

The (Chilling) Reason Slaves Didn't Revolt More Often

In grade school, I often naively wondered why slaves didn't revolt more. The reasons seem fairly obvious now, of course.

Oftentimes slaves had nowhere to go, and if they did (say, to a free state in the North before the Fugitive Slave Law was passed) they had to travel a long, perilous road to get there. If they failed, the penalties often were severe.

This is easy to understand in the abstract, but specific historical accounts and documents can (chillingly) drive the message home.

For example, in 18th century St. Croix, then a colony of the Dutch, the punishments for attempting escape and the responsibilities of white men to assist in the punishment are clearly spelled out in a booklet entitled "The St. Croix Pocket Companion." In his book [Alexander Hamilton](#), Ron Chernow offers details from the pocketbook and explains what slaves on this Caribbean island faced if they were caught attempting to escape (or if they attempted to intervene in a slave's punishment).

On days when renegade slaves were executed at [Christiansvaern](#), the white men formed a ring around the fort to prevent other slaves from interfering. Any slave who attacked a white person faced certain death by hanging or decapitation – death that probably came as a blessed relief after first being prodded with red-hot pokers and castrated. Punishments were designed to be hellish so as to terrorize the rest of the captive population into submission. If a slave lifted a hand in resistance, it would promptly be chopped off. Any runaway who returned within a three-month period would have one foot lopped off. If he then ran away a

second time, the other foot was amputated. Recidivists might also have their necks fitted with grisly iron collars of sharp, inward-pointing spikes that made it impossible to crawl away through the dense underbrush without slashing their own throats in the effort.

Hamilton, who grew up on St. Croix and its island-neighbor Nevis, likely witnessed some of this hellish treatment first hand, which no doubt forged his “permanent detestation” of the system of slavery and fueled his staunch abolitionism.

“Few, if any, other founding fathers opposed slavery more consistently or toiled harder to eradicate it than Hamilton,” writes Chernow.

Many slaveholders no doubt saw terror as an effective tool to keep slaves in line, but its inhumanness, revolting to many American colonials reared in the concepts of Christian love and mercy, likely helped fuel the slow demise of America’s “peculiar institution” (Jefferson’s euphemistic description of slavery).

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