

1741. The Testimony of Mary Burton

In 1741, White New Yorkers, afraid of a slave revolt, responded to rumors and unexplained fires with the arrest of 146 enslaved Africans, the execution of 35 Blacks and four Whites, and the transport to other colonies of 70 enslaved people. The most serious accusations were made by Mary Burton, a sixteen-year-old White indentured servant who received £100 and her freedom in exchange for her testimony. Compare Mary Burton's deposition against John Hughson from March 4 and the testimony from July 29 against John Ury. In what ways are the stories told by Mary Burton the consistent? What inconsistencies do you see? If you were a defense attorney in these cases, what would you have argued? Why?

A. Mary Burton's Deposition Against John Hughson, March 4, 1741

Mary Burton, of the city of New-York, Spinster, aged about sixteen years, being sworn, deposed, That about two o'clock on Sunday morning last, a negro man who goes by the name of John Gwin (or Quin) came to the house of John Hughson, the deponent's master, and went in at the window where one Peggy lodges, where he lay all night. That in the morning she saw some speckled linen in the said Peggy's room; that the said negro then gave the deponent two pieces of silver, and bid Peggy cut off an apron of the linen and give to the deponent, which she did accordingly. That at the same time the said negro bought a pair of white stockings from her master, for which he was to give six shillings; that the said negro had two mugs of punch, for which, and the stockings, he gave her master a lump of silver. That her master and mistress saw the linen the same morning. That soon after Mr. Mills came to inquire for one John Quin, a soldier, who he said, had robbed Mr. Hogg of some speckled linen, silver, and other things. That after Mr. Mills was gone, her mistress hid the linen in the garret; and soon after some officers came and searched the house; and when they were gone and found nothing, her mistress took the linen from the place she had before hid it in, and hid it under the stairs. That the night before last, her master and mistress gave the said linen to her mistress's mother who carried it away. That yesterday morning, one John Romme was at her master's house, and she heard him say to her master, if you will be true to me, I will be true to you; and her master answered, I will, and will never betray you. That the said negro usually slept with the said Peggy, which her master and mistress knew of.

B. Mary Burton's Testimony Against John Ury, July 29, 1741

Why I have seen Ury very often at Hughson's about Christmas and new-year, and then he stayed away about a fortnight or three weeks, and returned again about the time that Hogg's goods came to our house. I have often seen him in company with Hughson, his wife and daughter, and Peggy, and several negroes, talking about the plot, burning the fort first, then the fly, and then the dock; and upon some of the negroes saying they were afraid of being damned for being concerned in the plot, I heard Ury tell them they need not fear doing of it, for that he could forgive them their sins as well as God Almighty, and would forgive them. They were to burn the whole town and to kill the people: Ury was to be captain of a company of negroes, and he was to begin the fire where he lodged; that when they were once together above stairs, Ury, Hughson, his wife and Peggy, they called Mary, and I went up, but when I came up stairs, Ury had a book in his hand, and bid me go away, and asked me what business I had there, and said they did not call me, they called Mary Hughson, and he was angry and shut the door too again, and I looked under it, and there was a black ring upon the floor, and things in it that seemed to look like rats, I don't know what they were. - That another time I heard him talking with the negroes, Quack and others, about the plot, and turned the negroes out of the room, and asked me to swear? and I said I would swear if they would tell me what I was going to swear, but they would have me swear first; and Hughson and his wife went and fetched silks and gold rings, and offered them to me in case I would swear, but I would not, and they said I was a fool; and Ury the told me he could forgive sins as well as God, I answered I thought it was out of his power. That one night, some time about new-year, I was listening at the door of the room upon the stairs, where there was Ury, Hughson, his wife and daughter Sarah, Vaarck's Caesar, Auboyneau's Prince, Philipse's Cuff and other negroes; and I looked through the door and saw up-on the table a black thing like a child, and Ury had a book in his hand and was reading, but I did not understand the language; and having a spoon in my hand, I happened to let it drop upon the floor, and Ury came out of the room, running after me down stairs, and he fell into a tub of water which stood at the foot of the stairs, and I ran away. When they were doing any thing extraordinary at nights, they would send me to bed.