

"This Deplorable Condition"

The Robin Johns' Enslavement
in British America

*A*s Grandy King George nursed his wounds, wrote letters to his old English slave trader friends in search of Little Ephraim and Ancona, and attempted to rebuild his shattered business empire, Little Ephraim and Ancona sweated, retched, and suffered below the stinking decks of the *Duke of York*. Captain Bivins took an estimated 336 captives on board in Old Calabar, and of that number only 272 survived the grueling forty-five-day Middle Passage to be sold on the island of Dominica.¹ It is important to note that the involvement of Africans in the trade did not end on the coast of Africa, but continued during the Middle Passage, where Africans worked as sailors and interpreters on the slave ships. Some of those Africans were enslaved, but many were

hired on the coast of Africa. In addition, sailors often relied on assistants from among the captives as they supervised their cargoes. African sailors from Old Calabar would play an important role in the Robin Johns' experience in the Americas. The horrors of the Middle Passage inflicted terrible suffering and traumatized its victims.² Ripped from their homes and families, often marched long distances to be sold at market, dazed and confused by the sight of the sea, the slave ships, and Europeans, most captives had no idea what fate awaited them.

Clearly, the Robin Johns were in a far different position from most victims of the slave trade. Unlike the vast majority of captives, who were kidnapped in the interior and whose language barriers prevented them from understanding their plight, the Robin Johns were fully aware of their predicament. As slave traders, they knew all too well what lay in store for them. Unlike many captives, they had no fear of the white sailors on board the *Duke of York*; in fact, they may well have known some of them already either from previous voyages or from their contacts with them while the ship lay at anchor in the Calabar River off Old Town. If lucky, they may have found a crewman like John Ashley Hall, whose duty as second mate was serving the provisions. He was often on shore in Old Calabar and reported that "I trusted myself with the natives." He communicated easily with the Efik traders there since "all of them speak English, some of them very good." Perhaps more impor-

tant for his treatment of the men, women, and children under his supervision, he believed the slave trade to be "perfectly illegal, and founded in blood."³

The fact that the two princes were together must have been a tremendous comfort to them, and these young, capable members of the Efik elite were a team bent on survival. Their knowledge of English language and customs was a significant advantage. Many captives suffered for their lack of understanding of the language and customs of the sailors; fear often prevented them from taking offers of assistance from the ship's men, and their refusal to eat brought them severe floggings. John Barbot noted that "all the slaves . . . believe that we buy them to eat them. . . . It is this which makes many slaves die on the passage across, either from sorrow or from despair, there being some who refuse to eat or drink."⁴ Whether the Robin Johns' better understanding of their situation made them more or less desperate is impossible to say, but it is certain that they had a more realistic view of their situation than did typical captives. The fact that they were from a slave-trading people gave them a familiarity with the trade, its participants, and its goals. Consequently, we can assume that they had a fundamentally different view of their plight.

It was by no means unheard of for young elite men in Old Calabar to return from long stays abroad, and there were even rare cases of young Efik men who were taken as pawns by English traders, illegally enslaved, sold into

slavery in the Americas, and later returned by the slave traders themselves.⁵ The surviving letters from Efik traders to their English counterparts indicate that the Efik frequently demanded the return of pawns, usually family members, who had been abducted in violation of usual practice. In 1761, for instance, the English trader William Earle assured Duke Abashy in Old Calabar, "I make no doubt of getting your Boys and Cobham Back . . . for they are all Freeman & No Slaves." It is impossible to know how often traders succeeded in returning such captives, though Captain Lace once purchased a member of an Efik trading family in Jamaica and returned him to Old Calabar, even though the man "was of no consiquance [*sic*] in family." With the bottom line ever in view, Lace reported that "it ansrd [answered] the Expence," no doubt by winning him favor with the man's family.⁶ However rare such cases may have been, the Robin Johns knew what most captives did not—that it was possible for them to make their way home. That knowledge, combined with their understanding of English language and customs, must have enabled them to negotiate their enslavement in ways that other captives could not.

Although the Robin Johns left no direct evidence of their voyage, it is possible to reconstruct it from records of other English slave ships. The *Duke of York* was a ship of a hundred tons carrying twelve guns and a crew of forty-five, a modest vessel slightly smaller than the

average ship engaged in the trade. Divided by gender, the African captives were crowded onto two decks in the ship's hold specially built by the ship's carpenters for that purpose. Bivins packed the ship more tightly than average, giving each person less than five square feet of deck area. Although there was seemingly no correlation between tight packing and death rates on board slave ships, the death rate of 19 percent on this journey was substantially higher than the average of 14.9 percent on slave voyages from the Bight of Biafra during the period. Death rates were high on voyages from Old Calabar, a fact not lost on sponsors. Investors in a 1762 venture to Old Calabar advised Captain Ambrose Lace that "Callebar is Remarkable for great Mortality in Slaves" and added, "we Desire you may take every Prudent Method to Prevent it."

Coming onto a slave ship was one more step in a process of degradation and dehumanization that began with an individual's capture. Slaves were brought on board with their arms tied behind them with cords. Especially unruly men might be chained together, linked by collars around their necks. The risk of slave uprisings on board was considered greatest during the months that ships spent lying in the Cross River. One captain noted in 1767 that seven vessels were anchored in the river, and that "the major part of the vessels here have very dangerous disorders amongst the slaves, which makes me rejoice that I have very few on board." He also observed that

"three captains belonging to Bristol died within these few months, besides a number of officers and sailors." A decimated and weakened crew made an even easier target for rebellion. Captives rose up in revolt in about one in every ten slaving voyages, though voyages from the Bight of Biafra showed a lower incidence of revolts than those from other regions. In a bitter play on the biblical creation story, sailors called the first male captive brought on board Adam and the first female Eve. Men were stripped naked and locked in irons during the entire voyage, the right leg of one man locked to the left leg of another. Women were generally not locked in irons and might be given strips of cloth to cover themselves. Being bound together created great difficulties for the men and often resulted in fights and arguments. As one sailor reported, "They frequently disagree in the night about their sleeping places; and frequently the men linked together disagree and fight, when one wants perhaps to obey the calls of nature, and the other has been unwilling to go with him." No doubt their tempers became increasingly frayed as the journey continued. Captains resorted to the most extreme measures to prevent those tensions from erupting into rebellion. One captain advised that if an uprising occurred, "spare no effort to repress their insolence and as an example to the others, sacrifice the lives of all the most mutinous. . . . The way of making it clear to them, I mean the form of punishment that scares Africans most, is by chopping parts off a liv-

ing man with blows from an axe and presenting the separated parts to the others." With high mortality rates, suicides, dismemberments, and executions, it is no surprise that hungry sharks trailed the bloody slave ships across the Atlantic.⁸

Food on board the ships was often meager, though some captains tried to accommodate the slaves' food preferences in an attempt to lessen mortality rates during the Middle Passage. Barbot noted that he tried to supply slaves with food they liked, "the Calabar slaves being generally better pleas'd with food of their own country, than with any of Europe." Slaves received a steady diet of beans, rice, and yams with a bit of palm oil and pepper for seasoning. Many slaves fell into a state of depression and refused to eat, and they often suffered for their obstinacy. Sailors referred to this condition as "sulking" and resorted to extreme measures to compel slaves to eat. Sailors might first simply strike slaves with their fists, but when that failed they often resorted to a cat-o'-nine-tails, a whip made of nine knotted leather cords attached to a wooden handle. More difficult cases brought more extreme measures. A sailor named George Millar told the story of "a woman Slave being brought on board . . . who refused any sustenance, neither would she speak: she was at last ordered to have thumb-screws put upon her, and suspended in the mizen rigging, and every attempt made by the cat and those instruments they generally have on board the ships, but all to no purpose; she

died three or four days after that, and I was told by some of the women Slaves that she spoke to some of them the night before she died, and said, 'She was going to her friends.'" John Barbot confessed that "I must say I am naturally compassionate, yet have I been necessitated sometimes to cause the teeth of those wretches to be broken, because they would not open their mouths, or be prevail'd upon by any intreaties to feed themselves; and thus have forced some sustenance into their throats." In later years slave ships were furnished with an instrument called a speculum oris, invented to pry open the mouths of lockjaw victims, to force open the mouths of "sulky" captives. Some slaves took their own lives because they believed that if they died their souls would return to Africa.⁹

Traders believed that exercise was necessary to keep the captives healthy. Slaves were brought above decks to take meals, and after each meal they were compelled "to jump up and down upon the beating of a drum." The rolling of the ship made such exercise difficult, and male slaves were further constrained by the shackles. Perhaps for that reason, men more often refused to participate than women. When captives would not do the "dance," as the exercise was called, then sailors forced them with the cat-o'-nine-tails. Along with drummers, some slave ships employed bagpipers, though whether they were intended to entertain the crew or the slaves is unclear.¹⁰

Since the ships sailed through tropical seas, the heat

caused great suffering. One sailor reported that "I have frequently heard them crying out when below for the want of air; and between decks of an African ship with their Slaves on board, it is so violently hot, that I have frequently, after being below but a few minutes, had my shirt so wet by perspiration, that I could have wrung it as if it had been steeped in water." Slave ships generally had gratings in the decks to allow air to flow below, and many others were fitted with air ports along the side of the ship to funnel more fresh air below the decks. The situation below became more desperate during storms, when the grates had to be covered with tarpaulins. Women, who had more freedom of movement than men, often crawled onto the ship's beams to get closer to the gratings, but when sailors found them there they forced them back down into the decks. The ports were also closed at night because the English believed that "the night Air is very Pernicious."¹¹

Slave ships leaving Old Calabar often stopped in the Cape Verde Islands to replenish their supplies of food and especially of fresh water. The trip to Porto Praya (Praia), the port of St. Jago (Sao Tiago) island, took about three weeks. Porto Praya would be the last sight of land until the ship reached the Caribbean, some four weeks later if sailing conditions were good.¹²

The threat of slave uprisings was ever present, and as a result slave ships carried larger crews than ships engaged in other forms of commerce. The forty-five sail-

ors aboard the *Duke of York* worked under harsh conditions. In fact, the trade was so notorious among sailors that captains resorted to a variety of ruses to assemble a crew. For instance, captains in port cities like Bristol often worked with landlords whose tenants fell into debt and could not pay their rent. Landlords gave them the choice of joining the crew of a Guineaman or going to debtors prison. Captains often took poor boys of nine or ten as apprentices, paying little or nothing for their services. James Morley of Bristol recalled that he first joined the crew of a slave ship at the age of nine or ten as a servant. Over the years, he was gradually promoted to gunner, boatswain, and, finally, mate. Despite ill-usage, he recalled that he remained in the trade for several years because of "a promise of promotion, and to maintain my family, having been brought up in that trade at that time." He reported that seamen on Guineamen were treated "with great rigour, and many with cruelty." Some officers were physically abusive. One Matthews, the chief mate on the *Venus*, "would knock a man down for a very frivolous thing; such as not being as quick as he wanted him with a swab, or upon any small occasion, and this, with any thing he could get in his hand, a cat, a piece of wood, or a cook's ax, with which he once cut a man down his right shoulder, by throwing of this ax at him in his passion." Such violence was by no means unusual. Provisions on the ships were usually scanty, and since the holds were filled to capacity with slaves and

supplies, sailors had no choice but to sleep on the decks. As Morley put it, sailors had no shelter but "the heavens, none that I know of; in the Middle Passage . . . they lie upon deck and die upon deck: that I have seen." As a result of poor diet and exposure to infection, disease was common. Many sailors contracted tropical diseases, especially malaria and water-borne diseases, while their ships lay, often for months, at anchor in the Cross River, waiting for the slaves to be purchased and delivered.¹³

Many desperate sailors deserted the slave ships once they reached the West Indies, where the slaves were offloaded, and captains often discharged sick seamen once the ships docked. For example, of the 940 crewmen on twenty-four Bristol Guineamen in 1787, 216 died and another 239 either deserted or were discharged in the colonies. The ships required fewer sailors as they made their way from the West Indies back to England, and captains and owners were eager to reduce costs by discharging as many men as possible. As a further cost-cutting measure, sailors were often paid all or part of their wages in the debased currency of the islands rather than in sterling. Known by such names as wharfingers and beach horners, the sick sailors could be found "lying about the wharfs, beaches, and different places, in almost all the islands of the West Indies, with ulcerated legs and other disorders, almost dead." These men suffered from scurvy or black scurvy, the most dreaded illness that plagued sailors engaged in the slave trade. John Ashley Hall, who began

his career as a crewman but was eventually promoted to captain, reported mortality rates as high as 68 percent for crewmen on slave ships. Figures from Liverpool ships in the 1770s reveal a mortality rate of 28 percent for slave ship crews during the Middle Passage, a rate that soared to 45 percent while ships remained on the African coast. The high death rate among slaves on board the *Duke of York* suggests that the crew also suffered a high mortality rate. When diseases struck the African captives, they often spread to the crew as well, especially to those men who had direct contact with the Africans. Hall recalled that "the crews of the African ships, when they arrive in the West Indies, are generally in a sickly debilitated state, and they seamen who are discharged or desert from those ships . . . are they most miserable objects I ever met with in any country in my life; I have frequently seen them with their toes rotted off, their legs swelled to the size of their thighs, and in an ulcerated state all over." He believed the slave trade "to be particularly destructive to the seamen employed in it, and beyond every degree of comparison with any trade I am acquainted with."¹⁴

After several weeks at sea, Captain Bivins sailed the *Duke of York* into harbor at Dominica. He may have gone directly to Roseau, the island's principal city, though a high surf sometimes made docking there difficult. At times, ships anchored some thirty feet offshore, then placed two long joists, called skids, over the boat's stern

that reached to the shore. Goods, and people, could then be moved on and off the ship. It is more likely that the ship docked at Woodbridge Bay, "the general place where all Guinea-men in particular bring up on their arrival." The bay was only a short distance from Roseau, but the water was smoother there and the low surf permitted ships to load and unload their cargoes more safely.¹⁵

The details of the Robin Johns' enslavement on Dominica are sketchy, but the limited evidence suggests that they were more savvy than most men in their circumstances. Like many of the islands in the Lesser Antilles, Dominica had bounced from one European nation to another as the colonial powers struggled for dominance in the Caribbean. For many years Dominica was a French colony like its nearest neighbors, Martinique and Guadeloupe, but the British acquired the island in 1763 as a part of the Treaty of Paris. A British free port, Roseau attracted Frenchmen and Spaniards from nearby Caribbean islands who bought slaves and British manufactured goods there, while American traders brought lumber, foodstuffs, cattle, and other goods to supply Caribbean sugar planters. The island had a sugar and coffee plantation system of its own. Production on Dominica received a boost after a 1727 earthquake severely decreased production on Martinique and thus caused a mass exodus of over a thousand planters to Dominica and the small French island of Alourzie. Acquisition by the British brought another boom fueled by high prices

for sugar and coffee. The English commissioner of lands reported that "since our conquest of Jamaica from the Spaniards, in the days of Oliver Cromwell, down to the present times, there has been no such opportunity of improving private fortunes." Hungry investors rushed to purchase land and open plantations. The importation of slaves reflected the island's rapid expansion; fewer than a hundred were imported in 1765, but over 3,500 came three years later when the Robin Johns arrived.¹⁶

Slaves were sold either on the ship or on the shore, most often on the shore. Government officials often got the first pick of slaves aboard the ships before they were unloaded and offered for general sale. The ship's captain negotiated the price for each slave sold and did his best to obtain the highest possible price. Slaves who were ill or infirm often could not be sold through individual purchases; they were known as "refuse slaves" and were offered at auction or "vendue," where they sold for only a few dollars. Another common form of sale was known as the "scramble," for reasons that the following description makes clear:

The ship was darkened with sails, and covered round. The men slaves were placed on the main deck, and the women on the quarter deck. The purchasers on shore were informed a gun would be fired when they were ready to open the sale. A great number of people came on board with tallies

or cards in their hands, with their own names upon them, and rushed through the barricado door with the ferocity of brutes. Some had three or four handkerchiefs tied together, to encircle as many as they thought fit for the purpose.

The fact that the Robin Johns remained together suggest that they were sold by individual purchase. Did Captain Bivins make a special effort to keep them together? It could be that the men made themselves useful on the voyage and found favor with the captain. Often, Africans on board the ships were appointed "quartermasters." They assisted in organizing their fellow captives at mealtimes, supervised the work crews that cleaned the lower decks, and reported any threat of rebellion. They were rewarded with special treatment that might include more food, more clothing, and other privileges. Given the Robin Johns' language skills and their own experience as slave traders, they would have been ideal candidates for that position.¹⁷

Slave traders usually made no effort to keep families together, not even mothers and children, much less brothers. The Robin Johns, however, not only survived, but were sold together to a French physician who treated them relatively well. There can be little doubt that the princes' higher level of acculturation made it possible for them to avoid a more terrible fate. Ancona later wrote that "we was treated according to what they could make

of us upon ye whole not badly." The doctor probably practiced in Roseau, a rollicking city bustling with Englishmen, Frenchmen, Spaniards, Genoese, and island-born creoles. The Robin Johns' ability to communicate in English must have been a valuable asset given the island's recent change of hands, and their knowledge of African languages would have been a great advantage as well. Most of the slaves on Dominica were fairly recent arrivals, and well over half of the 37,873 known to have been imported between 1751 and 1775 came from the Bight of Biafra. Their relatively benign treatment underscores Ira Berlin's point that "if slavery meant abuse and degradation, the experience of Atlantic creoles provided strategies for limiting such maltreatment."¹⁸

Dominica's mountainous terrain and irregular and unguarded coastline invited smuggling, as did its reputation as a free-wheeling port. Smuggling was so common that it became "part of the accepted order of things" on the island. Seven months after the Robin Johns' arrival, Captain William Sharp of Liverpool sailed the *Peggy* into the harbor at Roseau, on one of his many voyages carrying cargoes of slaves from the Windward Coast, an important slave-trading region in modern-day Liberia and Sierra Leone. The captain was no stranger to the smuggling common on Dominica, and he somehow learned about the Robin Johns and promised to return them to Africa if they could make their way on board his ship. Ancona and Little Ephraim, in their own words, "were

determined to get home," and they managed to escape to Sharp's sloop in the dark of night. The unscrupulous captain had no intention of returning them to Old Calabar. His ship was bound not for Africa, but for Virginia, where Sharp sold Ancona and Little Ephraim into slavery.¹⁹

Once again these Atlantic creoles avoided the drudgeries of plantation labor and even managed to remain together. Sharp sold them to Captain John Thompson in Virginia. Thompson, a native of Bristol, operated a store in Williamsburg in partnership with John and James Tarpley until 1766, when he advertised the store for sale. Thompson apparently relocated to York County, Virginia, where he traded between Virginia and Bristol. He owned at least one schooner and often took the Robin Johns to sea with him. The princes were not as fortunate in their treatment, however, as they had been with the Dominican physician. Captain Thompson was abusive, and Ancona recalled that "he would tie me up & whip me many times for nothing at al[l] then some times be Cause I could not Dress his Diner for him not understanding how to do it . . . he was exceeding badly man ever I saw."²⁰

Despite their mistreatment, the Robin Johns may well have been fortunate to find themselves on the ship. As Paul Gilroy wrote, ships were "micro-systems of linguistic and political hybridity," an ideal environment for Atlantic creoles such as the Robin Johns. Black sailors

were by no means unusual on eighteenth-century ships, and skilled watermen like the Robin Johns brought their knowledge of boats with them from Africa. Guineamen often employed skilled African sailors, whom they hired on the African coast. Captains sometimes attempted to enslave them, but the rights of these free sailors were upheld in the English courts. In 1779 Chief Justice Lord Mansfield awarded Amissa, a free black sailor from Anamaboe, a slave-trading port on the Gold Coast, £500 in damages in a suit involving the captain of a Liverpool ship. The captain had hired Amissa on the African coast in 1774 and paid him part of his wages in advance. When the slave ship reached Jamaica, however, the captain sold Amissa into slavery and later told his relatives that he had died on the Middle Passage. Years later, another black sailor from Anamaboe reported that Amissa was still alive and enslaved. His relatives then persuaded another captain to redeem him. Amissa was taken to London, where he won his case and returned home. Slaveowners in the Americas recognized the skills of African sailors such as Amissa and exploited them. The historian W. Jeffrey Bolster noted that "enslaved black sailors established a visible presence in every North American seaport and plantation roadstead between 1740 and 1865." Like other skilled slaves, sailors enjoyed greater independence than most field hands, and their wide travels made them among the best-informed men in the slave community. They also had more opportunities

to escape than most slaves. About 25 percent of the skilled runaways in Virginia between 1736 and 1801 were sailors.²¹

In March 1772, the *Virginia Gazette* printed the following announcement: "Friday last died . . . Captain Thompson, on board the schooner *George*, from Virginia." To the Robin Johns, who were aboard the ship when their owner collapsed after complaining of a stomach ache, it appeared that providence had once again intervened on their behalf. After several years of abuse at Thompson's hands, they were relieved but frightened when the captain suddenly fell dead while walking along the deck. His death gave them another opportunity to make their escape.²²

About three weeks after Thompson's death, a ship called the *Greyhound* arrived in Virginia under the command of Captain Terence O'Neil. A Bristol Guineaman, the ship had left England for Old Calabar in 1772, carried 132 slaves to South Carolina, and then sailed to Virginia. In one of the remarkable coincidences in the Robin Johns' story, two African sailors employed on board the *Greyhound* were from Old Calabar; they recognized the Robin Johns and knew the details of their capture. At their urging, O'Neil sent for Little Ephraim and promised to buy him and Ancona, but it soon became evident that he did not have the money to do so. Instead, he offered to return them to Old Calabar on his next voyage out of Bristol if they would run away at

night and board his ship. Once again they made a daring escape.²³ Safely on board the *Greyhound* with men from Old Calabar who could give them information about their families and friends, the Robin Johns dreamed of returning home at last as the ship made its way across the Atlantic.