect place for the “caballing and entertainment of negroes” and for the fencing of stolen goods: built into it were secret compartments—in the cellar, in various rooms, and under the stairs—where hot items, slipped in through a back-alley window in the middle of the night, could be hidden. As Bastian explained, “The negroes brought what they could steal to him.” In return, they, like apprentices, indentured servants, soldiers, and sailors, received money, some of which they left in the hands of the tavernkeeper, “to drink out” on credit. Other, lesser fences worked through Hughson’s network. The slave Will stole a silver spoon from his mistress and carried it to the wife of soldier William Kane, who then turned it over to her husband, who in turn sold it to the silversmith Peter Van Dyke and gave Will “eight shillings of the money.” Other Irish conspirators also had a hand in the illegal circulation of goods. Daniel Fagan, Jerry Corker, and John Coffin wanted William Kane “to rob houses with them and go off.” But before they “went off,” they would have stopped at Hughson’s, as Edward Murphy had done when he wanted to cash in some purloined jewelry.<sup>13</sup> Indeed, so many “run goods” passed through Hughson’s house, making it “a mart of so great note,” that its customers had wryly begun to call the place Oswego, after the great provincial trading house where the English and Iroquois swapped their goods on the upper colonial frontier. Like the Iroquois, those who gathered at Hughson’s had a special interest in guns, powder, and ammunition, which they stockpiled through the winter of 1740–41.<sup>14</sup>

Two of the most daring and most notorious members of the waterfront

economy—and part of Hughson's "black guard"—were John Gwin and Prince, who worked along the docks, wharves, and warehouses, taking hauls big and small: fifty firkins of butter, a cache of pieces of eight, beeswax, a shirt, stockings, a coat, and whatever else came their way. According to Horsmanden, these two "very wicked idle fellows had before been detected in some robberies, for which they had been publicly chastised at the whipping-post." The authorities scarred their backs for a theft of gin, a Dutch contribution to civilization and the drink of mortal desperation of the London poor in this era. Carried by cart in a "suitable Procession round the Town," they got "at every Corner . . . five Lashes with a Cowskin well laid on each of their naked black Backs," as bystanders pelted them with "Snow balls and Dirt." Gwin and Prince took the momentary defeat in stride and in humor: in honor of the event they soon founded the "Geneva Club" and proclaimed themselves its leaders. They continued to show up at Hughson's with booty, in their pockets, on their backs, or "tied up in a large table cloth." When it came to the plot, Gwin and Prince were "two principal ringleaders in it amongst the blacks." Daniel Horsmanden made this point clear when he called the waterfront workers "brother criminals" whose thefts were the actual "ingredients of the conspiracy." Such operations along the waterfront generated leadership, connections, and solidarities that proved crucial to the conspiratorial design.<sup>15</sup>

As the number of committed conspirators grew, the older, smaller gangs of the waterfront economy evolved into quasimilitary forms of social organization adapted to insurrectionary purposes. A gang called the Fly Boys met at John Romme's tavern, while the Long Bridge Boys met at Hughson's. Each group had its highest leader and below him several captains, each in charge of a company. Gwin was the leader of the Long Bridge company; his equivalent in the Fly Boys was the experienced Spanish-speaking soldier Juan. Both apparently reported directly to Hughson. Other captains included Ben, a "head man or captain" and "commander of a hundred at least," and Jack, called a "head captain." Curaçao Dick, York, and Bastian rounded out those named (or self-named) in the testimony as captains, though the group should have included both Cuffee and Prince as well. All stayed in close, steady contact with Hughson. Dundee, Cook, London, and Gomez's Cuffee were lesser

officers. Each company had its own drummer, such as old Tom, and its fiddler, such as Braveboy, who, Albany insisted in recruitment, was needed precisely "because he was a fiddler." Perhaps he would have been like Louis Delgres, the Martinican who led a slave revolt on the island of Guadeloupe and was last seen sitting in a cannon port in the island's Fort Matouba, fiddling madly amid the smoke and the sizzling shot to inspire his fellow rebels against the French.<sup>16</sup>

### WEST AFRICA

The cultures and memories of West Africa figured centrally in the plan for insurrection in 1741. Several distinct groups of Africans took part, and indeed John Hughson, among others, was keenly aware of their variety and importance. Central to the plan for organizing the revolt was an inner circle of "headmen," each of whom was, as a leader within a specific community of Africans in New York, responsible for recruitment, discipline, and solidarity. Hughson instructed these most trusted men (they were all men) carefully: they were "not to open the conspiracy to any but those that were of their own country," since as Daniel Horsmanden would observe, "they are brought from different parts of Africa, and might be supposed best to know the temper and disposition of each other."<sup>17</sup> They worked according to plan. In making his pitch on behalf of the insurrection, Cato asked Bridgewater, "Countryman, will you help?" A slave named Ben used the same approach, saying to Jack, "Countryman, I have heard some good news." The word was that the Spanish planned to invade the city, which would support their own rising from within. Cato and Bridgewater appealed to ethnic groups such as the Papa, from the Slave Coast near Whydah; the Igbo, from the area around the Niger River; and the Malagasay, from Madagascar, who constituted the revolutionary cells of New York's movement.<sup>18</sup>

The leading cell was made up of Africans from the Gold Coast of West Africa, the Akan-speaking people who were known by the name of the slave-trading fort from which they were shipped: Coromantee (or, in Fante, Kromantse). Many a "Coromantee" had been an *okofokum*, a common soldier trained in firearms and hand-to-hand combat in one of the mass armies of West Africa's militarized, expansionist states (Ak-

wamu, Denkyira, Asante, Fante), before being captured and shipped to America. Peck's Caesar was identified as "a Caromantee," as was an unnamed old woman owned by Gerardus Comfort. Moreover, five of the thirteen slaves who would be burned at the stake either had Akan day-names (Quack [Kwaku in Akan], Quash [Kwasi], and two called Cuffee [Kofi]) or were known to be Coromantee (Gwin), suggesting strong Gold Coast participation in the leadership of the plot. Yet another, Quamino (Kwamena), was hanged, while three more were transported. In the aftermath of the failed conspiracy, a slave named Warwick "cut his [own] throat," probably in the style and tradition of a defeated Asante warrior. Doctor Harry, who was almost certainly an obeah man (an Akan shaman who had deep natural and spiritual knowledge and powers) of Gold Coast origins, had produced poison—"the same sort they saw in Guinea"—for the plotters to gulp down in the event of failure.<sup>19</sup>

The role of the Coromantees, and of Africa more broadly, was most obvious in the administering of war oaths, which Hughson shrewdly "accommodated to their own customs." The Irish soldier William Kane testified that there existed a specific "negro oath," but in truth there were probably, as Horsmanden believed, several different oaths. The most frequent of these involved "swearing by thunder and lightning," a "terrible" oath commonly used among the Africans. Many of the slaves swore by this oath to support the revolt and never to reveal the common secret. Military oaths invoking the primal powers of thunder and lightning were in use on the Gold Coast of Africa in the middle of the eighteenth century, suggesting both the origin and the efficacy of the practice. Nanny, the legendary leader of the Windward Maroons in the 1730s, administered similar oaths, as did rebels in Antigua and elsewhere. Horsmanden sensed that the "obligation of that infernal oath" impeded the investigation in New York, but he never understood that the original source of his difficulty lay across the Atlantic, on the Gold Coast of Africa.<sup>20</sup>

These oaths, like African traditions of resistance more generally, were not new to New York, for they had been used a generation earlier, in 1712, in one of the bloodiest revolts ever to hit the North American mainland, when a coalition of slaves of Coromantee and Papa backgrounds set fire to a building and then killed several whites who came to extinguish the

flames. Afterward, nineteen slaves were executed—burned, hanged, starved, broken on the wheel—but not forgotten.<sup>21</sup> Horsmanden knew the earlier history, as did attorney William Smith, who had helped to send the rebels to their “brutish and bloody” executions.<sup>22</sup> Now, in 1741, John Romme, it would be testified in court, encouraged the conspirators “to set them all a light fire; burn the houses of them that have the most money, and kill them all, as the negroes would have done their masters and mistresses formerly.” Hughson, who himself had grown up in the environs of New York, “proposed burning the fort before anything else; because at a former rising, the white people run into the fort.” The testimony of a slave named Sawney, who was only sixteen years old at the time of the second uprising, proved that he had heard the tales of 1712, perhaps from the likes of “old man” Cook or “Comfort’s old Caromantee woman.”<sup>23</sup>

### THE IRISH

Another cell in New York’s insurrectionary movement was Irish. These plotters, like their African counterparts, demonstrated a penchant for secret societies and conspiracy; they, too, called each other countryman. There were, in all, perhaps thirty to thirty-five Irish men and women involved in the conspiracy, though only eleven of these were recorded by name. One person testified that seventeen soldiers had attended a meeting at Hughson’s tavern; more commonly an ever-changing nine or ten turned up. Most all of the Irish were soldiers—“brother soldiers,” as they called themselves—stationed at Fort George. They wanted revenge against the Protestant English, expressing a desire “to burn the English church.” Hatred of the army was another motivation: Jerry Corker declared, “By G-d, I have a mind to burn the fort.” William Kane, whose involvement began when he told his fellow conspirators that “he would help them all that lay in his power” and ended in 1742 when he was shipped off to the Caribbean in punishment, wanted the fort in flames so that the soldiers “would have their liberty.” The complicity of Corker and Kane shows just how close the conspirators got to power: both had served as “sentry at the governor’s door” inside Fort George.<sup>24</sup>

Although little is known about the Irish individuals who took part in

the conspiracy, it is possible to sketch in broad outline the historical experience that set the Irish in motion around the Atlantic in the years before 1741. A depression in the linen industry, intensified oppression by landlords and Anglican clergyman, and especially the famine of 1728–29 created new waves of Irish vagabondage and migration. Another famine in 1740–41, called in Gaelic "*bliadhain an air*" ("the year of the slaughter"), sent tens of thousands to their graves and thousands more across the seas in search of subsistence. Such vagabonds were called "Saint Patrick's vermin."<sup>25</sup> The traditional spalpeen migrations now moved into wider, Atlantic orbits. For many the movement led to a military experience—in the army of Britain, France, or Spain—which in turn led to a new posting at the outskirts of the empire as a soldier or military laborer. Others made their way to Irish harbors, signed on in the cod fishery, and sailed for Newfoundland, where many fell into debt and whence they traveled on as indentured servants or maritime workers to the port cities of North America.<sup>26</sup> Some variant of this process would appear to have been the experience of the "Irish Newfoundland beauty," Peg Kerry.

Still others fell afoul of the law and ended up in the Americas as His Majesty's seven- or fourteen-year passengers, having been sentenced as felons to long terms of punitive labor and shipped overseas. Crime and rebellion were inextricably intertwined for these Irishmen and Irishwomen, as for thousands of others in Britain who found themselves living on the wrong side of laws that were changing rapidly to protect new definitions of property. Irish felons transported to Georgia were denounced as a "Parcel of harden'd abandoned Wretches perfectly skill'd in all manner of Villainy, and who have been transported [from] their country for Committing Crimes by which they have been deemed too dangerous to be allowed to stay there." Some of the transported were rioters who had lashed out against intolerable conditions; once in America, they stole their masters' property and made "treasonable Designs against the Colony."<sup>27</sup>

The Irish had a history in America of betraying the English, who themselves had a history in Ireland of brutally subjugating the Irish. Several times during the seventeenth century (in 1655, 1666, and 1689), Irish indentured servants had assisted Spain or France in attacks against the English Caribbean colonies of St. Christopher, Montserrat, and Nevis.

These treacheries were well remembered among British colonial officials in the eighteenth century, especially after new calamities in Ireland sent new waves of migrants toward American shores. Governor Robert Hunter of Jamaica considered the Irish to be “a lazy useless sort of people, who come cheap and serve for deficiencies” (i.e., to expand the minority white population). On his island in the early 1730s were many—perhaps too many—Irish indentured servants and soldiers: “Many of them considering their religion might prove rather a disservice than of use to us in case of a rupture at any time with France or Spain.” Hunter could only conclude, ominously, “Their hearts are not with us.” The same fears gripped Hunter’s counterparts in New York, particularly after war broke out with Spain in 1739 and war with France simultaneously threatened.<sup>28</sup>

### SPANISH AMERICA

Members of a third cell within the insurrectionary plot whispered in Spanish. The leading figures here were Spanish-American sailors, “negroes and mulattoes,” who had been captured on a prize vessel by Captain John Lush in the early spring of 1740, brought to New York from the West Indies, condemned with the rest of the vessel in the city’s Vice-Admiralty Court, and promptly sold as slaves. A merchant testified that he had heard, while in Havana, that one of the sailors came from a family of slaves in Cartagena. The sailors themselves maintained that they were “free subjects of the King of Spain” and hence entitled to treatment as prisoners of war. Known among the conspirators as the “Cuba People,” they had probably come from Havana, the greatest port of the Spanish West Indies and a center of privateering, military defense, and a free black population. Having been “free men in their own country,” they felt that great injustice had been done them in New York. They “began to grumble at their hard usage, of being sold as slaves.”<sup>29</sup>

The rage of the sailors heated many a conversation. Not surprisingly, Captain Lush, who had profited heavily from selling these prizes, was the object of special wrath. The sailors insisted that “if the captain would not send them to their own country, they would ruin all the city; and the first house they would burn should be the captain’s, for they did not care what they did.” Pointing to Lush’s house, they said, “*D--n that son of a b---b,*

*they would make a devil of him,*" doubtless by turning his home into an inferno. They even threatened to tie him "to a beam and roast him like a piece of beef."<sup>30</sup>

The Hispanic sailors had more than rage to contribute to the design to take the city, however, for they were highly skilled and knowledgeable in the ways of warfare. The tall, "very forward" Antonio de St. Bendito made no secret of their prowess. He bragged that when the time for the rising came, "while the York negroes killed one, the Spaniards could kill twenty." The sailors' reputation as experienced fighters circulated along the waterfront. John Hughson told York that "the Spaniards knew better than the York negroes how to fight"; he acknowledged their military experience by making Augustine an officer and Juan captain of the Fly Boys, one of the highest positions within the rebel command. Ben, a member of the conspiracy's inner circle, considered it good news that the "Spanish negroes" were ready to lend a hand in the rising when "the wars came." He told his skeptical countryman Jack that "those Spaniards know better than York Negroes, and could help better to take [the city] than they, because they were more used to war; but they must begin first to set the house (i.e. the houses) on fire."<sup>31</sup>

Here, too, the Hispanic sailors had something to offer, in particular their knowledge of the incendiary substances called fireballs that had long been used in the marauding, plundering, city-burning warfare of the Caribbean. At one of the meetings at Hughson's an unidentified Hispanic sailor "rolled something black in his hands, and broke it and gave to the rest, which was to be thrown in the houses, to set fire to the shingles in several places." Antonio and Juan were especially knowledgeable about the "stuff to put the houses on fire, by flinging it into the house." When on Monday, April 6, two fires broke out simultaneously on each side of Captain Sarly's house, the cry went up, "The Spanish negroes; the Spanish negroes; take up the Spanish negroes." Juan's knowledge, motive of revenge, and insolent bearing upon being accused raised suspicions that eventually led to his hanging.<sup>32</sup>

The Afro-Hispanic sailors also contributed to the plot an example of freedom based on their own maritime experience, and a means to achieve it, by coordinating an internal uprising with an external attack by Spanish forces. Of course, New York's authorities could not comprehend that



news about Spanish military plans in the New World might circulate among sailors and waterfront workers. But sensing that there were real connections between the New York Conspiracy and Spanish America, they seized upon a letter written by General James Oglethorpe from Georgia in 1741 about a "popish Plot" in which secret emissaries—priests disguised as physicians, dancing masters, and the like—were inciting revolts "to burn all the magazines and considerable towns in English North America, thereby to prevent the subsisting of the great expedition and fleet in the West-Indies." Although Oglethorpe himself "could not give credit to these advices," many New Yorkers could. The real credit instead belonged to the Hispanic sailors, the human vessels who transported information and experience from one Atlantic port to another.<sup>33</sup>

### THE GREAT AWAKENING

Another Atlantic dimension of the conspiracy of 1741 was religious, for it occurred during the Great Awakening. Beginning in the 1730s, both sides of the Atlantic witnessed an outburst of popular religious enthusiasm in which itinerant preachers traveled from place to place, testifying about their own religious experiences and encouraging working people wherever they went to become, as Gary B. Nash has put it, the "instruments of their own salvation." George Whitefield, a smallish preacher with crossed eyes, leather lungs, and burning charisma, ranged up and down the eastern seaboard of the colonies in 1739, delivering an endless succession of fiery sermons before the thousands, black and white (five to seven thousand in New York alone), who gathered to hear him.<sup>34</sup> The more radical itinerants preached a spiritual egalitarianism based on the biblical precept "God is no respecter of persons," and many members of the colonial upper classes hated them for it. James Davenport, for example, was accused by the conservative Charles Chauncey of Boston of acting out the communism of the Book of Acts, seeking to destroy private property and make "all things common, wives as well as goods." As the evangelicals preached justification by faith against the more traditional idea of justification by works, the specter of radical antinomianism hovered around their message and haunted their conservative adversaries. Some feared that the Levellers, Ranters, and Fifth Monarchy men of the

seventeenth-century English Revolution had reappeared a century later, and they were not entirely wrong. The physician Alexander Hamilton worried that such "New Light fanatics" would strip established religion of its ritualistic powers of mystification, letting loose "the mobile, that many-headed beast," from its carefully constructed cage.<sup>35</sup>

Although prosecuting attorney William Smith would call New York's slave conspirators "Pagan negroes," it is clear that Christianity, much of it a result of the Great Awakening, had affected many of them. John Hughson used the Bible to administer binding oaths to a number of the slave rebels. Bastian would testify in court that he and several other slaves "were sworn on a bible." Cato agreed, claiming that Hughson took him and Albany upstairs in the tavern and "swore them upon a bible," after which they "kissed the book." Once captured, Cato would appear in court clutching his Bible to "his bosom"; "he said he read [it] in jail as often as he could." Another slave, Othello, wanted assurance that his taking part in the revolt "would not hinder him from going to heaven." Many others, black and white, fretted that by violating their sacred oath they would be "wronging their own souls." Many New York slaves had lived long enough in English-speaking colonies to comprehend and engage the Christian message of the Awakeners, and even to endow it with revolutionary meaning. As an Anglican missionary explained, "the *Negroes* have this notion, that when they are baptized, they are immediately free from their masters."<sup>36</sup>

Whitefield made the issue of slavery central to the Great Awakening when, in 1740, he wrote and published a letter to "the Inhabitants of Maryland, Virginia, North and South Carolina," remarking upon the slave rebellions that had recently convulsed Virginia and South Carolina and expressing his surprise that there had not been more of them. He considered rebellions past, present, and future to constitute a "judgment," a "visitation" from God. He cited the biblical story of "Saul and his Bloody House," who were subjected to famine for having enslaved the Gibeonites, "the Hewers of Wood and the Drawers of Water." God had avenged the poor slaves in the day of David and he would do so again. Whitefield commanded sternly, "Go to now, ye rich Men, weep and howl for your Miseries that shall come upon you!" But he also offered the sinful masters a way out of their self-built Babylon, through a proper

Christianity that attended to the souls of both masters and slaves. Masters would cease their brutalities and avert the awful judgment at the hands of the "sons of violence." Slaves would cease to be rebellious and would naturally become better servants. Both would be conscious of their "relative Duties," to the Lord and to each other.<sup>37</sup>

Such words were more than many slaveowners could bear to hear. The Reverend Alexander Garden, who ministered to the slavemasters of Charleston, South Carolina, responded by accusing Whitefield of "enthusiasm and pride" and comparing him to "the *Oliverians, Ranters, Quakers, French Prophets.*" Such antinomianism, said Garden, led Whitefield to incite insurrection among the slaves. Others, such as William Smith, writing from the Caribbean, agreed: "Instead of teaching [the slaves] the *Principles of Christianity,*" enthusiasts such as Whitefield were "filling their heads with a Parcel of *Cant-Phrases, Trances, Dreams, Visions, and Revelations,* and something else still *worse,* which Providence forbids to name."<sup>38</sup>

The something worse reared its hydra head in New York in 1741, and Whitefield's poisonous influence was duly noted. John Ury, a clergyman who would be hanged in 1742 for his role in the conspiracy, believed that "it was through the great encouragement the negroes had from Mr. Whitefield [that] we had all the disturbance." Particularly pernicious, he thought, were Whitefield's views of free grace, the theological issue at the center of the antinomian heresy, the embrace of which allowed self-declared, often poor saints to take the law into their own hands. Looking back on the conspiracy in 1746, Horsmanden would also denounce the "Enthusiastical Notions" and "New Fangled Principles" of Whitefield and other "Suspicious Vagrant Strolling Preachers."<sup>39</sup>

An Anglican missionary in New York went further in his indictment. Whitefield, he claimed, was directly responsible for the rising, for in New York as elsewhere he had unified and encouraged the slaves as he divided and discouraged their masters. His "greatest address hath been to the *Negroes* alone": he had proposed to erect a school for slaves, which would cause many to "run away from the masters in hopes that they shall be here maintained, and have their liberty." The result would be baptism and, from the slaves' perspective, the freedom that came with it. Whitefield also inspired "feuds and animosities" everywhere he went. He

knew that a "kingdom divided against itself cannot stand, but is brought to desolation." Whitefield thus "raised up a bitter spirit in the *Negroes* against their Masters." In New York as elsewhere, "all the planters are forced to be doubly upon their guard, and are not sure when they go to bed, but that they shall have their throats cut before the next morning; and it may be the overturning of several colonies."<sup>40</sup>

### A CARIBBEAN CYCLE OF REBELLION

The overturning of several colonies by insurrection seemed a real possibility in the 1730s and 1740s. During these years a furious barrage of plots, revolts, and war ripped through colonial Atlantic societies like a hurricane. No respecter of national or imperial boundaries, this cycle of rebellion slashed through British, French, Spanish, Dutch, and Danish territories, which stretched from the northern reaches of South America through the West Indies to the southern colonies and then the port cities of North America. Most of these events took place in plantation regions and were led by African Americans, but other areas (such as New York) and other actors (such as the Irish) were also involved. The magnitude of the upheaval was, in comparative terms, extraordinary, encompassing more than eighty separate cases of conspiracy, revolt, mutiny, and arson—a figure probably six or seven times greater than the number of similar events that occurred in either the dozen years before 1730 or the dozen after 1742. It was within this cycle of rebellion that the actions of the African slaves, Irish soldiers, and Hispanic sailors in New York in 1741 took on their greatest and most subversive meaning.

Scholars have studied the acts of resistance that constituted this cycle of rebellion, but almost always as isolated events; rarely have they analyzed them in relation to each other, as having both a coherence and a collective causal power. But of course both the rebels and the colonial authorities of the 1730s and 1740s were acutely aware of this profound, generative wave of struggle, even if their latter-day chroniclers have not been. Governor Mathews of the Leeward Islands in 1737 wrote of the cycle in the idiom of disease: "The contagion of rebellion is spread among these islands more than I apprehend is discovered." Governor Edward Trelawny of Jamaica, who had witnessed firsthand the numerous