



The Great New York Conspiracy of 1741: Slavery, Crime, and Colonial Law (Landmark Law Cases and American Society) (Landmark Law Cases & American Society)

Peter Charles Hoffer

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Three and a half decades before the city of New York witnessed the first great battle waged by the new United States of America for its independence, rumors of a massive conspiracy among the city's slaves spread panic throughout the colony. On the testimony of frightened bondsmen and a handful of whites, over seventy slaves were convicted and a third of these were executed.

The suspected conspiracy in New York prompted one of the most extensive slave trials in colonial history and some of the most grisly punishments ever meted out to individuals. Peter Hoffer now retells the dramatic story of those landmark trials, setting the events in their legal and historical contexts and offering a revealing glimpse of slavery in colonial cities and of the way that the law defined and policed the institution.

Among other things, Hoffer reveals how conspiracy became a central feature of the law of slavery at the same time as it reflected the white belief that slaves were always conspiring against their masters. He draws on uniquely revealing firsthand accounts of the trials to both retell a gripping story and open a window on colonial American justice. He leads readers through a chain of events involving robbery and arson that culminated in the trials of a group of white men suspected of inciting the slaves to revolt.

The episode, so vital to our understanding of a time when slavery was an entrenched institution and the law made even the angry muttering of slaves into a criminal act, has much to tell us about current affairs as well. African slaves in colonial times were viewed by authorities and citizens much as some foreigners are today: inherently dangerous, easily identifiable, and constantly conspiring.

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