

The Case of Trent's Death

In March of 1737, this article was published in the Pennsylvania Gazette.

Two men of African descent, possibly enslaved though that is not stated, were overheard trying to convince another to poison his master. They apparently boasted that they could provide a poison that killed Mr. Trent and others. The two men were quickly apprehended, found with arsenic and an unknown root, and apparently confessed.

We hear from Trenton, That two Negroes were last Week imprison'd on the following Occasion. 'Tis said that they were about to perswade another Negroe to poison his Master; and to convince him of the Efficacy of the Drug which they presented him for that purpose, and the Security of giving it, let him know that Mr. Trent and two of his Sons, Mr. Lambert and two of his Wives, and sundry other Persons were remov'd by their Slaves in that Manner. This Discourse being overheard, they were apprehended, and 'tis said have made some Confession. But as the Persons abovemention'd died apparently of common Distempers, it is not fully credited that any such Method was used to destroy them. The Drugs found on one of the Negroes, were Arsenick and an unknown kind of Root.

How Did Trent Die?

William Trent died suddenly on Christmas Day 1724 in what was described as a “fit of apoplexy.”

On Friday, the 25th of this instant, William Trent Esq. Chief Justice of the Province of New Jersey departed this life (being seized with a fit of apoplexy) at his house in Trenton. He was one that was universally beloved, and is as much lamented.

The Boston Gazette – January 11-18, 1725

Was William Trent Poisoned?

At that time, apoplexy referred to any sudden death, particularly if the victim died very quickly with a sudden loss of consciousness.

A stroke or a heart attack might have been the cause of Trent's apoplexy.

In fact, the author of the Pennsylvania Gazette article seems to doubt

that Trent was poisoned, stating that Trent and the others

mentioned by the accused men

“died apparently of common distempers” or diseases.

However, this article does raise the possibility that Trent was poisoned by his enslaved servants with a substance provided by the two accused men.

What Really Happened?

What evidence was used to convict the two men?

Does this evidence support their claim of providing poison that killed William Trent?

If this claim was not proven, why were the men executed?

What does this suggest about the fear and reality of resistance by enslaved people?

What Was the Evidence?

**The men were found with arsenic,
a powerful poison,
and an unknown root.**



**There appears to have been
a witness to the men's offer
to provide poison.**

**And the men were reported
to have confessed to
attempting to provide poison
with the intent to help
others kill their enslavers.**

**Whether other evidence was
presented related to their
claims regarding Trent and
others is not known.**



Artist: William Jackson



The unknown root that was found on one of the accused may have been used in African folk medicine or sorcery. For example, seeds of the wild licorice plant were worn as necklaces and talismans.

This root may have been brought to the colonies on a ship transporting enslaved people, possibly as food or medicine. Captains of these ships used native roots to cure fevers. We know that vegetables like yams and okra were brought from Africa to the colonies.

Does the Evidence Support Their Claim that Trent Was Poisoned?



If given in sufficient quantity, arsenic can cause convulsions, coma, and death within a few hours. This could be described as a fit of apoplexy.

There was apparently no suggestion of poisoning at the time of Trent's death and it was accepted as death from natural causes.

Asserting that their poisons were the cause of the sudden death of a well-known man 13 years earlier would have been hard to disprove and easy to claim.

Why Were the Men Executed?

It appears that these two men were found guilty and executed in 1738.

The Pennsylvania Gazette
June 15, 1738

"We hear from Burlington, that two Negroes found guilty of practising Poison, by which they had destroy'd sundry Persons, were executed there last Week."

Although we do not know what evidence was presented as proof that the men committed the crime of murder, they were executed for "practising Poison."

In fact, conspiracy to commit murder by poisoning and attempting to incite others to commit murder in the same fashion were capital offenses, regardless of whether death occurred.

What Law Justified the Execution?

While this particular law was enacted in 1768, it amended an 1713/14 act, making the court proceedings easier and quicker, with multiple courts eligible to hear and decide on these cases. As the preamble states, the 1768 law was to improve “the present Mode of trying Negro and Mulatto Slaves, for Murder and other capital Crimes, by Three or more Justices, and Five of the principal Freeholders of the County, [which] hath on Experience, been found inconvenient.”

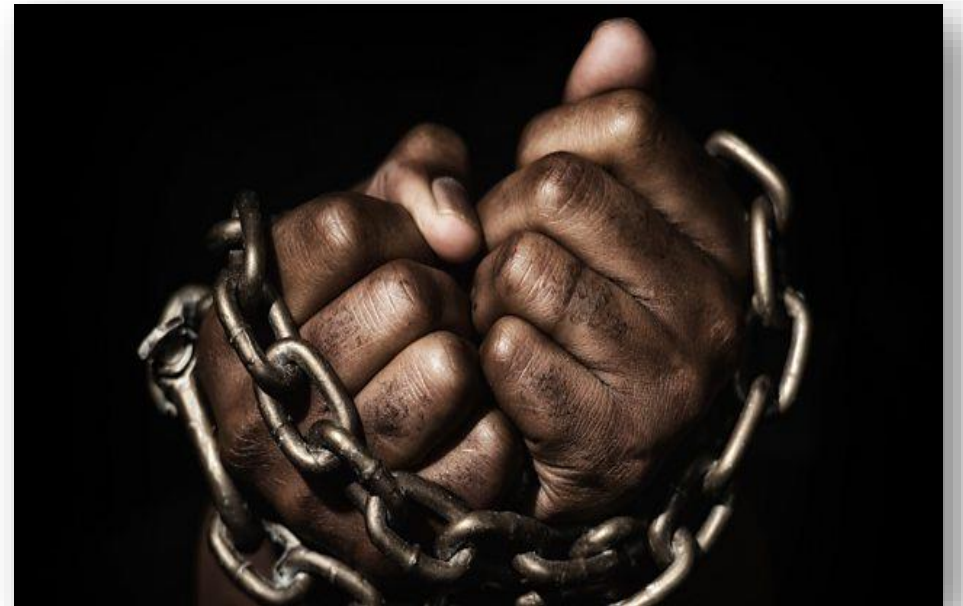
...every Negro, Indian, or Mulatto Slave, who shall murder or conspire, or attempt the Death of any of his Majesty's Liege People in this Colony...and be thereof convicted, by Confession or Verdict, in the Supreme Court, Court of Oyer and Terminer and General Goal Delivery, or Court of General Quarter Sessions of the Peace, of the County wherein the Fact shall be committed, shall suffer Death without Benefit of Clergy...

Why Were Such Punishments Considered Necessary?

Laws governing enslaved people in colonial New Jersey were exceedingly strict, and punishments were draconian.

The law that required execution of enslaved individuals convicted of murder or conspiracy to murder also mandated capital punishment for rape, arson, and serious injury.

These laws were intended to prevent and punish efforts by enslaved people to resist their bondage.

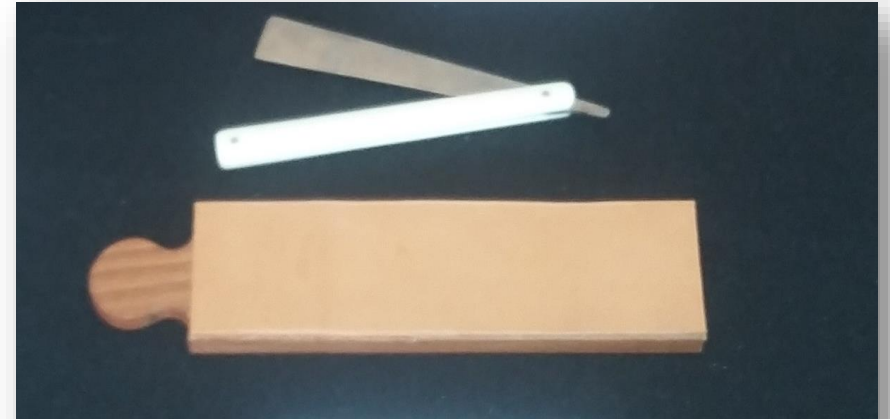


Fear of these punishments was intended as a deterrent to resistance by enslaved people.

How Did Fear of Resistance Co-Exist with Trust?

William Trent owned an enslaved man named Yaff, who likely was both butler and Trent's manservant or valet. As butler, he would have had major responsibility for managing Trent's household. And as valet, he would have shaved Trent daily with a straight razor.

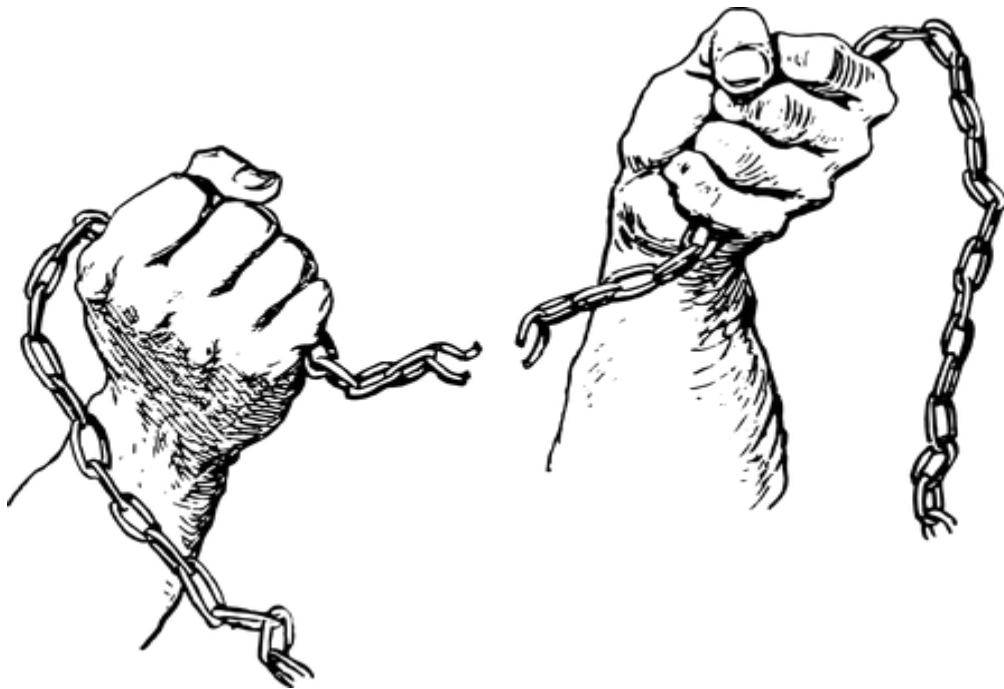
Yaff would have had the opportunity to murder Trent with the straight razor but he did not. Was Trent confident in Yaff's loyalty? Or was Trent counting on Yaff's fear of the punishment he would have received?



What else might have Yaff considered in his decision not to resist through murder? The consequences for other enslaved people in Trent's household? His personal values about human life?

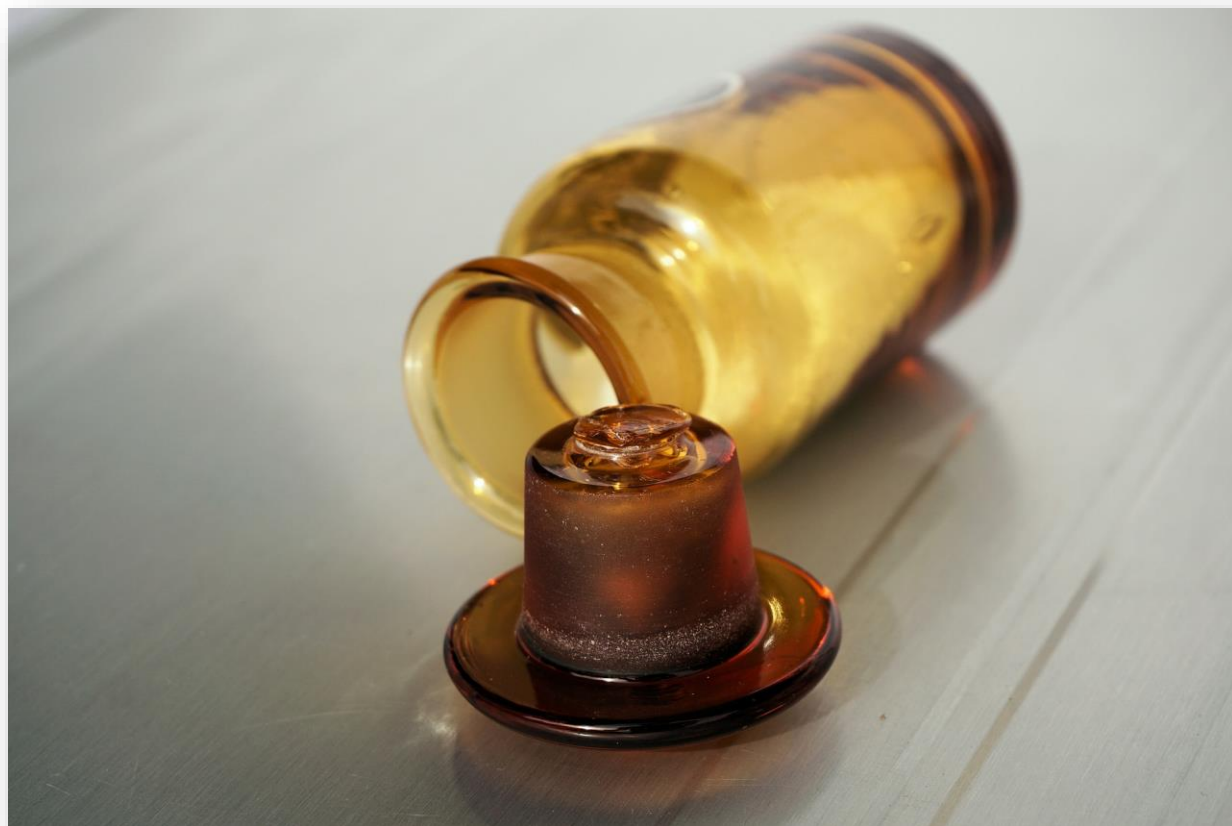
Many enslaved people did resist enslavement using force in New Jersey and the other northern colonies.

A particularly violent uprising in New York in 1712 prompted lawmakers to write new codes governing enslaved people that were even stricter and punishments harsher.



The New York Assembly, following the revolt, passed "An Act for the suppressing and punishing the conspiracy and insurrection of Negroes and other Slaves," which mandated that any enslaved person found guilty of murder, rape, arson, or assault was to "suffer the pains of death in such manner and with such circumstances as the aggravation or enormity of their Crimes...shall merit and require."

What do you think?



Sources

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