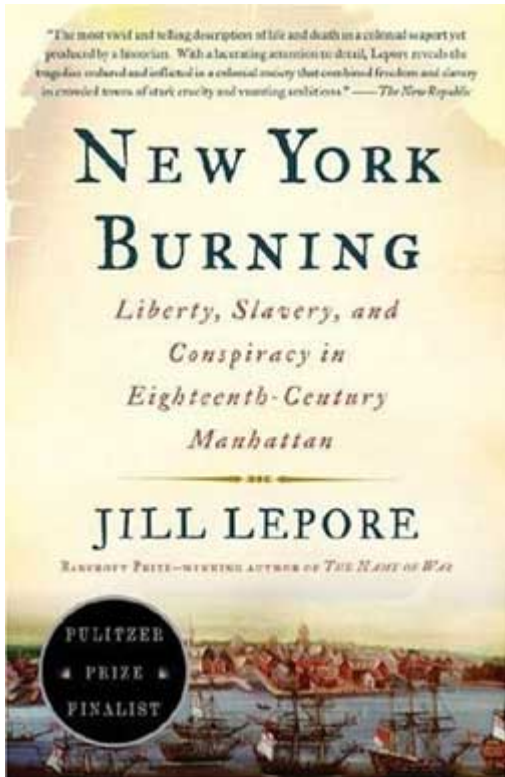
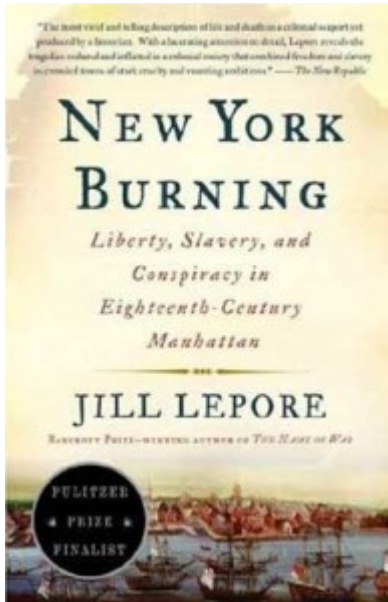


# Where There's Smoke, There's Fire



Early in the afternoon of March 18, 1741, flames began to shoot through the shingled roof of Lieutenant Governor George Clarke's home, a building safely nestled within the stone walls of New York's Fort George. Ten more suspicious fires followed. Before the next snows fell, Manhattan magistrates had arrested 172 men and women, most of them black and enslaved. Eighty-four of the accused were expelled from the colony, with another four whites and seventeen blacks hanged. For the thirteen blacks judged to be the instigators of the plot to destroy New York, the court reserved the ultimate punishment of burning at the stake. Deconstructing and describing these ghastly events requires enormous skill. Historian Jill Lepore writes with unusual flair and enormous narrative power, and *New York Burning* succeeds admirably in drawing the reader into this world of intrigue. Whether she also succeeds at disentangling the complicated web of accusations is less certain.



## New York Burning: Liberty, Slavery, and Conspiracy in Eighteenth-Century Manhattan

Although historians prefer to reconstruct the past through a variety of sources, the chief document in this affair remains a single text: Judge Daniel Horsmanden's 1744 *Journal of the Proceedings*. As would be the case with an account produced by any prosecutor, Horsmanden's version elevates his role in the trials into that of savior of New York, while the accused are allowed to speak only through his pen. The judge's determination to advance his career through this thick volume—the original version filled up 391 printed pages—does not, of course, render it fatally flawed, and so Lepore, like everybody else who has written of the fires, builds her story around this key piece of evidence. More than any other historian, Lepore reconstructs the details of the relatively unknown Horsmanden's early life. Born in England in 1694, young Daniel followed his cousin, William Byrd II, to Virginia but failed to obtain entrance to the bar there. Relocating to New York City, he fared somewhat better, although he never regained the fortune lost in the South Sea Bubble. By 1741 he was one of the three justices on the colony's Supreme Court, and from his position on the bench Horsmanden became the recorder of the trials, the central interrogator of those arrested, and finally, the affair's first chronicler. (A second edition of the *Journal* appeared in 1810, unfortunately replete with printer's errors, mistakes that also found their way into the 1969 Greenwood reprint, as well as into Thomas J. Davis's 1971 edition.)

If Horsmanden has yet to find a modern author to tell his story, the same cannot be said of the alleged conspiracy described in his book. Early on, Lepore insists that the "episode is hardly known today," but that is true only if students and scholars are far behind in their reading (xii). Davis followed his edition of the *Journal* with a full-length account of the plot in 1985, and only three years ago, legal historian Peter Charles Hoffer published the justly admired *The Great New York Conspiracy of 1741* (2003). Serena Zabin edited an abridged version of the trial documents in 2004, and Marcus Rediker and Peter

Linebaugh devoted considerable attention to the plot in *The Many-Headed Hydra* (2001). Lepore, however, contextualizes her saga by recreating the cultural world of midcentury Manhattan. Whereas Rediker and Linebaugh situate the conspiracy within the waters of Atlantic radicalism, Lepore focuses instead on New York City's particular legal and religious customs. By broadening her narrative to encompass the wider urban context in which the trials took place, Lepore brilliantly reveals what theatrical plays men like Horsmanden saw, what accounts of other slave conspiracies they read about in local newspapers (most especially the recent plots and rebellions in Antigua and South Carolina), and how they regarded other faiths. Lepore brings the city of the late 1730s to life as few writers have, although on occasion the connections she draws prove very little. Her attempt to link the court proceedings of 1741 with the earlier libel trial of the printer John Peter Zenger, for example, is unconvincing. As one would expect, given the limited number of attorneys in what remained a small city, a number of individuals had cameos in both events. But this is purely circumstantial; it demonstrates no substantive connection between these events. Similarly, it may be that the partisan animosity left by the divisive Zenger trial helped convince some bondmen that a divided white majority was easy prey for black rebels. But the theory that, in the aftermath of the Zenger affair, nervous whites feared that "real and imagined slave conspirators functioned as a phantom political party" is asserted rather than demonstrated (219).

By shifting the focus of her book away from the city's back alleys and taverns into the corridors of power, Lepore ultimately reveals more about men like Horsmanden than she does about the lives of those who swung from the gibbet. For a book with the word *slavery* in the subtitle, *New York Burning* has surprisingly little to say about the enslaved men and women who may have conspired for their freedom. Lepore never once cites important modern studies of African Americans in colonial New York by Graham Russell Hodges and Leslie Harris. Giving voice to the so-called historically inarticulate is admittedly no easy task, but for a scholar rightly worried about the veracity of Horsmanden's version of events, it is curious that the judge receives roughly three times the pages devoted to Caesar Vaarck, the possible mastermind of the plot.

For readers who prefer neat conclusions, the fact that Lepore never clearly states whether she believes the city's slaves actually hatched the conspiracy for which they were accused will be perplexing. (For the record, Hodges, Harris, Rediker and Linebaugh, Davis, Hoffer, Donald R. Wright, and David Brion Davis all believe that the conspiracy was authentic.) Perhaps she regards the question as unanswerable, given the need to rely on Horsmanden's biased, self-serving account of the proceedings. Nonetheless, Lepore offers several hints that when pushed, she comes down in opposition to the scholarly orthodoxy. By emphasizing Horsmanden's hope to profit from the publication of his *Journal*, she seems to imply a certain lack of gravitas in what the judge wrote. She also twice suggests—as did one contemporary observer—that the 1741 trials and the 1692 Salem witchcraft trials "had much in common" (xvii, 203).

The fact remains, however, that eleven mysterious fires *did* break out around the city, and they had little to do with the sort of hysteria caused by troubled Puritan girls. "Nothing 'just happened' in the early eighteenth century," Lepore insists. "There was always a villain to be caught, a conspiracy to be detected" (51). Perhaps. Yet even in a time when educated people believed in spontaneous combustion, it was hardly irrational for slaveholding residents of a city constructed from wood to suspect that *somebody* was starting these fires. *New York Burning* is a pleasure to read, but for now, Hoffer's carefully argued study will remain the standard account of the affair.

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