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# Efforts to Prevent Negro Revolts In Early Savannah

by

Austin D. Washington

The inability of the American Negro to accept slavery completely manifested itself in various ways, from committing crimes against the master to revolting.<sup>1</sup> In general the slaveholding South learned of crimes by individual Negroes with considerable equanimity.<sup>2</sup> It was news or suspicion of concerted action by Negroes which caused widespread alarm and uneasiness.<sup>3</sup>

Early Savannah had its share of alarm and uneasiness due to slave revolts and the fear of slave revolts. For example, a number of Negroes revolted against their master in 1728, but fled when twice fired upon . . .<sup>4</sup> In 1768, some Negroes attempted to gain freedom by revolting, but they failed.<sup>5</sup> In September, 1795 a plot for the uprising of the Negroes of Savannah was reported by Major-General James Jackson and Colonel Tattnall.<sup>6</sup> In April, 1804 owing to alarming reports of a possible slave revolt the city marshal was directed to call on all shopkeepers and warn them not to sell or deliver to any Negro, powder, lead, shot, or balls without written permission from his owner or guardian.<sup>7</sup>

In order to reduce the possibility of future slave uprisings, the city of Savannah and the state of Georgia passed several laws regulating the movement and activities of the Negro. The overall activities of the Negro in Savannah were controlled by the surveillance of the City Guard. Although methods of patrolling existed as early as 1759, it was not until 1806 that a permanent and well-organized City Guard was established. The purpose of the City Guard is stated in the ordinance of 1759 passed by the Royal Legislature in Savannah: "whereas the safety of the town of Savannah next to the divine

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<sup>1</sup>Evidence for this statement may be found in the following works: John Hope Franklin, *The Militant South* (Cambridge, 1956); Herbert Aptheker, *American Negro Slave Revolts* (New York, 1943); Raymond A. Bauer and Alice H. Bauer, "Day to Day Resistance to Slavery," *Journal of Negro History*, XXVII (1942), 388-419; Harvey Wish, "American Slave Insurrections Before 1861," *Journal of Negro History*, XXII (1932), 299-320; Donald D. Wax, "Negro Resistance to Early American Slave Trade," *Journal of Negro History*, LI (1966), 1-15; and Herbert Aptheker, "Maroons Within Present Limits of United States," *Journal of Negro History*, XXIV (1939), 167-184.

<sup>2</sup>U. B. Phillips, *American Negro Slavery* (New York, 1918), p. 463.

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup>Asa H. Gordon, "Struggle for Physical Freedom," *Journal of Negro History*, XIII (1928), 34.

<sup>5</sup>Federal Writers Project in Georgia Work Progress Administration, *Savannah* (Savannah, 1937), p. 50.

<sup>6</sup>Thomas Gamble, *A History of the City Government of Savannah From 1790 to 1901*, (Savannah, 1900), p. 58.

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 68.

protection chiefly depends on the care and vigilance of the inhabitants . . . [the City Guard is now established].<sup>8</sup>

The City Guard regulated the activities of the Negro by use of the curfew and by use of the pass. Fear of Negro unrest is openly expressed in various provisions of the 1759 ordinance. One provision establishing the curfew stated: "it may prove of dangerous consequence to the peace and the security of the said town to suffer Negroes and other slaves to be lurking and caballing about at night . . ."<sup>9</sup> Under this ordinance the City Guard, at first, had the authority to "whip any Negroes or other slaves found in any streets, lanes, alleys, or other places in Savannah without a ticket from his or their owner or overseer."<sup>10</sup>

Later in 1839 this ordinance was amended. It became the duty of the City Guard to arrest "all slaves and free persons of color who may be found out of his or her house or enclosure after the ringing of the Guard House bell without a pass."<sup>11</sup> This bell, at first, was located near the center of Savannah, but in the late 1850's it was located in a building at President and Whitaker Streets and it rang every night at eight o'clock in the winter and nine o'clock in the summer.<sup>12</sup>

The City Guard was so common in the life of Negroes in Georgia and Savannah that many Negroes would sing:

"Oh Mister Watchman don't ketch me  
Ketch that Negro behind dat tree."<sup>13</sup>

The purpose of the curfew was to regulate the night activities of the Negro while the pass or ticket ordinance controlled the movement of the Negro both day and night. For example, on plantations near Savannah, no more than two Negroes at any time were permitted to come to town with or without a pass.<sup>14</sup> These passes were very specific, giving the hour when they were written and the hour they were to expire. The City Council of Savannah passed an ordinance August 2, 1839, stating: "No ticket shall pass after midnight whether it be dated before or after that hour unless the time when given and the object in view and the place to which the bearer is distinctly specified."<sup>15</sup>

The pass ordinance was rigidly enforced by some whites, and violated by other persons in Savannah. Alexander Telfair, a local

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<sup>8</sup>Allen D. Candler, *Colonial Records of Georgia (1754-1768)* (Atlanta, 1911), p. 212.

<sup>9</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 213.

<sup>10</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 213.

<sup>11</sup>Charles S. Henry, *Ordinance of City of Savannah*, (Savannah, 1854), p. 450; *Savannah Daily Morning News*, December 29, 1853.

<sup>12</sup>Martha Waring, "Charles S. H. Hardee's Recollection of Old Savannah," *Georgia Historical Quarterly*, XII (1928), p. 353.

<sup>13</sup>Federal Writer's Project in Georgia Work Progress Administration, *Op. cit.*, p. 48.

<sup>14</sup>Charles S. Henry, *Op. cit.*, p. 344.

<sup>15</sup>*Revised City Ordinance* (1789-1854); *Savannah Daily Morning News*, December 29, 1853.

plantation owner, instructed his overseer: "You will give tickets (passes) to any Negro who applies for them; to go anywhere about the neighborhood but not to allow them to go off it without them passes, nor suffer any strange Negroes to come on it without a pass."<sup>16</sup> In contrast to these stern instructions, an editorial in a local paper stated: "There are individuals in our community who give tickets to Negroes over whom they have no authority to pass."<sup>17</sup> Such a ticket "caused the arrest and commitment to the Guard House of a Negro; the owner of the Negro had to pay a fine of \$1.00 to liberate him, while the person who violated the law goes unpunished because he is unknown."<sup>18</sup>

In addition to these laws regulating the Negro on the local level, there were several state laws which also controlled activities of the Negro. One such law stated: "Any person may inflict twenty lashes on the bare back of a slave found without license (pass) on the plantation or without the limits of the town to which he belongs."<sup>19</sup> Another law stated that the killing of a slave in the act of revolt or in the act of resisting arrest shall be ruled justifiable homicide.<sup>20</sup>

The establishment of the City Guard with its power to regulate the Negro by enforcing the pass and curfew laws were efforts to stop any attempts of Negro revolts. But in spite of these efforts Savannah, at various times, rippled with rumors of Negro unrest and revolt.<sup>21</sup> No wise white man, living during these times in Savannah, could seriously believe that the Negro was a natural-born slave.

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<sup>16</sup>U. B. Phillips, *Plantations and Frontier*, II (Cleveland, Ohio, 1910), 12.

<sup>17</sup>*Savannah Daily Morning News*, November 4, 1852.

<sup>18</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup>William Goodell, *The American Slave Code: In Theory and Practice* (London, n.d.), p. 21. Allen D. Candler, *Op. cit.*, p. 213.

<sup>20</sup>Augustus Clayton, *Georgia Justice* (Milledgeville, 1824), p. 269.

<sup>21</sup>Thomas Gamble, *Op. cit.*, p. 68.

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