

The Social History of Crime and Punishment in America: An Encyclopedia

Slave Patrols

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Slave patrols were public efforts to regulate slavery. They were part of a broader trend of restrictions placed on slaves and their movements. Slave patrols were initiated in the 16th and 17th centuries in the West Indies by English and Spanish settlers. Patrols grew out of colonial efforts to regulate slavery by creating laws to restrict slaves that required all white colonists to assist in enforcing the resulting slave codes. In South Carolina, for instance, landowners were obligated to punish slaves who wandered onto their property. Slave patrols were charged with questioning wandering slaves, dispersing slave gatherings, searching slave quarters, and patrolling roads between settlements.

In towns and cities, slave patrols usually operated on foot, investigating suspicious gatherings and questionable behavior. After slavery was established in the south, slave patrols were adopted as a way of policing the enslaved population. White southerners were determined to maintain their dominant social position. White citizens were induced to serve on slave patrols through various penalties and inducements such as fines or tax abatements. Substitutes could be hired for those who wished not to perform their turn at patrol service. Many patrollers were non-slaveholders who came to resent their forced duty that largely benefited the elite planter class. The slave patrols evolved from impromptu voluntary vigilante groups to organized institutions staffed by salaried civil servants.

Justification

Slave patrols were established as a reaction to white southerners' pervasive fear that with respect to the potential lawlessness of slaves, including the possibility of an outright rebellion. These fears were partly based on real concerns as slaves were far more numerous than whites in many parts of the south, and there had been instances of slave violence against whites and even of bloody insurrections. For example, in 1739 in Stono, South Carolina, several dozen intoxicated slaves armed with knives and guns set out for Florida, where they would be free; on the way, they slaughtered more than two dozen whites. Other notable acts of insurgency by slaves included the Gabriel Prosser [p. 1679 ↓] conspiracy of 1800 and Nat Turner's Rebellion in 1831, both of which were in Virginia.

In response to these actions, many restrictions were imposed on slaves across the south. These slave codes included measures, for instance, where a slave could not be off a plantation without a specific pass from the master. Many communities passed laws that required most white males to serve as members of armed patrols; certain professionals were exempt from serving.

Slave patrols were charged with monitoring the activities of slaves. The patrols could stop and question unaccompanied slaves anywhere, and if they could not produce a note from their master or an identification pass, the patrol could seize and hold them. Slave patrols generally functioned as an agent of intimidation to suppress the enslaved populace, as well as free blacks. It became common practice for patrols to beat and sometimes maim blacks, enslaved or free, they encountered, with little fear of repercussion. In effect, the state legitimized violence against slaves through these patrols. Slave patrols searched slave quarters and homes looking not only for runaway slaves but also for weapons, stolen goods, and evidence of literacy such as books, paper, and pens. A patrol returning a runaway slave to a master generally received a bounty.

Organization

Two major models were followed in creating slave patrols. The patrols were sometimes linked with compulsory local militia units intended to protect white settlers from Native Americans, foreign invasion, and other hostile threats. The militia model was used, for example, in South Carolina and Virginia. In other places, such as North Carolina and Texas, county courts were charged with forming local committees that were responsible for creating slave patrols to cover their territory.

In 1704, South Carolina was the first U.S. colony to establish slave patrols. Virginia formed its first slave patrol in 1727. In 1757, the Georgia colonial assembly passed An Act for Establishing and Regulating of Patrols, which required white citizens to serve on patrols of seven or fewer riders to work in districts that were 12 square miles. In 1811, militia officers in the Natchez District in Mississippi were ordered to form patrols in response to a slave uprising in the neighboring parish of St. John Baptist along Lake Pontchartrain, Louisiana, where about 500 slaves had organized and marched toward

New Orleans. In 1822, a statute was passed in Mississippi that made each militia captain responsible for maintaining a list of slave patrol detachments of three men each, which were obligated to perform patrol duties once every three weeks. This law was repealed in 1833, when another Mississippi statute granted each Board of County Police the authority to appoint leaders of patrols for each police district. In 1822, another statute in Mississippi authorized slave patrols to kill all dogs owned by slaves. In 1825, Arkansas passed its first regulation establishing slave patrols. In Texas, officials became concerned about the number of slaves escaping to Mexico. In 1846, the Texas legislature directed county courts to form local patrols to cover specific districts. In the antebellum south, every slaveholding state had established slave patrols, principally to prevent slave rebellions.

After passage of the 1850 Fugitive Slave Law, federal commissioners were appointed for every county in the country, charged with responsibility for enforcing the law. Further, U.S. marshals and, if necessary, the U.S. Army, could also be used to return runaway slaves. In 1857, the southern-dominated U.S. Supreme Court under Chief Justice Roger B. Taney handed down the *Dred Scott* decision, which asserted that slaves, and even free blacks, were not citizens and had essentially no rights. The pervasive paranoia on the part of southern whites against slave violence and resistance was fueled by the continued existence of slave patrols. Slave patrols generally came to an end with the cessation of the Civil War. However, the sentiments that led to the formation and maintenance of slave patrols led to the emergence of groups like the Ku Klux Klan during Reconstruction as well as to the evolution of modern policing and, perhaps, also to the tacit acceptance of violence toward African Americans by police.

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See Also

- [Buchanan, James \(Administration of\)](#)
- [Dred Scott v. Sandford](#)
- [Ku Klux Klan](#)
- [Slavery](#)
- [Slavery, Law of](#)

Further Readings

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