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David Lucander

Slave Patrols

The slave societies of the American South formed slave patrols to control their slaves and enforce the slave codes, laws that attempted to regulate slave behavior. Slave patrols were usually locally organized groups of young white men, both middle-class slave owners and lower-class yeomen farmers. Patrollers generally had three main duties: searching slave quarters; dispersing slave gatherings; and safeguarding white communities by patrolling the roads.

Fear of growing slave populations and the threat of foreign invasion drove southerners to institute and later expand slave patrols. Due to its early black majority and threats from Native Americans and the Spanish, South Carolina established the earliest slave patrol in 1704; Virginia followed in 1727, North Carolina in 1753, and Georgia in 1757. As new territories and states formed across the Deep South and West in the early nineteenth century, they too established slave patrols. The Territory of Mississippi formed patrols in 1811, as did Missouri in 1823. The city of Washington, D.C., established citizen patrols in 1838; in 1842 they became an auxiliary night police to patrol the city's streets and enforce a "colored curfew."

Slave patrols reinforced a sense of white solidarity in the South between slave owners and non-slave owners, all of whom shared a desire to keep the non-white population under control. However, conflict sometimes arose between slave owners and patrollers. Some planters felt that patrollers abused slaves who had permission to travel, while other planters neglected to write the required passes. Much of the burden of patrolling fell to non-slave owners, who sometimes resented what they saw as serving the planter class.

It is unclear how effective slave patrols were at actually regulating slave behavior. However, it is quite clear that slaves feared and learned survival skills to thwart patrollers. Francis Henderson was nineteen years old when he escaped slavery in 1841. He recalled,

> The slaves are watched by the patrols, who ride about to try to catch them off the quarters, especially at the house of a free person of color. I have known the slaves to stretch clothes lines across the street, high enough to let the horse pass, but not the rider; then the boys would run, and the patrols in full chase would be thrown off by running against the lines.

A number of post–Revolutionary changes created more work for patrollers. African Americans understood the Revolutionary rhetoric of liberty and many slaves made escape attempts after the Revolution. Other slaves became free through manumission. In the Upper South, some masters freed their slaves because they believed slavery conflicted with Revolutionary ideals, while other masters freed or sold their slaves because of economic changes that reduced the need for slave labor. Those who sold their slaves often took part in the new domestic slave trade to the Deep South, which slaves greatly feared and from which they would flee. Patrollers therefore had to track runaway slaves and investigate the activities of the growing free black communities.

In this atmosphere of change and with the inspiration of abolitionist activities and the Haitian Revolution of 1791, free and enslaved African Americans throughout the South rebelled against slavery. Among the most noteworthy slave rebellions were Gabriel Prosser's planned rebellion in Virginia in 1800; a large rebellion in Louisiana that lasted for three days in 1811; a battle between slaves, Indians, and the U.S. Army at Fort Blount in Florida in 1816; and Nat Turner's Virginia rebellion in 1831, during which slaves killed at least fifty-five whites. White leaders brutally put down each of the rebellions, but not before fear spread throughout the slave societies, which responded with stricter laws and severe penalties for any hint of rebellion. After the Nat Turner rebellion, much of the South became an armed camp in which slave patrols were stepped up and black movement, gatherings, and the presence of free black communities were limited.

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Slavery and the Founding Generation

The United States was founded upon an apparent paradox: the new nation was conceived in liberty but preserved slavery. In 1780 about half a million people, one-sixth of all Americans, were enslaved; 40 percent of southerners were slaves. The institution was not confined to the South: in the Revolutionary era, for example, slaves made up 3 percent of the population in Connecticut and 14 percent in New York. Historians still struggle to document and understand the political, social, legal, and moral aspects of how the founders dealt with slavery. Some modern-day observers have taken the founders to task for not abolishing slavery; others say that the founders deserve credit for putting slavery on the road to ultimate extinction.

Thomas Jefferson and John Jay, two leaders of the time, both wrote that in the decades prior to the Revolution the majority of white Americans, in the South and the North, had little cause to question the justice of slavery. Even the deeply religious communities of Puritans and Quakers held slaves in the colonial era. The evangelist George Whitefield, who owned a plantation in Georgia worked by seventy-five slaves, said in 1751 that slavery was lawful, that God had made the colony of Georgia an ideal place for slave labor, and that slaves should be treated with Christian forebearance. David Brion Davis has written that, in the worldview of many people of the time, slavery "conformed to the natural structure of the universe, which evidenced an infinity of gradations and subordinations" (1975, p. 152).

By the 1760s, however, slavery was being denounced by religious leaders like John Wesley and political thinkers like the Boston patriot James Otis. Otis's pamphlet *Rights of the British Colonies* (1764) proclaimed, "The Colonists are by the law of nature free born, as indeed all men are, white or black. . . . Does it follow that tis right to enslave a man because he is black?" As the Revolution gathered momentum, the moral contradiction between slavery and the ideals of the Revolution became more and more evident to the founders. In 1775 Abigail Adams wrote to her husband, John Adams, "I wish most sincerely there was not a single slave in the province; it always appeared a most iniquitous scheme to me [to] fight ourselves for what we are daily robbing and plundering from those who have as good a right to freedom as we have."

When Jefferson wrote in the Declaration of Independence that "all men are created equal," he likely meant to include African Americans as among those who possess the rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. In an earlier statement of grievances against the Crown, the *Summary View of the Rights of British America* (1774), Jefferson declared, "The abolition of domestic slavery is the great object in [these] colonies, where it was unhappily introduced in their infant state. But previous to the enfranchisement of the slaves we have, it is necessary to exclude all further importations from Africa." In 1776 he unsuccessfully proposed a clause in Virginia's new constitution whereby "no person hereafter coming into the state would be held in slavery." Jefferson thus sought the emancipation ("enfranchisement") of the slaves, though he wanted them to enjoy their rights elsewhere—his subsequent proposals for emancipation hinged on forced exile of the people freed.

THE GATHERING MOVEMENT TOWARD EMANCIPATION

Thousands of African Americans bore arms for the American cause from the first day of fighting at Lexington to the last at Yorktown. When George Washington took command of the American army at Cambridge in July 1775, he found black men, both free and enslaved, among his soldiers. In a series of orders issued in the summer and fall of 1775, Washington barred recruiters from accepting any blacks. In December Washington reversed himself and allowed free blacks to serve. Amid acute manpower shortages later in the war, Washington initially supported a plan put together by his aides John Laurens and Alexander Hamilton to emancipate thousands of slaves in South Carolina and Georgia, with compensation to the owners, and form the freedmen into