

Voices of a People's History of the United States

SECOND EDITION

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The First Slaves

Three Documents on Slave Revolts (1720 to 1793)

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"Petition of a Grate Number of Blackes" to Thomas Gage (May 25, 1774)

"Petition of a Great Number of Negroes" to the Massachusetts House of Representatives (January 13, 1777)

Benjamin Banneker's Letter to Thomas Jefferson (August 19, 1791)

In the year 1619, the first blacks were brought by force to serve the white colonists of Jamestown, Virginia. But the slave trade had begun almost a hundred years before this, when blacks were brought from Africa to the Portuguese and Spanish colonies in the Caribbean and South America.

The Virginians in 1619 were desperate for labor to grow enough food to stay alive. In the winter of 1609–10, the colony had been decimated by starvation, leaving only sixty colonists from an original group of five hundred. They could not force the Indians to work for them, but blacks captured in Africa, brought far from home and helpless, would be useful. And so the importation of slaves began, with the first twenty blacks brought in chains from the West Indies to Jamestown.

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Slaves did not merely accept their lot, as some historians have claimed. Instead, they resisted in many ways, including physical rebellion, as the following three documents reveal. In the first, an anonymous letter, the author describes a slave uprising in the Carolinas, one of many that would happen until slavery was abolished. The second letter describes "a very dangerous Insurrection among the Negroes in the Eastern shore of Virginia." The third document is a rare letter in the archives

of the state of South Carolina by a slave who tells of plans for a rebellion involving thousands of slaves. This never came to fruition, but the document, which was found on the street in 1793 in Yorktown, Virginia, reveals the desire of slaves for freedom, despite the great odds against a successful revolt.

Three Documents on Slave Revolts (1720 to 1793)

ANONYMOUS LETTER TO MR. BOONE IN LONDON (JUNE 24, 1720)¹

I am now to acquaint you that very lately we have had a very wicked and barbarous plott of the designe of the negroes rising with a designe to destroy all the white people in the country and then to take the town [Charles Town] in full body but it pleased God it was discovered and many of them taken prisoners and some burnt some hang'd and some banish'd.

I think it proper for you to tell Mr. Percivall at home that his slaves was the principal rogues and 'tis my opinion his only way will be to sell them out singly or else I am doubtful his interest in slaves will come to little for want of strict management, [since] work does not agree with them. 14 of them are now at the Savanna towne and sent for white and Indians and will be executed as soon as they come down[.] [T]hey thought to gett to [St.] Augustine and would have got a creek fellow to have been their pylott but the Savanna garrison tooke the negroes up half starved and the Creeke Indians would not join them or be their pylott.

LETTER FROM PETERSBURG, VIRGINIA (MAY 17, 1792)²

Several alarming accounts have been received in town, of a very dangerous Insurrection among the Negroes in the Eastern shore of Virginia;—Reports state, That about two weeks ago, the Negroes in that part of the State, to the amount of about 900, assembled in different parts, armed with muskets, spears, clubs etc. and committed several outrages upon the inhabitants. A favorite servant of Colonel Savage, who had joined them, met his master on the road, took his horse and some money from him, and treated him in an insolent manner. Celeb, a negro, the property of Mr. Simkins, was to command this banditti; he was also a favorite servant of his master and had long lived with him in the capacity of overseer. A barrel of musket balls, about 300 spears, some guns, powder, provisions, etc. have already been discovered and taken; the spears, it is said, were made by a negro blacksmith on the Eastern shore. A considerable number of the slaves have been taken up, and it is expected will be hanged.

It appears from a letter which has been lately discovered in Norfolk from one of the Negroes on the Eastern shore that they had concerted a plan with the Negroes from Norfolk and Portsmouth to commit some violent outrages in and about those towns. Six hundred of them were to cross the bay, at a certain time in the night, and were to be joined by the Negroes, in that Neighborhood; then they meant to blow up the magazine in Norfolk, and massacre the inhabitants.

**SECRET KEEPER RICHMOND (UNKNOWN) TO SECRET KEEPER
NORFOLK (UNKNOWN) (1793)³**

Dear Friend—

The great secret that has been so long in being with our own color has come nearly to a head tho some on our Town has told of it but in such a slight manner it is not believed[.] [W]e have got about five hundred Guns aplenty of lead but not much powder[.] I hope you have made a good collection of powder and ball and will hold yourself in readiness to strike whenever called for and never be out of the way[.] [I]t will not be long before it will take place, and I am fully satisfied we shall be in full possession of the [w]hole country in a few weeks[.] [S]ince I wrote you last I got a letter from our friend in Charleston[:] he tells me has listed near six thousand men, there is a gentlemen that says he will give us as much powder as we want, and when we begin he will help us all he can, the damn's brutes patroles is going all night in Richmond but will soon kill them all, there ain't many, we will appoint a night to begin with fire clubs and shot, we will kill all before us, it will begin in every town in one nite[.] Keep ready to receive orders, when I hear from Charleston again I shall [k]no[w] and will [w]rite to you, be that give you this is a good friend and don't let any body see it, [w]rite me by the same hand he will give it to me out his hand and he will be up next week[.] [D]on't be feared have a good heart, fight brave and we will get free[.] I had like to get each [illegible] but God was for me, and I got away, no more now but remain your friend—Secret Keeper Richmond to secret keeper Norfolk.

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More evidence of resistance to slavery can be found in the various petitions by slaves to state legislatures, seeking release from their bondage. Here are four of them, in part deferential but also impassioned and defiant.