Slave Resistance Essay, Research Paper

African-American History Ever since the practice of slave trade existed in the new world, there have always been forms of slave resistance. Ranging from violent uprisings to more passive forms of slave disobedience. There are several major slave rebellions that are worth noting in the struggle against tyranny. However, more commonly, the average slave made subtle attempts to undermine the master and the slave system. The region of slavery also contributed to the form of slave resistance. This is true for different regions of the United States as well as when comparing the North America and Latin America. The slaves overall experience of resistance as well as the conduct of disobedience differed from slave to slave and region to region. Throughout the history of slave rebellions, the first occurred in 1712 in New York. This uprising proved to be more harmful considering the changes in public code that resulted. For instance persons of color gathering in a group of three of more could yield forty lashes punishment for each involved. It also dubbed some felonious offenses committed by slaves punishable by death. This incident is important because it leads to distinction of color in the law. In a 1739 slave rebellion in South Carolina sixty people were killed. Of those sixty, two-thirds were black. This attempted insurrection created an unsafe feeling among the white minority. Harsh laws were passed to discourage further rebellions. The changes included the establishment of local militias to monitor any tomfoolery by slaves. So now when a slave is caught, the community could hold a public hanging, which proved disconcerting for potential runaways. Also, the idea began to catch on that being brutally violent towards slaves created more dissidence. So lawmakers agree on outlawing harsh treatment. The only upside was the establishment of black churches. At church, they were allowed to congregate, sing, collaborate, and maybe attempt to learn how to read. Churches were definitely important as the centers where more advance forms of slave disobedience could take root. All of this anti-slave legislation was codified in the Negro Acts of 1740. This was the grass roots of the institution of slavery in the United States. It is important to consider that nearly all the rebellions were not successful in any military consideration. Mostly the attempts were a testament to the undying desire for freedom. The attempts of Gabriel Prosser and Denmerk Vescey were both thwarted by government informants. However their death followed in spirit of David Walker s call for courage, Kill or be killed . His appeal called for violent revolution for the obtainment of freedom. Walker also inspired the bloodiest and largest revolt. In 1831, a faith inspired preacher, named Nat Turner, started implementing Walker s violent policy. He began his revolt by killing his master and his white family. He continued his assault on many whites while en route to Jerusalem, Virginia. As more joined the mob they began to lose control. After killing 67 whites the rebellion was quelled by the Virginia State Militia. The institution of slavery had no insurrections that created major damage to the structure of society until the Civil War. Perhaps passive slave disobedience was the most successful form of undermining the system. The life of a slave was never good. Every slave could be subjected to beatings. Their situation was a two-headed coin. You re damned if you do, you re damned if you don t. With this in mind, the ideas of passive disobediences take root. For instance say some slave fakes a sickness. Either two things could happen, you could fool the slave master or you could get beaten. It is important to realize that the consequences for all disobedience could result in beating or death. The riskiest form of non-violent disobedience was running away. The flight to freedom was dangerous and unlikely but to the slave who didn t care anymore; the consequences became ignored. Often when runaways were caught they were killed to set an example. Another common aforementioned method was pretending to be sick. Which rarely worked unless the slave showed signs of obvious pain. Another form of non-violent disobedience was the breaking of farm tools and other equipment. Some slaves went as far as burning barns and buildings. The stealing of food and clothes proved to be out of necessity for the underfed and unclothed slaves. The disobedience that proved most threatening to the institution and fundamentals of slavery was the slaves learning to read. Literate slaves were illegal. Some were taught by their masters but most learned within the confines of the Bible. Literacy enabled persons like Frederick Douglass and Sojourner Truth to disillusion the subhuman tenant that was fundamental to slavery s principles. There were a few violent means of disobedience that occurred on the local scale but differ from the large physical uprisings like Nat Turner s. House slaves in the preparation of food could slip some lethal poison in to the Dinner meal. Another violent act was the slaughter of cattle. Slaves would be motivated to do this either to obtain much needed food or to hurt the master s profits. Finally, some mothers practiced the method of mercy killing. Often parents would agree that the child was better of not ever having to be subjected to the horrors of slave life.

Slave disobedience differed from the plantations of the South to the plantations of South America and the Caribbean. The southern societies provided a structure in which slaves could be managed and controlled correctly. Society dictated that a slave s status although subhuman had a place in society. In the southern plantations masters could get by with only severely beating one slave to extend control. Although slaves were subhuman they always had hope of a better life. This hope is what perpetuated the non-violent disobedience and quelled the violent disobedience. The idea of being a slave was not that bad. Many figured they were putting in their dues and they would be redeemed in the afterlife. The less harsh circumstance in the southern plantations primarily produced instances of non-violent disobedience. The treatment in Latin America was much harder because the slave owners had many more slaves in a more confined area. This is because usually they were only being stored there before passage to the States. Without ample resources many slaves located in Latin American died of disease, malnutrition, and dehydration. With no common language the Africans in Latin America had trouble both organizing amongst themselves as well as trouble communicating with any locals that might be of assistance in escaping. All of these factors contribute to a harsher situation compared to their African brothers and sisters living in the colonies. In this harsh situation breeds more violent means of slave resistance. Starving and sick, lost in a strange land, and unable to communicate, slaves found themselves in a situation where violence with the chance at death takes precedence over life s considerations. Many factors contribute to the different types of resistance seen in American slave society. Some of these factors include location of the slave, position of the slave, and the type of treatment the slave received. The slave located in a border state such as Maryland was obviously more likely to flee north for the prospect of freedom than one in the Deep South in Alabama. In colonial times slaves in South Carolina had the opportunity to flee south with the help of the native peoples especially the Seminoles. Once again the factor of how brutal the master treated his slaves determined what type of resistance was used. Brutal owners asked for brutal responses, mildly brutal owners received only non-violent forms of disobedience. Finally, the type of slave could also be a factor in the method of resistance. The field slaves, whom had it worst, were more inclined to participate in either violent or non-violent type of resistance. Conversely, the house slaves would almost never violently disobey; and feared losing their job if they were caught disobeying in the slightest. Overall, the status of the slave, severity of owner, and the location of the slave, all provide different scenarios in which disobedience can take place. From the beginning of the institution of slavery, slave resistance occurred. It didn t matter what city a slave was in. Slavery meant brutality and brutality meant resistance. Although many factors determined the form of disobedience in which the slave participated, collectively they all disobeyed. Whether it was violent or passive the goal was still ultimately the same.