

Great Albany Fire of 1793

by Kayley Pilawa

In 1793, three enslaved Africans were accused of setting fire to the New York State capital of Albany. The great fire was set on November 17, 1793. By the next morning there were reported losses of over \$250,000, with most of the damage done to offices and twenty-six homes. Arson was suspected almost immediately (Gerlach, 1977). Bet, a female slave owned by Phillip Van Rensselaer confessed in a deposition and implicated her co-conspirators. Her confession is the main historical source for events. It was signed with her mark on November 28, 1793.

Bet began her story with an account of a conversation with Dean, a female slave owned by Volkert Douw. According to Bet, Dean knew Pompey, a male slave belonging to the estate of Matthew Visscher and Pompey proposed a plan to set a fire someplace in Albany. After initially declining, Dean agreed to help Pompey. Bet explained that when Pompey approached her she agreed to help set the fire. She insisted that Pompey was going to set the fire because two White men with a grudge against Leonard Gansevoort, "a prominent Albany merchant and Federalist," offered him a watch as payment if he set fire to property owned by Gansevoort around Market Street. One of the men was a Mr. Bessbrown and the other was unknown to the Africans.

Initially Pompey wanted to set the fire on the back stoop of Mr. Gansevoort's house, but Bet objected because his family would have no chance to get out of the house safely. Pompey agreed with this and they decided to move the fire to the stable.

In her disposition, Bet provided considerable

detail about times and dates and the name of one of the White men. She explained that she and Dean "took a Lantern without a door belonging to the Mr. Douws which Dean got out of the back cellar." They put hot coals in it and met Pompey. When the coals were accidentally extinguished, they returned to the Douw's dwelling for more burning coals and then placed them in the hay in the stable. After setting the fire, Bet and Dean ran one way and Pompey the other. The women heard the cries of fire when they reached Van Veghtens Corner and Market Street. At that point they snuck back in through the windows of the Douw's house.

Bet feared she would be found out. Dean reassured her that neither Pompey nor herself would tell anyone of what they did. A free black woman named Jane advised her to tell no one because if she were found out she would be hanged. Bet spoke to Pompey the Wednesday after the fire and he told her that he had received payment for setting the fire. After she finished her confession, the men who took her deposition signed and dated the document and also signed Bet's name. Bet completed the document by signing it with her mark, a big letter "X."

Bet might have hoped that cooperation with authorities would lead to less severe punishment and possibly even freedom. However, when Bet and Dean pleaded guilty on January 7, 1794 they were sentenced to be hanged. Pompey pleaded not guilty, was tried and convicted, and was also sentenced to death. The two women were hanged on March 14. Pompey was executed on April 11. Fearing that this

was a precursor of future slave rebellions, the town council passed new resolutions forbidding slaves from wandering around after 9 PM. There is no record of what happened to the White participants.

Sources: Gerlach, D. (1977, March). "Black Arson in Albany, New York: November 1793," *Journal of Black Studies* 7(3): 301-312.

"Examination of Bet, Slave of Philip S. Van Rensselaer," November 28, 1793, Albany, New York State Library, Manuscripts and History Section.

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