XII

The Stono Rebellion and Its Consequences

I

IN September 1739 South Carolina was shaken by an incident which became known as the Stono Uprising. A group of slaves struck a violent but abortive blow for liberation which resulted in the deaths of more than sixty people. Fewer than twenty-five white lives were taken, and property damage was localized, but the episode represented a new dimension in overt resistance. Free colonists, whose anxieties about controlling slaves had been growing for some time, saw their fears of open violence realized, and this in turn generated new fears.

According to a report written several years later, the events at Stono "awakened the Attention of the most Unthinking" among the white minority; "Every one that had any Relation, any Tie of Nature; every one that had a Life to lose were in the most sensible Manner shocked at such Danger daily hanging over their Heads." The episode, if hardly major in its own right, seemed to symbolize the critical impasse in which Carolina's English colonists now found themselves. "With Regret we bewailed our peculiar Case," the same report continued, "that we could not enjoy the Benefits of Peace like the rest of Mankind and that our own Industry should be the Means of taking from us all the Sweets of Life and of rendering us Liable to the Loss of our Lives and Fortunes."[1]

The Stono Uprising can also be seen as a turning point in the history of South Carolina's black population. As the previous chapter made clear, this episode was preceded by a series of projected insur-

[1] *SCCHJ, 1741–1742,* July 1, 1741, p. 84.

rections, any one of which could have assumed significant proportions. Taken together, all these incidents represent a brief but serious groundswell of resistance to slavery, which had diverse and lasting repercussions. The slave system in the British mainland colonies withstood this tremor, and never again faced a period of such serious unrest. For Negroes in South Carolina the era represented the first time in which steady resistance to the system showed a prospect of becoming something more than random hostility. But the odds against successful assertion were overwhelming; it was slightly too late, or far too soon, for realistic thoughts of freedom among black Americans.

II

THE YEAR 1739 did not begin auspiciously for the settlement. The smallpox epidemic which had plagued the town in the previous autumn was still lingering on when the council and commons convened in Charlestown in January. Therefore, Lt. Gov. William Bull, in his opening remarks to the initial session, recommended that the legislature consider "only what is absolutely necessary to be dispatched for the Service of the Province."[2] The primary issue confronting them, Bull suggested, was the desertion of their slaves, who represented such a huge proportion of the investments of white colonists. The Assembly agreed that the matter was urgent,[3] and a committee was immediately established to consider what measures should be taken in response to "the Encouragement lately given by the Spaniards for the Desertion of Negroes from this Government to the Garrison of St. Augustine."[4]

Even as the legislators deliberated, the indications of unrest multiplied. In Georgia William Stephens, the secretary for the trustees

[2] *SCCHJ, 1736–1739*, Jan. 17, 1739, p. 590. Bull continued:

> The Desertion of our Slaves is a Matter of so much Importance to this Province that I doubt not but you will readily concur in Opinion with me that the most effectual Means ought to be used to discourage and prevent it for the Future, and to render as secure as possible so valuable a Part of the Estates and Properties of his Majesty's Subjects.

[3] *SCG*, Jan. 25, 1739. Charles Pinckney, the Speaker of the Assembly, was reported as saying: "We consider the Desertion of our Slaves as a Matter of very ill Consequence to the Estates and Properties of the People of this Province; and if some speedy and effectual Care is not taken to prevent it before it becomes more general, it may in time prove of the utmost Disadvantage."

[4] *SCCHJ, 1736–1739*, Jan. 19, 1739, pp. 595–96.

of that colony, recorded on February 8, 1739, "what we heard told us by several newly come from Carolina, was not to be disregarded, viz. that a Conspiracy was formed by the Negroes in Carolina, to rise and forcibly make their Way out of the Province" in an effort to reach the protection of the Spanish. It had been learned, Stephens wrote in his journal, that this plot was first discovered in Winyaw in the northern part of the province, "from whence, as they were to bend their Course South, it argued, that the other Parts of the Province must be privy to it, and that the Rising was to be universal; whereupon the whole Province were all upon their Guard."[5] If there were rumblings in the northernmost counties, Granville County on the southern edge of the province probably faced a greater prospect of disorder. Stephens' journal for February 20 reports word of a conspiracy among the slaves on the Montaigut and de Beaufain plantations bordering on the Savannah River just below the town of Purrysburg.[6] Two days later the Upper House in Charlestown passed on to the Assembly a petition and several affidavits from "Inhabitants of Granville County relating to the Desertion of their Slaves to the Castle of St. Augustine."[7]

That same week the commons expressed its distress over information that several runaways heading for St. Augustine had been taken up but then suffered to go at large without questioning. An inquiry was ordered, but it was not until early April that the Assembly heard concrete recommendations upon the problem of desertions. The first suggestion was for a petition to the English king requesting relief and assistance in this matter. Secondly, since many felt that the dozens of slaves escaping in November had eluded authorities because of a lack of scout boats, it was voted to employ two boats of eight men each in patrolling the southern coastal passages for the next nine months. Finally, to cut off Negroes escaping by land, large bounties were recommended for slaves taken up in the all-white colony of Georgia. Men, women, and children under twelve were to bring £40, £25, and £10, respectively, if brought back from beyond the Savannah River, and each adult scalp "with the two Ears" would command £20.[8]

In the midst of these deliberations, four slaves, apparently good riders who knew the terrain through hunting stray cattle, stole some

[5] "The Journal of William Stephens," p. 275.
[6] *Ibid.*, pp. 283–84.
[7] *SCCHJ, 1736–1739*, pp. 631–32.
[8] *Ibid.*, pp. 628, 680, 681; cf. p. 707.

horses and headed for Florida, accompanied by an Irish Catholic servant. Since they killed one white and wounded another in making their escape, a large posse was organized which pursued them unsuccessfully. Indian allies succeeded in killing one of the runaways, but the rest reached St. Augustine, where they were warmly received.[9] Spurred by such an incident, the Assembly completed work April 11 on legislation undertaken the previous month to prevent slave insurrections. The next day a public display was made of the punishment of two captured runaways, convicted of attempting to leave the province in the company of several other Negroes. One man was whipped and the other, after a contrite speech before the assembled slaves, "was executed at the usual Place, and afterwards hung in Chains at Hangman's Point opposite to this Town, in sight of all Negroes passing and repassing by Water."[10]

The reactions of colonial officials mirrored the desperate feelings spreading among the white population. On May 18 the Rev. Lewis Jones observed in a letter that the desertion of more than a score of slaves from his parish of St. Helena the previous fall, in response to the Spanish proclamation, seemed to "Considerably Encrease the Prejudice of Planters agst the Negroes, and Occasion a Strict hand, to be kept over them by their Several Owners, those that Deserted having been Much Indulg'd."[11] But concern continued among English colonists as to whether even the harshest reprisals could protect their investments and preserve their safety.

A letter the same month from Lt. Gov. Bull to the Duke of Newcastle, summarizing the situation, reflected the anxiety of the white populace:

[9] "Account of the Negroe Insurrection," pp. 232–33. According to the account of this March escape:

> four or five who were Cattel-Hunters, and knew the Woods, some of whom belonged to Captain Macpherson, ran away with His Horses, wounded his Son and killed another Man. . . . They reached Augustine, one only being killed and another wounded by the Indians in their flight. They were received there with great honours, one of them had a Commission given to him, and a Coat faced with Velvet.

See also *SCCHJ, 1739–1741*, pp. 229–30; *SCCHJ, 1742–1744*, Feb. 23, 1743, p. 235.

[10] *SCG*, April 12, 1739. For the full description, see Chapter X, note 54, above.

[11] Quoted in Klingberg, *Appraisal*, p. 68. Klingberg mistakes this incident for the Stono Rebellion later in the year. He also appears to have mistaken the date of the letter, which was May 18. See S.P.G. Transcripts in the Library of Congress, series B, vol. 7, part 1, p. 233.

My Lord,
I beg leave to lay before Your Grace an Affair, which may greatly distress if not entirely ruin this His Majesty's Province of South Carolina.

His Catholick Majesty's Edict having been published at S^{t}. Augustine declaring Freedom to all Negroes, and other slaves, that shall Desert from the English Colonies, Has occasioned several Parties to desert from this Province both by Land and Water, which notwithstanding They were pursued by the People of Carolina as well as the Indians, & People in Georgia, by General Oglethorpes Directions, have been able to make their escape.[12]

Bull repeated the blunt refusal which the Spanish governor had given to deputies visiting St. Augustine to seek the return of fugitives, and he reported that "This Answer has occasioned great disatisfaction & Concern to the Inhabitants of this Province, to find their property now become so very precarious and uncertain." There was a growing awareness among whites, Bull concluded, "that their Negroes which were their chief support may in little time become their Enemies, if not their Masters, and that this Government is unable to withstand or prevent it."

III

DEVELOPMENTS DURING the summer months did little to lessen tensions. In July the *Gazette* printed an account from Jamaica of the truce which the English governor there had felt compelled to negotiate with an armed and independent force of runaways.[13] During the same month a Spanish Captain of the Horse from St. Augustine named Don Piedro sailed into Charlestown in a launch with twenty or thirty men, supposedly to deliver a letter to Gen. Oglethorpe. Since Oglethorpe was residing in Frederica far down the coast, the visit seemed suspicious, and it was later recalled, in the wake of the Stono incident, that there had been a Negro aboard who spoke excellent English and that the vessel had put into numerous inlets south of Charlestown while making its return. Whether men were sent ashore was unclear, but in September the Georgians took into custody a priest thought to be "employed by the Spaniards to procure a general Insurrection of the Negroes."[14]

Another enemy, yellow fever, reappeared in Charlestown during

[12] BPRO Trans., XX, 40–41.
[13] *SCG*, July 28, 1739.
[14] *SCCHJ, 1741–1742*, July 1, 1741, pp. 83–84.

the late summer for the first time since 1732. The epidemic "destroyed many, who had got thro' the Small-pox" of the previous year, and as usual it was remarked to be "very fatal to Strangers & Europeans especially."[15] September proved a particularly sultry month. A series of philosophical lectures was discontinued "by Reason of the Sickness and Heat"; a school to teach embroidery, lacework, and French to young ladies was closed down; and the *Gazette* ceased publication for a month when the printer fell sick.[16] Lt. Gov. Bull, citing "the Sickness with which it hath pleased God to visit this Province," prorogued the Assembly which attempted to convene on September 12. The session was postponed again on October 18 and did not get under way until October 30.[17] By then cool weather had killed the mosquitoes which carried the disease, and the contagion had subsided, but it had taken the lives of the chief justice, the judge of the Vice-Admiralty Court, the surveyor of customs, the clerk of the Assembly, and the clerk of the Court of Admiralty, along with scores of other residents.[18]

The confusion created by this sickness in Charlestown, where residents were dying at a rate of more than half a dozen per day, may have been a factor in the timing of the Stono Rebellion,[19] but calculations might also have been influenced by the newspaper publication, in mid-August, of the Security Act which required all white men to carry firearms to church on Sunday or submit to a stiff fine, beginning on September 29.[20] It had long been recognized that the free hours at the end of the week afforded the slaves their best opportunity for cabals, particularly when whites were engaged in communal activities of their own. In 1724 Gov. Nicholson had expressed to the Lords of Trade his hope that new legislation would "Cause people to Travel better Armed in Times of Publick meetings when Negroes might take the better opportunity against Great Numbers of Unarmed men."[21] Later the same year the Assembly had complained that the recent statute

[15] James Killpatrick, *An Essay on Inoculation*, p. 56; letter of Oct. 16, 1739, Pringle Letterbook.

[16] *SCG*, Oct. 13, 1739; Dec. 1, 1739.

[17] *SCG*, Sept. 15, 1739; Oct. 20, 1739.

[18] Yates Snowden, *History of South Carolina*, 5 vols. (Chicago and New York, 1920), I, 231.

[19] A letter from S.C., dated Sept. 28, was reprinted in the *Boston Weekly News-Letter*, Nov. 8, 1739: "A terrible Sickness has rag'd here, which the Doctors call a yellow billious Fever, of which we bury 8 or 10 in a Day; the like never known among us; but seems to abate as the cold Weather advances."

[20] *SCG*, Aug. 18, 1739.

[21] May 5, 1724, BPRO Trans., X, 111.

requiring white men "to ride Arm'd on every Sunday" had not been announced sufficiently to be effective, and in 1727 the Committee of Grievances had objected that "the Law w^{ch}: obliged people to go arm'd to Church &^{ca}: wants strengthening."[22] Ten years later the presentments of the Grand Jury in Charlestown stressed the fact that Negroes were still permitted to cabal together during the hours of divine service, "which if not timely prevented may be of fatal Consequence to this Province."[23] Since the Stono Uprising, which caught planters at church, occurred only weeks before the published statute of 1739 went into effect, slaves may have considered that within the near future their masters would be even more heavily armed on Sundays.[24]

One other factor seems to be more than coincidental to the timing of the insurrection. Official word of hostilities between England and Spain, which both whites and blacks in the colony had been anticipating for some time, appears to have reached Charlestown the very weekend that the uprising began.[25] Such news would have been a logical trigger for rebellion. If it did furnish the sudden spark, this would help explain how the Stono scheme, unlike so many others, was put into immediate execution without hesitancy or betrayal, and why the rebels marched southward toward Spanish St. Augustine with an air of particular confidence.

IV

DURING THE EARLY HOURS of Sunday, September 9, 1739, some twenty slaves gathered near the western branch of Stono River in St. Paul's Parish, within twenty miles of Charlestown. Many of the conspirators were Angolans, and their acknowledged leader was a slave named

[22] *SCCHJ, 1724,* June 4, 1724, pp. 7, 9; *SCCHJ, 1726–1727,* Jan. 13, 1727, p. 69.

[23] *SCG,* March 26, 1737. It is significant that the next set of presentments dealt with the other side of the coin. It was objected in October that the Sabbath laws were being violated "in several Parts of the Country by laying Negroes under a Necessity of Labouring on that Day, contrary to the Laws of God and Man." *SCG,* Nov. 5, 1737. Whether Sunday labor reduced or enhanced the prospects of rebellion would be debated repeatedly by whites in the next several years.

[24] A similar law, which made clearer provisions for the security of Charlestown, was passed in 1743. *Statutes,* VII, 417–19.

[25] "The Journal of William Stephens," p. 412. A confirmation that war had been declared and the first news of an insurrection at Stono reached Georgia before noon, Sept. 13, via the same "express" from Charlestown.

Jemmy.[26] The group proceeded to Stono Bridge and broke into Hutchenson's store, where small arms and powder were on sale. The storekeepers, Robert Bathurst and Mr. Gibbs, were executed and their heads left upon the front steps.

Equipped with guns, the band moved on to the house of Mr. Godfrey, which they plundered and burned, killing the owner and his son and daughter. They then turned southward along the main road to Georgia and St. Augustine and reached Wallace's Tavern before dawn. The innkeeper was spared, "for he was a good man and kind to his slaves,"[27] but a neighbor, Mr. Lemy, was killed with his wife and child and his house was sacked. "They burnt Colonel Hext's house and killed his Overseer and his Wife. They then burnt M[r] Sprye's house, then M[r] Sacheverell's, and then M[r] Nash's house, all lying upon the Pons Pons Road, and killed all the white People they found in them."[28] A man named Bullock eluded the rebels, but they burned his house. When they advanced upon the home of Thomas Rose with the intention of killing him, several of his slaves succeeded in hiding him, for which they were later rewarded. But by now reluctant slaves were being forced to join the company to keep the alarm from being spread. Others were joining voluntarily, and as the numbers grew, confidence rose and discipline diminished. Two drums appeared; a standard was raised; and there were shouts of "Liberty!" from the marchers. The few whites whom they encountered were pursued and killed.

By extreme coincidence, Lt. Gov. Bull was returning northward from Granville County to Charlestown at this time for the beginning of the legislative session. At about eleven in the morning, riding in the company of four other men, Bull came directly in view of the rebel troop, which must have numbered more than fifty by then. Comprehending the situation, he wheeled about, "and with much

[26] U. B. Phillips (*American Negro Slavery*, p. 473) gives the leader's name as Jonny. Aptheker points out in *Slave Revolts*, p. 187 *n*, that Dr. Ramsey called the leader Cato and used the date 1740. (He could have been referring to a later incident mentioned below.) To avoid such confusions, I have bypassed derivative secondary sources and pieced together the following description of the Stono Uprising from the contemporary materials which survive.

[27] "Account of the Negroe Insurrection," p. 234. This would suggest that even in the midst of the most desperate revolt, slave violence was by no means haphazard. Such an instance of discretion was not unique. During Tacky's Rebellion in Jamaica in 1760, for example, slaves chose to spare one Abraham Fletcher while killing more than three dozen other whites. Robert Renny, *An History of Jamaica* (London, 1807), p. 66.

[28] "Account of the Negroe Insurrection," p. 234.

difficulty escaped & raised the Countrey." The same account states that Bull "was pursued," and it seems clear that if the lieutenant governor had not been on horseback he might never have escaped alive. Bull's death or capture would have had incalculable psychological and tactical significance. As it was, the rebels probably never knew the identity of the fleeing horseman or sensed the crucial nature of this chance encounter. Instead they proceeded through the Ponpon district, terrorizing and recruiting. According to a contemporary account, their numbers were being "increased every minute by new Negroes coming to them, so that they were above Sixty, some say a hundred, on which they halted in a field and set to dancing, Singing and beating Drums to draw more Negroes to them."[29]

The decision to halt came late on Sunday afternoon. Having marched more than ten miles without opposition, the troop drew up in a field on the north side of the road, not far from the site of the Jacksonburough ferry. Some of the recruits were undoubtedly tired or uncertain; others were said to be intoxicated on stolen liquor. Many must have felt unduly confident over the fact that they had already struck a more successful overt blow for resistance than any previous group of slaves in the colony, and as their ranks grew, the likelihood of a successful exodus increased. It has been suggested that the additional confidence needed to make such a large group of slaves pause in an open field in broad daylight may have been derived from the colors which they displayed before them.[30] Whatever the validity of this suggestion, the main reason for not crossing the Edisto River was probably the realistic expectation that by remaining stationary after such an initial show of force, enough other slaves could join them to make their troop nearly invincible by morning.

[29] *Ibid.*

[30] *Ibid.* Fisher, *Negro Slave Songs,* p. 70, points out that members of secret West African cults often claimed to derive invincible powers from the presence of a special banner (much as Roman legions or American marines have historically drawn inspiration from the sight of certain standards):

> Negro cultists in many instances acted as though they were invulnerable. A picture of one of their banners in Africa, drawn by a slave trader of the eighteenth century, shows the cultist carrying a large grigri bag. In it were charms to preserve one from hurt or harm. . . . Jemmy's insurrectionists in South Carolina in the eighteenth century and the Vesey plotters of that same area in the nineteenth century were reckless because of dependence upon their banners.

Cf. William C. Suttles, Jr., "African Religious Survivals as Factors in American Slave Revolts," *JNH* (1971), 97–104.

But such was not to be the case, for by Sunday noon some of the nearest white colonists had been alerted. Whether Bull himself was the first to raise the alarm is unclear. According to one tradition Rev. Stobo's Presbyterian congregation at Wiltown on the east bank of the Edisto was summoned directly from church, and since this would have been the first community which Bull and his fellow riders could reach, the detail is probably valid.[31] By about four in the afternoon a contingent of armed and mounted planters, variously numbered from twenty to one hundred, moved in upon the rebels' location (long after known as "the battlefield"[32]).

Caught off guard, the Negroes hesitated as to whether to attack or flee. Those with weapons fired two quick but ineffective rounds; they were described later in white reports as having "behaved boldly."[33] Seeing that some slaves were loading their guns and others were escaping, a number of whites dismounted and fired a volley into the group, killing or wounding at least fourteen. Other rebels were surrounded, questioned briefly, and then shot.

White sources considered it notable that the planters "did not torture one Negroe, but only put them to an easy death," and several slaves who proved they had been forced to join the band were actually released.[34] Those who sought to return to their plantations, hoping they had not yet been missed, were seized and shot, and one account claimed that the planters "Cutt off their heads and set them up at every Mile Post they came to."[35] Whether the riders used drink to fortify their courage or to celebrate their victory, a bill of more than £90 was drawn up the next day for "Liquors &c" which had been consumed by the local militia company.[36]

[31] Alexander Hewatt, *An Historical Account of the Rise and Progress of the Colonies of South Carolina and Georgia,* 2 vols. (London, 1779), rpt. in Carroll, ed., *Historical Collections of S.C.*, I, 332. The account in Edward McCrady, *South Carolina under the Royal Government,* which follows Hewatt, suggests that Bull went to Charlestown via John's Island while a companion named Golightly rode the eight miles to Wiltown church.

[32] *SCHGM,* X (1909), 28.

[33] "Account of the Negroe Insurrection," p. 235. One slave was said to have answered his owner's query as to whether he truly wished to kill his master by pulling the trigger on his pistol only to have the weapon misfire, at which the planter shot him through the head. "A Ranger's Report of Travels with General Oglethorpe, 1739–1742," in Mereness, ed., *Travels in the American Colonies,* p. 223.

[34] "Account of the Negroe Insurrection," p. 235.

[35] "A Ranger's Report," p. 223.

[36] *SCCHJ, 1739–1741,* p. 158.

V

ALTHOUGH SECONDARY ACCOUNTS have suggested that the Stono Uprising was suppressed by nightfall,[37] contemporary sources reveal a decidedly different story. By Sunday evening more than twenty white settlers had already been killed. Initial messages from the area put the number twice as high and reported "the Country thereabout was full of Flames."[38] The fact that black deaths scarcely exceeded white during the first twenty-four hours was not likely to reassure the planters or intimidate the slave majority. Moreover, at least thirty Negroes (or roughly one third of the rebel force) were known to have escaped from Sunday's skirmish in several groups, and their presence in the countryside provided an invitation to wider rebellion. Roughly as many more had scattered individually, hoping to rejoin the rebels or return to their plantations as conditions dictated.

During the ensuing days, therefore, a desperate and intensive manhunt was staged. The entire white colony was ordered under arms, and guards were posted at key ferry passages. The Ashley River militia company, its ranks thinned by yellow fever, set out from Charlestown in pursuit. Some of the militia captains turned out Indian recruits as well, who, if paid in cash, were willing to serve as slave-catchers. A white resident wrote several weeks later that within the first two days these forces "kill'd twenty odd more, and took about 40; who were immediately some shot, some hang'd, and some Gibbeted alive. A Number came in and were seized and discharged."[39] Even if these executions were as numerous, rapid, and brutal as claimed, the prospect of a sustained insurrection continued. It was not until the following Saturday, almost a week after the initial violence, that a white militia company caught up with the largest remnant of the rebel force. This band, undoubtedly short on provisions and arms, had made its way thirty miles closer to the colony's southern border. A pitched

[37] This version is repeated in Sirmans, *Colonial S.C.*, pp. 207–8, and it has recently been echoed again in Richard Hofstadter, *America at 1750, A Social Portrait* (New York, 1971), p. 129.

[38] "The Journal of William Stephens," p. 412; cf. "A Ranger's Report," p. 222, which says "about forty White People" died.

[39] *Boston Weekly News-Letter*, Nov. 8, 1739, extract of a letter from S.C. dated Sept. 28.

battle ensued, and at length (according to a note sent the following January) "y^e^ Rebels [were] So entirely defeated & dispersed y^t^ there never were Seen above 6 or 7 together Since."[40]

It was not until a full month later, however, that a correspondent in South Carolina could report that "the Rebellious Negros are quite stopt from doing any further Mischief, many of them having been put to the most cruel Death."[41] And even then, white fears were by no means allayed. The Purrysburg militia company had remained on guard at the southern edge of the colony, and in Georgia Gen. Oglethorpe, upon receiving Lt. Gov. Bull's report of the insurrection, had called out rangers and Indians and issued a proclamation, "cautioning all Persons in this Province, to have a watchful Eye upon any Negroes, who might attempt to set a Foot in it."[42] He had also garrisoned soldiers at Palachicolas, the abandoned fort which guarded the only point for almost one hundred miles where horses could swim the Savannah River and where Negro fugitives had previously crossed.[43] Security in South Carolina itself was made tight enough, however, so that few if any rebels reached Georgia. But this only increased the anxiety of whites in the neighborhood of the uprising.

In November several planters around Stono deserted their homes and moved their wives and children in with other families, "at particular Places, for their better Security and Defence against those Negroes which were concerned in that Insurrection who were not yet taken."[44] And in January the minister of St. Paul's Parish protested that some of his leading parishioners, "being apprehensive of Danger from y^e^ Rebels Still outstanding," had "carried their Families to Town for Safety, & if y Humour of moving continues a little longer, I shall have but a Small Congregation at Church."[45] The Assembly placed a special patrol on duty along the Stono River and expended more than £1,500 on rewards for Negroes and Indians who had acted in the white interest during the insurrection. Outlying fugitives were still

[40] Andrew Leslie to Philip Bearcroft, St. Paul's Parish, S.C., Jan. 7, 1740, quoted in Klingberg, *Appraisal*, p. 80.

[41] *Boston Weekly News-Letter*, Nov. 30, 1739. Although the printer put Aug. 18, the date on the letter from S.C. must have been Oct. 18 or thereabouts. The correspondent added: "The Yellow Fever is abated, but has been very mortal."

[42] "The Journal of William Stephens," p. 427; cf. "A Ranger's Report," p. 222.

[43] "Account of the Negroe Insurrection," p. 236.

[44] *SCCHJ, 1739–1741*, Nov. 21, 1739, p. 37.

[45] Letter of Andrew Leslie cited in note 40 above.

being brought in for execution the following spring,[46] and one ringleader remained at large for three full years. He was finally taken up in a swamp by two Negro runaways hopeful of a reward, tried by authorities at Stono, and immediately hanged.[47]

VI

IT IS POSSIBLE to emphasize the small scale and ultimate failure of the uprising at Stono or to stress, on the other hand, its large potential and near success. Either approach means little except in the wider context of slave resistance during these years. Certain elements of the insurrection—total surprise, ruthless killing, considerable property damage, armed engagements, protracted aftermath—are singular in South Carolina's early history. Yet it remains only one swell in the tide of rebellious schemes which characterize these years. In retrospect, its initial success appears a high-water mark, and its ruthless suppression represents a significant turning of the tide. But the troubled waters of resistance did not subside any more abruptly than they had risen. For several years after the outbreak in St. Paul's Parish, the safety of the white minority, and the viability of their entire plantation system, hung in serious doubt for the first time since the Yamasee War.

Rebels from Stono were still at large in late November 1739 when rumors of new threats began. The Assembly requested of Bull that special precautions be taken for the upcoming Christmas holidays,[48] and on December 7 Assemblyman Joseph Izard departed for a week in order to raise the local militia and pursue "several runaway Negroes belonging to Mrs. Middleton that kept about Dorchester who

[46] *SCCHJ, 1739–1741*, pp. 341, 528–29.
[47] *SCG*, Dec. 27, 1742; *SCCHJ, 1742–1744*, p. 263.
[48] *SCCHJ, 1739–1741*, p. 69:

> May it please your Honour,
> The late Insurrection and Rebellion of the Slaves at Stono, is a sufficient Precaution to us, to take all the Care in our Power, to guard against any further wicked Designs they may have in Agitation; and as the Christmas Holy Days are drawing near (which being a Time of general Liberty to the Slaves throughout the Province) it is to be feared, if they have any such Intention, they will put it in Execution; we therefore desire your Honour will be pleased to give Directions to the proper Officers of the several Regiments in this Province to order the Captains and other Officers under their Command, to draw out of their respective Companies a Number of Men sufficient to patrol in the Christmas Holy Days; pursuant to the Directions of the Act for establishing and regulating of Patrols.

had committed a great many Robberies in those Parts."[49] Four days later the council, in a message outlining the critical situation of the white inhabitants, explained that "we have already felt the unhappy Effects of an Insurrection of our Slaves . . . (an intestine Enemy the most dreadful of Enemies) which we have just Grounds to imagine will be repeated." The council continued, "it is well known to us, that . . . if the present Session of Assembly be determined with the same unhappy Conclusion as the last," then "many of our [white] Inhabitants are determined to remove themselves and their Effects, out of this Province; insomuch, that upon the whole the Country seemed to be at Stake."[50]

Such fears were apparently well founded. Two days after Christmas Robert Pringle, the Charlestown merchant, wrote to his brother:

> We have been fatigued for this Week past keeping Guard in Town, on acco[t] of a Conspiracy that has been detected to have been Carrying on by some of our Negroes in Town but has been discovered before it came to any maturity. We shall Live very Uneasie with our Negroes, while the Spaniards continue to keep Possession of St. Augustine & it is pity our Goverm[t] at home did not incourage the disslodging of them from thence.[51]

In response to a special order of the lieutenant governor and council, the attorney general "spent a great Deal of Time" on an investigation and trial, but the Assembly had to be reminded in May that it had forgotten to repay this officer for "his Trouble and Attendance in prosecuting the Negroes concerned in the intended Insurrection last Christmass."[52] In March, Assembly members had rejected a £60 bill from the five constables of Charlestown for their attendance at the six-day examination of "certain Negroes who were apprehended on Suspicion of a Conspiracy,"[53] probably the same one investigated by the attorney general.

The legislature had scarcely adjourned when another potential uprising was revealed during the first week of June 1740. According

[49] *SCCHJ, 1739–1741*, p. 84.

[50] *Ibid.*, p. 97. The previous session of the Assembly had ended without passage of a new Negro act.

[51] Robert Pringle to Capt. Andrew Pringle, Dec. 27, 1739, Pringle Letterbook.

[52] *SCCHJ, 1739–1741*, May 6, 1740, p. 332. This message from the Upper House was dated May 5. Attorney General James Abercromby had previously submitted to the Assembly (Feb. 6, p. 182) a bill for £308 "for Prosecutions of Felons and other Offenders at March Sessions 1739 and October Sessions 1739, and for Prosecutions of Negro Offenders by special Directions of the Government."

[53] *Ibid.*, March 3, 1740, p. 225.

to first reports among whites, this conspiracy had "the Appearance of greater Danger than any of the former."[54] It originated somewhere between the Ashley and Cooper rivers "in the very Heart of the Settlements."[55] Its focus was apparently on the western edge of St. John's Parish, Berkeley County, near the rice-growing district of Goose Creek. This time between 150 and 200 slaves "got together in defiance."[56] These rebels lacked weapons, and they must also have had the failure of the Stono scheme fresh in their minds. For these reasons, nearby Charlestown, rather than the southern border, became their immediate objective. "As they had no prospect of escaping through the Province of Georgia, their design was to break open a store-house, and supply themselves, and those who would join them, with arms."[57]

How carefully such a strike had been planned and how close it came to execution cannot be determined. It appears that the conspirators' large numbers, which must have provided the confidence for so direct and desperate a plan as the seizure of Charlestown, also proved the source of their undoing. The hope for secrecy was destroyed, in this instance by a slave of Maj. Cordes named Peter, and white forces had time to prepare a suitable ambush for the rebels. Therefore, according to an account reaching Georgia, "when they appeared the next day fifty of them were seized, and these were hanged, ten in a day, to intimidate the other negroes."[58] All told, some sixty-seven slaves were brought to trial, and their betrayer, Peter, appeared personally before the legislature to receive thanks in the form of a new wardrobe and £20 in cash.[59] Robert Pringle summarized the incident in a letter to his wife in Boston at the end of the summer: "We had a Report in June last of some Negroes Intending to make an Insurrection, but [it] was timely Discovered and the Ring Leaders punished."[60]

[54] "The Journal of William Stephens," p. 592.

[55] *SCCHJ, 1739–1741*, p. 364.

[56] "The Journal of William Stephens," p. 592.

[57] [Martyn], *An Impartial Inquiry*, p. 173.

[58] *Ibid.*

[59] *SCCHJ, 1739–1741*, p. 480. Under "Insurrections" in the index for this volume (p. 586), there is confusion as to whether this plot occurred in St. John's Colleton or St. John's Berkeley. But since Maj. Cordes, whose slave revealed the plan, was the representative from the latter parish, it seems certain that the incident centered in St. John's Berkeley.

[60] Robert Pringle to Jane Pringle, Aug. 30, 1740, *SCHGM*, L (1949), 93. New Englanders already had word of the incident, for the *Boston Weekly News-Letter*, July 10, 1740, carried a notice datelined Philadelphia, June 26: "We hear from South Carolina, that a new Negro Plot is just discovered there, but two Days before it was to be put in Execution."

Further hints of slave resistance would follow. Acts of arson were suspected, and the great Charlestown fire that November did little to ease tensions. The spring of 1741 brought lurid tales of slave resistance in northern colonies,[61] and during the winter of 1742 the Assembly was obliged to investigate reports of "frequent Meetings of great Numbers of Slaves in the Parish of St. Helena" which were still striking "Terror" into local Europeans.[62] But by 1740 the implications of growing rebelliousness among slaves had already become unavoidable for the white minority. One Englishman, reflecting back upon Stono and other incidents, wrote:

> Such dreadful Work, it is to be feared, we may hear more of in Time, in case they come to breaking open Stores to find Arms, as they did the last Year; and are able to keep the Field, with Plenty of Corn and Potatoes every where; and above all, if it is considered how vastly disproportionate the Number of white Men is to theirs: So that at best, the Inhabitants cannot live without perpetually guarding their own Safety, now become so precarious.[63]

The Europeans' response to this "precarious" situation was desperate and effectual. Confronting at last the actual possibility of widespread revolution, bickering factions were able to cooperate in ways which maintained the English slave colony and determined many aspects of Negro existence for generations to come. Their actions constitute the beginning of a new chapter in the history of South Carolina and therefore lie outside the scope of this study, but they also signify the end of an era for the Negro in the colony, so it is fitting to cite them briefly in conclusion.

VII

ONE THRUST of the white response involved efforts to reduce provocations for rebellion. Besides waging war on the Spanish in St. Augustine, whose proximity was considered a perpetual incitement, the colonial government laid down penalties for masters who imposed such excessive work or such brutal punishments that the likelihood of revolt was enhanced. Efforts to extend Negro dependence were also

[61] See Chapter XI above.
[62] *SCCHJ, 1741–1742*, Feb. 17, 1742, p. 388; cf. pp. 381–82.
[63] "The Journal of William Stephens," p. 592.

undertaken: it was at this time that a Negro school was started in Charlestown on the assumption that a few slaves might be trained to teach other slaves certain carefully selected doctrines of the Christian faith, such as submissiveness and obedience. (The school persisted for several decades, though its impact on the total Negro population was negligible.)[64]

These gestures of calculated benevolence were overshadowed by far more intensive efforts to control and to divide the slaves. The comprehensive Negro Act, which had been in the works for several years but about which white legislators had been unable to agree in less threatening times, was passed into law and stringently enforced. This elaborate statute, which would serve as the core of South Carolina's slave code for more than a century to come, rested firmly upon prior enactments. At the same time, however, it did more than any other single piece of legislation in the colony's history to curtail *de facto* personal liberties, which slaves had been able to cling to against formidable odds during the first three generations of settlement. Freedom of movement and freedom of assembly, freedom to raise food, to earn money, to learn to read English—none of these rights had ever been assured to Negroes and most had already been legislated against, but always the open conditions of life in a young and struggling colony had kept vestiges of these meager liberties alive. Now the noose was being tightened: there would be heavier surveillance of Negro activity and stiffer fines for masters who failed to keep their slaves in line.[65] Even more than before, slaves were rewarded for informing against each other in ways which were considered "loyal" by the white minority (and "disloyal" by many blacks). The ultimate reward of manumission was now taken out of the hands of individual planters and turned over to the legislature, and further steps were taken to discourage the presence of free Negroes.[66]

Finally, and most significantly, authorities took concrete steps to alter the uneven ratio between blacks and whites which was seen to underlie the colony's problems as well as its prosperity. Since the economy by now was highly dependent upon rice exports, and since the Europeans in South Carolina were dependent upon African labor at every stage of rice production, there was talk of developing labor-

[64] Sirmans, *Colonial S.C.*, p. 210; cf. p. 142.
[65] *Statutes*, VII, 397–417.
[66] *SCCHJ, 1739–1741*, pp. 325–26.

saving machinery and of importing white hands to take on some of the jobs which could not be mechanized. A law was passed reiterating the requirement for at least one white man to be present for every ten blacks on any plantation, and the fines collected from violators were to be used to strengthen the patrols.[67] The most dramatic move was the imposition of a prohibitive duty upon new slaves arriving from Africa and the West Indies. While Negroes had arrived at a rate of well over one thousand per year during the 1730s, slave importations were cut to nearly one tenth this size during the 1740s, and the duties collected were used toward encouraging immigration from Europe. Before 1750 the slave trade was resuming its previous proportions, but this interim of nearly a decade meant that newly imported slaves would never again constitute so high a proportion of the colony's total population as they had in the late 1730s.

Among all these simultaneous efforts by whites to reassert their hold over black Carolinians, no single tactic was entirely successful. There is little to suggest that treatment became notably less brutal among masters or that doctrines of submissive Christianity were accepted rapidly among slaves. Despite the Negro Act of 1740, slaves continued to exercise clandestinely and at great cost the freedoms which the white minority sought to suppress. Those who wished to travel or to congregate, those who wished to grow food, hunt game, practice a trade, or study a newspaper learned increasingly to do these things secretly, and since informants were well rewarded, it was necessary to be as covert among other blacks as among whites. The result was not stricter obedience but deeper mistrust; a shroud of secrecy was being drawn over an increasing portion of Negro life.

Nor could white dependency on Negro workers be effectively reduced. The technique of periodically flooding the rice fields to remove weeds without the use of slave labor (which came into practice sometime around mid-century) may have originated in part to serve this end. But machines which could supplant the slaves who pounded rice every autumn made little headway until after the Revolution. Moreover, the recruitment of European settlers never burgeoned, despite offers of free land on the frontier. Therefore, in spite of the reduced import of slaves in the 1740s, the black–white ratio in the colony did not alter markedly.

[67] For example, in May 1744 Peter Taylor was fined £10 "for keeping Slaves without a white Person." *SCCHJ, 1744–1745*, p. 147.

If no one of these efforts succeeded fully enough to alter the nature of the colony, the combined effects were nevertheless clearly felt. The Negro majority, through persistent and varied resistance to the constraints of the slave system, brought South Carolina closer to the edge of upheaval than historians have been willing to concede. But in the process the slaves inspired a concerted counterattack from their anxious and outnumbered masters. The new social equilibrium which emerged in the generation before the Revolution was based upon a heightened degree of white repression and a reduced amount of black autonomy. By the time Europeans in America were prepared to throw off the yoke of slavery under which they felt themselves laboring as the subjects of the English king, the enslaved Negroes in South Carolina were in no position to take advantage of the libertarian rhetoric. Though they still constituted the bulk of South Carolina's population, too many had been reduced too soon into too thorough a state of submission. Had the earlier pervasive efforts at black resistance in South Carolina been less abortive, the subsequent history of the new nation might well have followed an unpredictably different path.