

## The Hopewell Mutiny

"John Wright, have Pity upon me; spare my Life; for I have a wife and four children."

The *Hopewell* was an unlucky sloop. She was constructed in Annapolis, the colonial capital of Maryland, in 1749 and owned by a local man named Patrick Creagh. Almost immediately, Creagh's vessel ran into trouble. The London Town, Maryland based captain William Strachan was commanding the sloop to Barbados, but sailed into the teeth of an incredible storm.

Last Saturday came up the Bay to this Place the Sloop *Hopewell*, Capt. *Strachan*, who sail'd a few Weeks since for *Barbados*; but meeting with excessive hard Weather about 50 Leagues from the Cape; and springing a Leak, was obliged to return, and put into *Norfolk* in *Virginia*, where Capt. *Strachan* sold her Lading, and came back to this Place. He brings a melancholy Account of a Storm which happened very lately, and has done incredible Damage near the Mouth of our Bay. On Saturday Evening, the 7th of this Instant, he being then at *Norfolk*, the Wind began to blow hard, and about one or two in the Morning was very violent at N. E. with Rain, and still kept increasing; but the most violent of the Storm was from ten 'til two on Sunday. The Tide rose 15 Feet perpendicular higher than usual, forcing Ships and other Vessels ashore where the Water was never before known to flow; many of which are now so far from the Water, and some of them loaded, that it will cost as much as they are worth to get them afloat again, if it be practicable: Several new Ships were carried off the Stocks; all the Wharffs, and several Warehouses were carried away. A Warehouse of Col. *Tucker's*, 60 Feet by 30, having in it 90 Pipes of Wine and 40 Hogheads of Rum on the lower Floor, and a Quantity of Corn and Oats in the Loft, was taken off it's Foundation, carried a Mile and a half from the Place where it stood, and landed upright on the other Side of the River, without any Damage to what was in it; this Warehouse pass'd by the *Hopewell*, the Eaves of it being about four Feet above Water, and touch'd her Quarter, without doing any Hurt. Wharffs with Anchors lying on them of 1000 lb. Weight, were seen floating on the Water, and were carried away bodily, Stones and Timber together; and the River was almost covered with Lumber, Masts, Yards, Bales, Casks, &c. And by a Letter from a Gentleman at *Norfolk* we are informed, that the Damage there amounts to upwards of 30,000 *l.* Some Gentlemen now at *Norfolk*, who were in *Jamaica* when the last great Hurricane happened there, which destroyed several Men of War, &c. say it was not so violent as this. The Tide kept continually fluxing, and run at the Rate of five Miles an Hour; it overflowed all their Streets, carried some small Craft near a Mile from the ordinary High Water Mark, and left some of them in the Corn Fields.

The *Hopewell* survived the ordeal, and led a rather unremarkable career for the next half decade running between Annapolis, the Caribbean, and the other North American colonies.

Her string of mundane voyages came to an end in 1754.

Captain William Curtis, who was master of the *Hopewell* for a short trip across the Chesapeake Bay to Maryland's Eastern Shore, appears to have been new to the business. I have only found one other reference to the man: a brief mention in the *Virginia Gazette* in 1752 in which he commanded a vessel named the *Enterprize* carrying food down to the Caribbean.<sup>1</sup> It appears that Curtis was a fresh and inexperienced captain.

Curtis was sailing the *Hopewell* from the small port of Choptank back to Annapolis, hauling a load of barrel heads and barrel staves, when the mutiny occurred.

The first the public heard of what befell Curtis and the *Hopewell* might have been this brief note in the *Maryland Gazette*.

*A Sloop of about 45 Tons, William Curtis, Master, belonging to Mr. Creagh, sail'd from hence some Weeks ago, in order to load on the Eastern Shore; but we have an Account that the Crew, consisting of two White Men, and a Mulatto, have run away with the Vessel and Cargo, and 'tis suppos'd they have murdered the Master; one of the Men having been seen with the Master's Cloaths on. A Boat well mann'd and arm'd sail'd from hence last Sunday in quest of them, but are not yet returned.*

*Maryland Gazette, March 8, 1754*

What they didn't yet know was how it really happened.

A feature of Chesapeake maritime culture is the number of unfree sailors. Enslaved men and convict servants could comprise entire crews, cutting the cost of labor per voyage to virtually nothing.

Among the forced sailors was a convict servant by the name of John Wright. In later papers, an alias is offered for him: William Wilson. I haven't yet been able to find the crime for which Wright/Wilson was convicted, but we do know that he was a navigator.

The sloop had only two other sailors, another convict servant named John Smith and an enslaved man of very light skin referred to as Toney. Toney's full name was Andrew Lewis, and he was known to pass himself as "a Portugeze."

Only a few hours out from Choptank, Wright bludgeoned Curtis with a handspike, and then struck him repeatedly with an axe after he had fallen. Andrew Lewis brought up a ballast stone and fastened it to the still living Curtis. Despite Curtis' pleas to spare his life for the sake of his wife and children, he was dumped over the side and sank into the Chesapeake.

Donning Curtis' clothes, Wright took command of the sloop and steered her south. Curtis' red suit was recognized by other mariners in the Chesapeake, and word spread of his likely murder. Annapolis mustered volunteers to man and arm a boat and set off in pursuit, but the *Hopewell* had a significant head start.

<sup>1</sup> *The Virginia Gazette*, September 15, 1752, page 3; October 20, 1752, page 2

The *Hopewell's* crew of three, two convict servants and an enslaved man, made their way south. After murdering their captain, the mutineers steered toward the Capes of Virginia and the Atlantic, their only real chance at freedom. If the sloop could make it to the open ocean they might find their way to a more distant colony where word of their crime would have no effect. Perhaps they thought they could make a Spanish, French, or Dutch port in the Caribbean that they could disappear in and begin life anew.

Led by the convict servant and navigator John Wright (alias William Wilson), the trio had a good shot of making it out of the Chesapeake. Two main obstacles stood in their way: time and manpower.

Already an armed boat had been dispatched from Annapolis to bring the pirates to justice. Word was spreading of their bloody mutiny. The longer they spent in the Bay, the more likely it was that they would be caught. It was imperative that they reach the Atlantic as soon as possible.

The bigger problem was with the sloop itself. Throughout her career, the *Hopewell's* compliment of sailors was continually reduced. Her maiden voyage to Barbados was managed with six crew, including captain William Strachan. Now, with the murder of Captain Curtis, she was reduced to three. Hopewell might have been manageable on the comparatively sheltered waters of the Chesapeake, but a voyage to the Caribbean required more hands.

The solution to the latter problem was aboard the brig *Nancy*. Captain William Strachan happened to be sailing the *Nancy* on the Patuxent River when the Hopewell's crew revolted. The mutineers had succeeded in outpacing word of their crime, and Strachan's crew was entirely unaware of the danger that came with sight of the Hopewell.

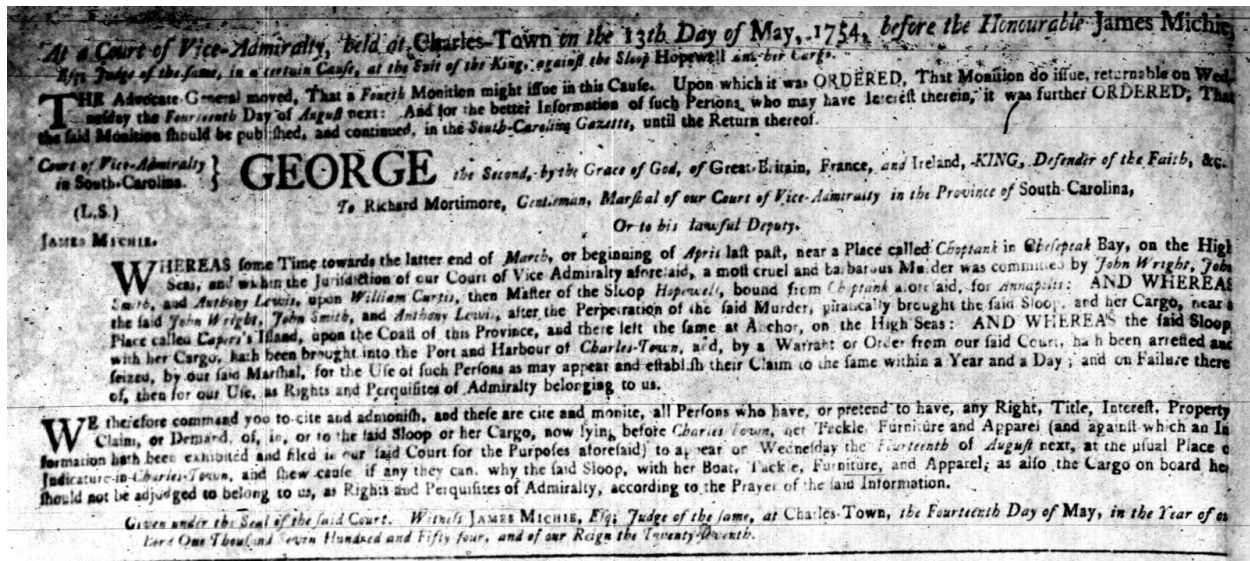
Perhaps it was a fond memory of how his former command had weathered a hurricane five years before, or maybe he was merely showing the respect that fellow mariners warranted. Whatever the reason, Strachan was convinced to help the Hopewell on her way. Two sailors, a convict servant owned by Strachan named James Manshore and an enslaved man named George Cook owned by the merchant James Dick, were dispatched in a small boat to carry bread to the pirates.

After Cook and Manshore climbed aboard, their boat was cut loose, the sails set, and the *Hopewell* slipped away. Strachan almost certainly pursued them, but with a head start and a swift vessel, the pirates escaped.

Soon the *Hopewell* had the Chesapeake to her stern, sinking with the horizon. Her three mutineers and two hostages had escaped. Maryland had no chance of recapturing the slaves and convicts, but as luck would have it, it was another colony that would deliver them up for eighteenth century justice.

For two months, there was no sign of the murderous mutineers of the sloop *Hopewell*, but the pirates' luck wouldn't last.

Somehow, the pirates wound up at Capers' Island, a small bit of land about fifteen miles north of Charleston, South Carolina. Months after her capture, an advertisement was placed in the South Carolina Gazette by the Court of Admiralty, stating that the Hopewell was left "at Anchor, on the High Seas," by her mutinous crew.



South Carolina Gazette, July 4, 1754

Per a report in the *New York Mercury*, the *Hopewell* was brought in to the Carolina Bar and abandoned by her crew, who were "soon after taken up and secured"<sup>2</sup> except for the mutineer John Smith, who was captured a short while later. Smith immediately claimed not to have anything to do with the murder.

Did the kidnapped sailors raise an alarm? Were the pirates trying to sell or trade their cargo as smuggled goods? Perhaps they were merely taking on water and provisions for a trip further south before things went awry. Or maybe they had no intention of sailing to the Caribbean and thought they could blend into the Carolinas. There are many unanswered questions.

What can be said is that the three mutineers were arrested and brought before the Court of Admiralty. As mentioned in the advertisement above, the court believed the mutiny, kidnapping, and murder were all committed "on the High Seas, and within the Jurisdiction of the Court of Admiralty." It is worth noting that George Cook and James Manshore, the kidnapped sailors, were not considered to be a party to the crimes of the mutineers, raising the possibility that it may have been them that turned in or revealed the crime of the pirates.

The record of the trial does not survive, but it is abundantly clear that John Smith turned evidence against his co-conspirators. John Wright, who committed the murder and took charge of the *Hopewell*, and Anthony Lewis, who had by this time shed his persona as a slave and passed as "a Portugese," should easily have been found guilty.

The Court, however, was forced to acquit. Apparently, the judges were unfamiliar with the geography of the Chesapeake, perhaps evidenced by their referring to "a place called Choptank in Chesapeake Bay." Powerful though it was, the Admiralty Court had no jurisdiction in the "narrow seas" of Maryland. It would fall to a provincial Admiralty Court in Maryland to decide the fate of the mutineers.

Given the dangerous nature of the criminals, they were confined in irons aboard a Royal Navy frigate, the *Shoreham*, and transported North. Captain Legg, commander of the *Shoreham*, does not appear to have been bound for Maryland, but rather to Nova Scotia, and rather than make a

<sup>2</sup> *New York Mercury*, June 17, 1754, page 2.

long voyage to Annapolis and back out to the Atlantic again, dropped the prisoners off in Virginia. Robert Dinwiddie, governor of Virginia, wrote to Horatio Sharpe, governor of Maryland, to let him know that "I have order'd them into the public Prison in this City [Williamsburg]," until Sharpe could send a boat and guard to pick them up at Yorktown.<sup>3</sup>

George Cook and James Manshore were returned to servitude in London Town, and the prisoners delivered up to Annapolis. After a brief trial, during which John Smith again testified against Wright and Lewis, the two were convicted and sentenced to hang.

Just outside the Annapolis City Gate, the two were hanged. Their bodies were then carried to Hackett's Point, at the mouth of Severn River, and displayed on gibbets in irons. Lewis and Wright's earthly remains became a grim reminder to sailors of the fate that awaited pirates in the Chesapeake.<sup>4</sup>

Slavery and convict servitude at times defined sailors in the eighteenth-century Chesapeake. British sailors could negotiate wages<sup>5</sup> and hold merchant officers accountable if they stepped out of line. While convict servants possessed some rights, enslaved sailors held virtually none. Both groups were subject to the whims of ship owners and sea captains.

Convict servants at least had a light at the end of the tunnel. Most were sentenced to seven years of servitude; after which they would be free. This guarantee of freedom also served as a bargaining chip to encourage proper behavior and deference from servants to masters. Some of these convicts went on to relative prominence. By way of example, William Logan was convicted of stealing muskets and rum from the ship *Ruby* in London and selling them in 1756. After his seven years of labor were up, he came to possess a barber shop, wharf, warehouse, and tavern on City Dock in Annapolis, the very same city the Hopewell cast off from.

---

<sup>3</sup> *The Official Records of Robert Dinwiddie*, Virginia Historical Society, 1933, Volume 1, Page 212. An interesting side note: that greatly renovated and restored prison still stands.

<sup>4</sup> *Maryland Gazette*, August 8, 1754.

<sup>5</sup> See N.A.M. Rodger's *The Wooden World: An Anatomy of the Georgian Navy*, W.W. Norton & Co., 1996.

**T**HE Subscriber, who has been Taught by  
 one of the most capable Masters in *England*,  
 undertakes to Teach, for Five Pounds Currency,  
 (the Learner understanding as far as the Rule of  
 Three,) Plain Geometry, Plain Trigonometry, and  
 Trigonometry Oblique, Plain Chart, Plain Sail-  
 ing, and Traverses, *Mercator's Chart*, *Mercator's*  
*Sailing*, and Middle Latitude, Parallel Sailing,  
 Oblique Sailing, Current Sailing, Amplitudes and  
 Azimuths, how to find the Variation of the Com-  
 pass, to make a Globular Chart, keep a Journal,  
 and prick off every Day's Work upon the Chart,  
 and to understand the Globe.  
 (11)  
 He is to be spoke with at Mr. *William Logan's*,  
 at the Sign of the *White Heart* on the Dock, in  
*Annapolis*.  
 SAMUEL BENNET.  
 2r

An advertisement placed in the *Maryland Gazette*, August 22, 1765

Despite the opportunities, many convict servants were nonetheless bound to service and subject to the people who held them, and a good number were certainly physically and mentally abused. Logan himself ran away from his new master, peruke maker Andrew Buchanan, within a year of arriving in Maryland.<sup>6</sup>

Enslaved people suffered the same abuses convict servants endured, along with the added mental toll of perpetual, generational enslavement for them and their families. London Town, the seaport that George Cook hailed from, was home to 961 known enslaved people between its founding and 1788. Of these, only nine are known to have gone free.<sup>7</sup> Free communities in the eighteenth-century Chesapeake were remarkably rare, and for some communities were unheard of.

How then did unfree mariners cope with their situation?

The convict servant John Wright and enslaved sailor Anthony Lewis responded with the full rejection of their status through violence. Their murder of Captain Curtis was a desperate bid at freedom, and perhaps even one they knew almost certainly could not succeed. Killing Curtis, kidnapping fellow sailors, and driving hard for the south was the most extreme version of resistance, one that held only two possible outcomes: death or freedom.

Subverting the system was another form of resistance. Lewis claiming himself to be a Portuguese man among white convict servants would have placed him in their class. Though convict servitude was not to be envied by many, the promise of eventual freedom and some basic protections under the law as a white man were very inviting to an enslaved man.

Resistance was a constant in North America and perhaps everywhere slavery was present, but not all forms of resistance were welcomed by the enslaved themselves. The runaways forced the enslaved mariner George Cook to travel south, and it is easy for us to imagine ourselves inviting such an abduction. The chance to escape to freedom not as a fugitive but as a blameless victim, removing the threat of punishment in the event of recapture, is appealing. This interpretation is, sadly, divorced from

<sup>6</sup>*Maryland Gazette*, September 22, 1757, page 3

<sup>7</sup>Ryan Cox, "The African-American Experience," lecture, Maryland State Archives at Historic London Town and Gardens.

the context of the eighteenth century. In contrast to Lewis, who could pass as a white man, Cook is always described as a "Negro." With darker skin, there was no way for him to blend in with South Carolina's free society, much less the Caribbean. Chesapeake slaves were familiar with the particularly deadly conditions of West Indies plantations, and the frightening efficiency with which Carolinian slave holders put down rebellions and revolts. Lewis was trying to move up the social ladder, but Cook was being dragged down it.

Above these considerations loomed the very real threat of brutal punishment. In eighteenth century Maryland, people of color were far more likely to be sentenced to death than any other class. Once sentenced to death, convict servants were less likely to receive a pardon or reprieve than anyone else, including enslaved people.<sup>8</sup> The outlook for unfree people was very grim when brought to court.

Walking the line between inviting brutal and fatal punishment and resisting the oppressive order was a difficult task. The anger and frustration of unfree mariners sometimes boiled over into violence. By contrast, the violence consistently perpetrated against unfree people was relentless, and when they struck back the legal system was swift in reinforcing social and racial hierarchy.

The *Hopewell Mutiny* is just one case of maritime violence in the eighteenth century, but it provides us with an intersection of several degrees of slavery and convict servitude.

---

<sup>8</sup> "Percent Hanged, Pardoned, and Reprieved: Classes Compared, 1726-1775," appendix to *Seven Hangmen of Colonial Maryland*, C. Ashley Ellefson, via Maryland State Archives