

## **The 1780 Gordon Riots: Black Participation in English Protests**

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### **Abstract**

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*The 1780 Gordon Riots were the most substantial riots in English history. The black participation was very small, but we can explicate some features of their experience during this revolutionary tumult and investigate the actions of some during those fateful days of June 1780. The three individual blacks who were part of the Gordon Riots were Benjamin Bowsey, John Glover, and Charlotte Gardiner. Their experiences enrich the understanding of the black presence in England and broaden the historical overview of blacks in European history. Additionally, there exists the opportunity to reconstruct some early class formations in the forgotten black English community. Ignatius Sancho, a free educated black expressed his anti-mob views about the rioters from a privileged position in British society following the event. This study employs an array of different sources including the Old Bailey court sessions, newspapers, autobiographies, political magazines, and state papers to interpret the black involvement in the Gordon Riots.*

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**Keywords:** Gordon Riots, Charlotte Gardiner, Benjamin Bowsey, John Glover, Blacks-United Kingdom, Black British, London-Protests

### **Introduction**

The 1780 Gordon Riots was a weeklong tumult that shook the social, economic, and political foundations of Great Britain. Consequently, one of the great capitals of Europe experienced a shock to its sense of order. Amid the riots, three black British subjects emerged from the upheaval and illuminate our understanding of the black connection in the Gordon Riots. One black woman Charlotte Gardiner, and two black men Benjamin Bowsey and John Glover faced a jury for their actions during the riots. The trial records, and contemporary newspapers provided some biographical sketches of these three individuals to extrapolate some rationale for their activities during the tumult of the riots.

In the eighteenth-century blacks became numerous throughout the teeming streets of London. In fact, London as the capital was home to the greatest concentration of blacks in England; among them were free blacks, black runaways, domestic servants, footmen, prostitutes, musicians, apprentices, and sailors. Blacks in London were not only a race apart, but also a class apart. British officials had no true approximation of the number of blacks residing in London. A 1764 political magazine listed the black population of London at nearly 20,000 (*Gentleman's Magazine*, (1764), 493), while one newspaper reported that the number of males and females combined was about 30,000 (*London Chronicle*, 387). These estimates appear high, as numbers from Lord Mansfield's court during the 1772 *Somerset* case suggest the black population ranged between 12,000 and 15,000 (Fryer, (1984), 68). Despite this meager existence, this population continued to run away and take their chances within London's limited choices rather than endure their lives as domestic servants (George, (1964), 171).

Blacks entered the eighteenth-century London world as the concept of English citizenship rights were undergoing a slow but radical transformation. The belief of an inherited birthright to freedom originated prior to the eighteenth century as a creed that any freeborn Englishman should be protected from arbitrary imprisonment, unwarranted arrest or entry upon private premises only grew during this era of the Enlightenment. New ideas also emphasized the ideals of freedom of the press, speech and conscience, rights of assembly, and freedom to travel, trade, and sell one's own labor. Further, also included in these rights was a moral consensus that authorities were bound to respect the rights of freeborn Englishmen (Thompson, 1963, 79-80). English blacks encountered these ideas amongst whites and became participants in the combustion of freedom and radical circles.

### **Gordon Riots**

The Gordon Riots origins were economic, political, and religious. The environment was ripe for upheavals as stagnant wages led to poor living conditions for many laborers, a country in a protracted war with its former colonies, a very unpopular government, combined with a virulent religious hostility. On June 2, 1780, a crowd estimated at 40,000 to 50,000, other accounts speculated a crowd of 100,000 people gathered at St. George's Fields, situated in the center of London (*The Political*, 1780, 416). The assembled crowd responded to a call from Lord George Gordon, the leader of the Protestant Association to petition Parliament for repeal of the Catholic Relief Act. The act was passed in 1778 and held certain restrictions on the religious rights of Roman Catholics. The 1778 Catholic Relief Act overturned some of the religious edicts decreed by parliament under Williams III's Popery Act of 1698, passed in 1700 (*Annual Register*, 1781, 254). The true aim of the Catholic Relief Act was to increase manpower for the strained British troops fighting against the breakaway American colonies (Haywood & Seed, 2012, 1). The impetus for the act was also a reaction to the French alliance with the American colonies. The new act allowed Catholics to join the British army without condemning the Catholic Church in an oath of allegiance to the British crown. The act further removed some restrictions on land ownership, preaching, and publishing, which produced angst and bitter protests in many parts of Great Britain (Haywood & Seed, 2012, 2).

The Protestant Association enjoyed popular support in London and stood against any legislation calling for the extension of rights to Roman Catholics. The organization and their leader Lord George Gordon viewed relaxing the restrictions against Catholics as unleashing popery upon the British population. Popery was anti-Catholicism rooted in Protestant fears of the doctrines, practices, and rituals associated with the papacy. The cry of "No Popery," communicated an anxiety of Catholic dominance under the guise of the papal office in Rome. This fear connected British Protestants into a web of religious nationalism. Gordon's method to demand an appeal of the act was by a petition drive, culminating in some 40,000 signatures delivered, where he insisted on immediate consideration for his petition. The unruly crowd attacked and harassed the gathering members of the Houses of Parliament and after six-hours the House of Commons by a vote of 192 to 6 suspended debate on the petition and set a continuing date of the following Tuesday (*Annual Register*, 1781, 259). The aftermath of the failure of the House of Commons to act on Gordon's petition set in motion the events that became the Gordon Riots, while unleashing the largest civil unrest witnessed in the history of London (Rudé, 1971, 270).

The news of the defeated petition of Lord George Gordon, created tensions, and tempers flared among the dispersed crowd as troops were called in. Later in the night, a group of rioters burned down the chapel of the Sardinian embassy in Duke Street, Lincoln's Inn Fields while another mob tried unsuccessfully to burn the chapel of the Bavarian ambassador in Warwick Street. For six days after the chapel burnings, London witnessed unparalleled social upheaval and property destruction. The mob destroyed the Newgate prison setting prisoners free and attacked the crimping houses, which were holding cells for men suffering from impressment prior to their embarkation to the sea. The sponging houses, sites that held debtors at the desire of their lenders where destroyed as well as the home of Lord Chief Justice Mansfield by fire (Linebaugh, 2006, 335; Rudé, 1971, 272-273). At the onset of the Gordon Riots, the sentiments of the crowd were clearly anti-Catholic. As the hours and days increased the anger coalesced around symbols of authority and repression to the lower orders in London. The military killed an estimated 285 rioters; they wounded hundreds, and arrested up to 500 prisoners (Archer, 2000, 57-59).

The makeup of the rioters included journeymen, laborers, sailors, and blacks who sought to find some sense of social justice against a social order that sanctioned brutal floggings, torture of prisoners, and public executions. Frustrated workers and servants saw it as an occasion to settle the score with the rich and powerful.

Links of communication helped to pass along the ideas among the rioters, demonstrating that a network of some capacity must have existed for such a prolonged attack to continue. Radical elements in the lower strata of English society brought various groups together to liberate the working class (Rudé, 1971, 291).

George Rudé examined the make-up of the mob and challenged the traditionally held belief that criminals constituted the great body of the rioters. According to Rudé, the majority of those who took part in the disturbances were “sober workmen” who held jobs but were beneath some poorer sections of the working class (Rudé, 1971, 280). He pointed out that the poor, working-class Catholics did not suffer. The victims were wealthy merchants, publicans, and representatives of authority (Rudé, 1971, 285-289). In several court records, the idea that individual rioters harbored anti-Catholic sentiments was a view held by multiple defendants. At the trial those who were believed to hold anti-Catholic opinions received a sentence of death. There is a social protest interpretation evident within Rudé’s views of the rioters, but the mob followed its pro-Protestant course as the rioters attacked prominent Catholics who occupied important positions as teachers, shopkeepers and publicans within the community.

Rudé postulated that the rioters blended anti-Catholicism with class hostility, Nicholas Rogers argues that Rudé overstated the crowd’s orderliness and discipline (Rogers, 1998, 31). In Rogers’ estimation, in the later of stages of the riot, the direction changed, and the targets became more specific, local and traditional, such as the attacks on the crimping and sponging houses and the much-hated Black friars toll bridge. Although the rioters were spurred by the efforts of Lord George Gordon to seek repeal of the Relief Act, their goal was to exert political pressure upon Parliament and draw attention to a law they viewed as detrimental to English liberty and its sense of national identity. The Protestant Association’s anxiety of the spread of popery perhaps initiated the riot, but as the disorder erupted the mob operated from its own autonomy. Although the Protestant Association orchestrated the riot, the mob did operate on its own autonomy. The Gordon riots were “a protest against “the religious urbanity of the cosmopolitan establishment which arrogated to itself the right to determine the future growth of British Catholicism” (Rogers, 1998, 172). The authorities betrayed the British Protestant and libertarian heritage regarding the Catholic Relief Act. The court trial records from the Old Bailey demonstrate that anti-Catholicism was a real thrust of the riots, but so was antipathy toward the upper strata of society. In many respects the focus and aim of Rudé’s scholarship that the riots were more than anti-Catholic in nature posits perhaps the most accurate description of rioters. In the aftermath of the Gordon Riots, sixty-two individuals were put on trial, of which three blacks, Charlotte Gardiner, Benjamin Bowsey, and John Glover along with fifty-nine whites, faced capital charges if convicted. Moreover, these three blacks received death sentences, along with twenty-one whites.

### **Charlotte Gardiner**

On July 4, 1780 Charlotte Gardiner and Mary Roberts, a white woman appeared before the Old Bailey court sessions. The Old Bailey, named after the street in which it was located, was the central criminal court in London. Both Gardiner and Roberts were among fourteen other prisoners tried, and these two women were among six who faced the death penalty (*OBP, Ordinary’s Account, Gardiner*, 13 June 2018 (t17800628-65); *London Chronicle*, July 4, 1780 – July 6, 1780). Gardiner, alongside Mary Roberts faced indictment for destroying the home of a Mr. LeBarty in St. Catherine’s lane, near Tower-hill for which each woman was charged with felony assembly and the participating in the destruction of private property.

John Lebart testified to the destruction of his house, and that he knew the white woman (Roberts), calling her bad woman who lived near him. Elizabeth Frazier, a servant to Lebart, in her testimony to the court described the mob and the activities of Charlotte Gardiner. Frazier claimed that Gardiner was shouting encouragement to the mob to break items, and added she saw her take two brass candlesticks out of master’s dining room. Afterwards, Frazier heard Gardiner encouraging the mob by her exhortations “well done my boys-knock it down, down with it,” (*London Chronicle*, July 4, 1780 – July 6, 1780, 1.; *General Evening Post*, July 4, 1780 – July 6, 1780, 1). Testifying, Frazier stated that Gardiner cried out “Bring more wood to the fire” (*London Chronicle*, July 4, 1780 – July 6, 1780, 1).

Elizabeth Jolly, a second neighbor of Mr. Lebart, also testified that Charlotte Gardiner, was amongst the mob and led the call to burn the house down. Her chant according to Jolly was “Down your eyes, wood, wood for the fire!” (*General Evening Post*, July 4, 1780 – July 6, 1780, 1). Jolly identified Gardiner as the first person to break into the house, and the most active of any person once the demolishing of the property began. Gardiner arrived with the mob, and joined by two men with bells, and another with a frying pan and tongs.

Gardiner along with the three men who all cried out “No popery! no popery!” (London Chronicle, July 4, 1780 – July 6, 1780, 1), and that Gardiner entered the house with the mob and heard her cry out numerous times “More wood for the fire” (London Chronicle, July 4, 1780 – July 6, 1780). Jolly offered that Gardiner carried furniture loads constantly to burn on Tower-hill, but according to trial records Gardiner never shouted “No popery” as her male accomplices constantly uttered (*OBP, Ordinary’s Account, Gardiner*, 13 June 2018 (t17800628-65)).

A third witness Lettice Alben, also a neighbor of Mr. Lebarty, who was also present at St. Catherine’s Lane as the mob destroyed Lebarty’s property. Alben testified that Gardiner, was very active in the mob and rowdy (London Courant and Westminster Chronicle, Wednesday, July 5, 1780). In her defense, Gardiner denied being active, but the court records indicate that her disposition at trial was not credible as jury found her guilty.

Throughout multiple sources the gender of Gardiner and Roberts prompted a great deal of interest at the court proceedings. The constant commentary referring to the actions of these women suggest this was an unusual occurrence for women to engage in this type of riotous behavior. They were described as “perhaps the most daring, or more so, though females, than any criminals which these unhappy disturbances have produced” (General Evening Post, July 4, 1780 – July 6, 1780, 1). Mr. Howarth, counsel for the prosecution stated that this was the first time that women faced a jury for crimes under the legal statute that Gardiner and Roberts were facing. He further commented that “no man was ever more guilty, or deserved severer punishment” (London Chronicle, July 4, 1780 – July 6, 1780, 1). In another newspaper account, Mr. Howarth opened the trial by observing that the appearance of Gardiner and Roberts were the first cases involving women before the jury, further he added their sex would not stand in the way of proving they were more responsible, very active and just as bold as any of the powerful men who helped to destroy the peace of London during the riots (London Courant and Westminster Chronicle, Wednesday, July 5, 1780). It appears Gardiner and Roberts received undue objectification because of their role as women in such events. The comments during the trial suggests that their activity during the riots was unusual and not the normal role of women in riots. While they were not the only people executed for their actions during the riots, the courts preoccupation with their gender underscores some consternation amongst the male court officials. Where these two women punished them more severely on account of their gender than some other men whom the court acquitted?

Charlotte Gardiner and Mary Roberts site for their execution was at Tower-hill, William Brown in Bishopsgate street, Tower Hill. Capital executions in the eighteenth-century often occurred closet to physical location of the crime committed. A third individual William MacDonald faced hanging for his activities during the riot along with the two women. With an estimated size of nearly 12,000, the three were led in a procession from the Newgate prison to the scaffolds. Even at their imminent death, their personal conduct was a topic of discussion in the newspaper accounts. Mary Roberts and Charlotte Gardiner hugged each other; MacDonald shook both of their hands. They each acted with great remorse, and cried intensely, chiefly Mary Roberts, who seemed the most emotional about her pending fate. The reports noted that Roberts was decently dressed and appeared to be an agreeable person. The description of Charlotte Gardiner included her clothed in almost rags symbolizes her poor status. Gardiner may have been destitute, and her description certainly implied her desperate situation living eighteenth-century London (St. James’s Chronicle or the British Evening Post July 8, 1780 – July 11, 1780). According to the *Political Magazine* each of the three prisoners exhibited great grief and regret for their actions for their past wrongdoings in life rather than for the crimes they stood accused of according to some accounts (The Political, 1780, p.500).

William MacDonald was listed as about 40 years old, wearing a red coat and a waistcoat, with short black hair, with very hard facial features, with many reports remarking he appeared to be a mulatto. William MacDonald may have been a black man and suggests that there may been more black participation in the Gordon Riots than has been previously understood. William McDonald conceivably was one of the multitudes of blacks who witnesses recalled seeing the mobs during the Old Bailey trials (Craftsman or Say’s Weekly Journal, July 15, 1780; St. James’s Chronicle or the British Evening Post July 8, 1780 – July 11, 1780).

After prayer with Mr. Vilette, the chaplain of Newgate prison around 2:00 pm they were hung. Mary Roberts went first, William MacDonald second, and lastly Charlotte Gardiner. After hanging the usual time, they were cut down, and their bodies delivered to their friends. (St. James’s Chronicle or the British Evening Post July 8, 1780 – July 11, 1780; Gazetteer and New Daily Advertiser, July 12, 1780).

Charlotte Gardiner's corpse became the subject of some intrigue after her death. A Sheriff Pugh refused to release her body to the friends who claimed it. Several blacks had applied for the body of Charlotte Gardiner, Pugh had heard murmurs amongst the spectators at her execution that the black friends had made plans to display her body at an apartment for money. Sheriff Pugh instead made plans for her internment in the city at St. Sepulcher's. The true intention of the friends of Charlotte Gardiner, remains murky, and unclear. (The Political, 1780, p.500).

The biographical profile in the sources of Charlotte Gardiner revealed nothing about her age, her place of origin, or how she arrived in London. There existed no clear understanding of her occupation or status in eighteenth-century London. Charlotte Gardiner, unquestionably like many black women in London had to rely on her own ingenuity to survive. Her economic independence would be difficult in a society with very few occupations open to women, white or black. Most likely her occupation was that of a domestic servant, in the capacity of a housemaid or laundry maid. Gardiner, like other absconded from her former masters as obtaining wages proved difficult for many black servants in eighteenth-century London. If she applied for Poor Law Relief, and could not show a settlement within a parish, Gardiner faced homelessness on the London streets. Perhaps, she suffered the fate of many black women and sentenced to workhouse for duty. Her distressed clothing description at the hanging, suggested that her economic situation appeared dire. Whatever her circumstances, the Gordon Riots provided Charlotte Gardiner an outlet and a focus for her grievances or circumstances.

### **Benjamin Bowsey**

On Friday, July 8, 1780 Benjamin Bowsey along with nine other prisoners, faced their charges of disturbing the public peace and the demolition of the home of Richard Akerman, who was the warden of Newgate prison. The sessions recorded the racial identity of Bowsey as a blackamoor, who had been a footman to a General Honeywood for several years. Honeywood, in a letter to Lord St. Germain, remarked that Bowsey had been an honest and very foolish fellow. Honeywood, confirmed that at the outbreak of the riot that Benjamin Bowsey had been working in the kitchen at St. Alban's Tavern (Sherwood, 1997, 27). According to the trial records, Bowsey did not testify at trial in his defense (*OBP, Ordinary's Account, Bowsey*, 20 February 2019 (t17800628-33)), his accusers identified him as a black man wearing a hat. He was among the first to enter Akerman's house, where his accusers swore during the trial that he rummaged through drawers and placed stolen items in a bundle, and then allegedly left the house and joined the crowd headed toward Newgate. The individuals who testified against him included female servants Rose Jennings and Ann Wood. A third female servant Ann Lessar, a washerwoman testified that she had sewn Bowsey's initials B.B. in place of Richard Akerman's on stockings he allegedly stole from Akerman's home. The constable Percival Phillips searched the dwelling of Bowsey and found the stockings, a pocketbook, and a handkerchief belonging to Richard Akerman, Bowsey was wearing the stockings at his apprehension (*OBP, Ordinary's Account, Bowsey*, 20 February 2019 (t17800628-33)).

The defense of Benjamin Bowsey at trial included a Dr. Sandiman, who had known him as a footman to his relatives, with good character, and always was faithful. A footman named Robert Gates, knew Bowsey from the moment he arrived in England, from America in 1774, and commented also he displayed good character. A servant Grace Roberts claimed that Bowsey was at home in her dwelling on the night that Newgate prison burned. A black servant, John Northington, testified that Bowsey was at his home on the night of the fire. In the Old Bailey court trial reports Bowsey asked Ann Wood what type of clothing he had on the night she testified she saw him in the mob. Ann Wood responded that Bowsey wore a light brownish coat, a round hat, and a red waistcoat (*OBP, Ordinary's Account, Bowsey*, 20 February 2019 (t17800628-33)). The jury convicted Bowsey for burning down the house of a Mr. Akerman and burning Newgate prison and freeing prisoners. (Gazetteer and New Daily Advertiser, July 8, 1780). Mr. Akerman was the warden of Newgate prison, and perhaps many of the rioters not only saw Newgate prison as a symbol of oppression but sought revenge against Mr. Akerman from prior interactions with him as the warden. At the cross-examination of Bowsey, multiple witnesses implied that other blacks possibly took part or joined the crowd. At least one witness identified another black in the crowd of rioters. It is possible that the numbers of blacks participating in the riots exceeded the three whom historians have identified.

In the newspaper coverage of the Old Bailey hearings, one newspaper paper reported that Benjamin Bowsey, was an East Indian black, a handsome man. Unlike the trial reports, some accounts claim Bowsey did testify but offered a very weak alibi, and he was subsequently found guilty. Benjamin Bowsey and his East Indian origins are perhaps better explained because of the East India Company's participation in trafficking of African slaves in the Indian and Pacific Ocean world (Gazetteer and New Daily Advertiser, July 8, 1780).

On the day before his execution Bowsey had a meeting with a Justice Addington. Bowsey under oath offered names of individuals who paid him to enter the riots, afterwards Justice Addington sent his statement to the Secretary of State's office. The information provided by Bowsey, garnered him his first delay from execution, and he received a second respite the following week. (Lloyd's Evening Post, July 26 – July 28, 1780). The following Thursday, Bowsey received a third continuation from the King until August 10, 1780 (St. James's Chronicle or the British Evening Post, August 1, 1780 – August 3, 1780).

Bowsey received a fourth delay, after expiration of the third respite on August 10, 1780. The extension of his life was at the pleasure of the King (Gazetteer and New Daily Advertiser, August 10, 1780). There appeared much dismay in the newspapers at each additional moderation of his sentence. The newspaper accounts mentioned that Bowsey was the beneficiary of four respites at trial since the Gordon Riots. Bowsey continually charged he had accomplices and did not act alone for his charged crimes, but after each investigation, there was no proof attached to his claims. The newspaper accounts protested that Bowsey's testimony should not stand against any other person as his information was dangerous to their life and liberty. Bowsey according to the newspaper accounts was not fit to charge others (Gazetteer and New Daily Advertiser, August 11, 1780; London Courant and Westminster Chronicle (London, England), Saturday, August 12, 1780). This account also signifies how cunning or astute this eighteenth century black man was to the charges against him, using whatever guile or ingenuity he was able to convince the authorities to respite him four times.

In the months following his conviction and after several respites granted from the King, Bowsey was held in the Poultry Compter. The Poultry Compter was a type of small prison, normally used for minor transgressions and was frequently throughout the eighteenth-century where ex-slaves in London were held as their fates became decided in legal proceedings. Bowsey and a fellow prisoner escaped from this prison Sunday, October 2, 1780 between ten and eleven o'clock. A newspaper advertisement added some significant details about Bowsey that elucidate a better physical description of him than prior accounts. Bowsey, in this account, is described as "a black man, about 28 years old, stout made, wears a high toupee, and a false tail tied close to his head, the wool being very short" (Gazetteer and New Daily Advertiser, October 3, 1780, 4). The advertisement mentioned that he was one of the convicted rioters at Newgate and sentenced to death at trial in June. The clothing worn by Bowsey at his escape was a "light coloured serge jacket, black velveret breeches, and a white waistcoat" (Gazetteer and New Daily Advertiser, October 3, 1780, 4). The reward offered for his capture was twenty pounds. From the advertisement, Bowsey physical stature description as stout suggests he was a large and imposing man, the high toupee appears to symbolize he may have been bald, the false tail tied close to his head suggests he may have been wearing a wig. His outfit was comparable to an outfit a domestic servant would have worn at that time (Gazetteer and New Daily Advertiser, October 3, 1780).

Benjamin Bowsey was re-captured shortly after his escape on Monday, October 2 in the morning. He was caught in St. James-market by the officers from Bow-street, the local police force, and brought back to the Poultry Compter, and the Bow Street runners received the reward of 20 guineas for his apprehension (Lloyd's Evening Post, October 2, 1780 – October 4, 1780).

Bowsey's escape posits that despite the numerous respites, he was constantly looking for a way to free himself whether by convincing authorities through cunning and if possible, a daring prison escape. His narrative suggests that he did not simply acquiesce to his fate but sought to change his circumstances in eighteenth century London as he awaited his unknown destiny at the hands of the authorities.

### **John Glover**

John Glover lived in Westminster, where he was reputed to be a quiet, sober, honest man, and worked as a servant to John Phillips, a lawyer. Glover stood alongside Bowsey at Old Bailey and faced the same charges as Bowsey for rioting with the Gordon Riots mob, and the commitment of the felonious act of destroying the home of Mr. Akerman, by burning and destruction, including the goods and furniture. Glover also faced charges of setting fire and freeing prisoners at the Newgate prison (*OBP, Ordinary's Account, Glover*, 20 March 2019 (t17800628-94); Gazetteer and New Daily Advertiser, July 8, 1780). At the court proceedings, witnesses accused Glover of being as part of one of the earliest groups seeking to tear down the gates at Newgate (*OBP, Ordinary's Account, Glover*, 20 March 2019 (t17800628-94)).

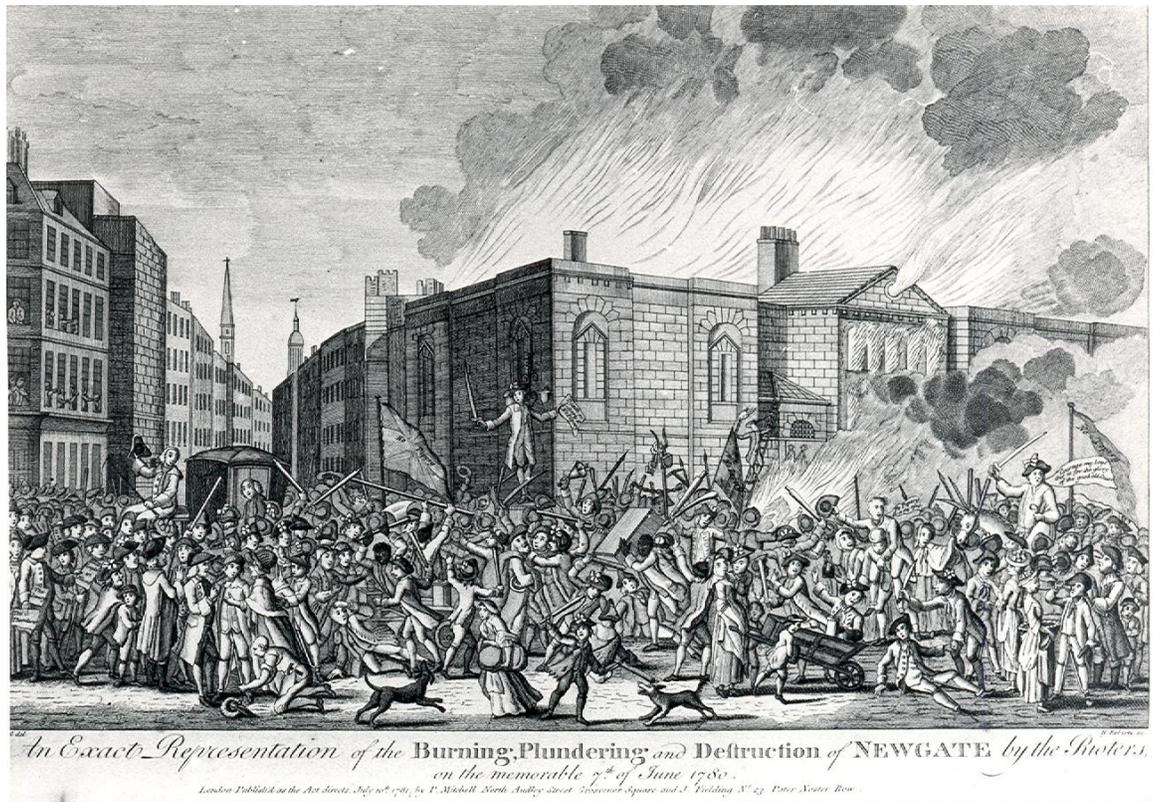
The first witness at cross examination against John Glover was William Shepard, a servant to Mr. Akerman. Shepard stated in court that Glover tried to tear down the main gate with a pickaxe. A second servant William Lee described witnessing Glover battering the great gate with an instrument he referred to as a gun barrel that belonged to his master. Charles Burket, another servant stated he witnessed Glover at the gate attempting to force it open, and openly swearing that he would tear down or burn down the gate. John Glover according to the court testimony of all three servants was vigorous in his attempt to force the gate open and enter the house of Mr. Akerman during the Gordon Riots ((*OBP, Ordinary's Account, Glover*, 20 March 2019 (t17800628-94); *London Evening Post*, July 13, 1780 – July 15, 1780).

At Gordon's trial, there were discrepancies in testimony concerning his identity. Several witnesses agreed that he wore a rough, short jacket and had a round hat with dirty silver lace upon it, but there was some confusion about the color of his skin. One witness doubted he was black, another preferred to call him a "copper coloured person," and a third said he had seen "several blacks and tawnies" (*OBP, Ordinary's Account, Glover*, 20 March 2019 (t17800628-94) in the mob. In defense of the prisoner John Glover, Mr. Saville, a watchmaker on Snow-hill, testified that saw a black very active in the mob, however, he claimed that it was not John Glover. In his account, Mr. Saville only saw one black among the mob and a second witness for Glover, a Mr. McMarlin, testified that he was at Newgate, and witnessed a black man very active in the mob, but claimed the man was not Glover, and stated that if he was there, he would have seen him.

The master of John Glover, John Phillips, a lawyer testified on his behalf that on Tuesday, July 10, he sent Glover to his home in Westminster to retrieve papers from a drawer in his chamber. Among the items Phillips stated he kept a gun barrel that was without lock or stock. Mr. Phillips offered that his servant Glover, had been a faithful servant for 12 years, and Glover left Westminster by about four o'clock on the evening of the riots. Phillips stated he often trusted Glover with large sums of money, and disputed that Glover had any opportunities to connect with the rioters. At cross examination Phillips confirmed he never saw Glover again after he gave him the order to retrieve items from his chambers. After hearing the testimony of all witnesses, the court ruled guilty by death in the trial of John Glover. (*OBP, Ordinary's Account, Glover*, 20 March 2019 (t17800628-94); *London Evening Post*, July 13, 1780 – July 15, 1780).

There is no evidence to suggest friendship between John Glover and Benjamin Bowsey, but perhaps they knew one another prior to the Gordon Riots. Each man faced the same charges, and their outcomes were similar. Their friends and former masters each spoke very favorably of each during the trial. They faced a sentence of death after the trials, but each received a pardon from the King following their convictions. Although Bowsey's respites elicited great concern and consternation, there exists no evidence of the same angst towards the respites received by John Glover. After spending time in prison for their crimes, they each received a royal pardon after agreeing to serve in the Corps of the Foot on the coast of Africa (SP, 1781, p. 115; *St. James's Chronicle or the British Evening Post*, May 3 – May 5, 1781; *Whitehall Evening Post (1770)*, May 19, 1781 – May 22, 1781).

Black participation in the Gordon Riots was not only part of the trial proceedings, but also part of the popular iconography of the riots. A 1781 painting of the Gordon Riots by Henry Roberts, known as *An Exact Representation of the Burning, Plundering and Destruction of Newgate by the Rioters, on the Memorable 7<sup>th</sup> of June 1780* (Figure 1), depicts the Gordon rioters in front of Newgate Prison, which is in flames.



**Figure 1 Roberts, Henry. (1781). An Exact Representation of the Burning, Plundering and Destruction of Newgate by the Rioters on the memorable 7<sup>th</sup> of June 1780 (1781). © Trustees of the British Museum**

The figures in the crowd crystallize the momentous event and grant agency to the people who took part in the riots. A man on a ladder holds up a torch and a hammer. There are three “No Popery” flags. A man on horseback on the right exorts the crowd with a sword drawn with the phrase “Courage my boys this for the glory of the good old Cause.” On a platform stands a rioter holding up a sword and a paper inscribed “Death or Liberty & No Popery.” The keys of the prison are held up on a pitchfork. The image captures the black participation in the Gordon Riots with two images of black men. One black wields an axe, another carries off a large box. An enlargement of the image (Figure 2) confirms the idea that blacks played a role in the Gordon Riots. Roberts posits direct evidence of black participation in the riots in which three blacks were charged. Roberts never identifies if the two blacks in the painting were Benjamin Bowsey and John Glover, but the image reveals that in the popular imagination of the time blacks were part of the body politic. Blacks also went into the crowd and joined the radical underbelly of English society to assert their rights to resist.



**Figure 2 Enlargement of “The Exact Representation”  
Ignatius Sancho**

Unlike Benjamin Bowsey, John Glover, and Charlotte Gardiner, some blacks experienced very different life in eighteenth-century London. Ignatius Sancho, a former slave, who survived the intolerable conditions of the Atlantic Slave Trade, rose from those bleak circumstances to become a published author and grocery owner in London. Sancho, wrote a memoir of letters, *Letters of the Late Ignatius Sancho, An African*, published in 1782. Ignatius Sancho, experienced London as an acculturated black man who corresponded with the literary elite in English society. Sancho’s education and class position placed him in a privileged space beyond the three blacks who took part in the Gordon Riots, and other blacks in London.

Ignatius Sancho was born on a slave ship in 1729; the ship was bound for a plantation in Grenada. He became an orphan after his mother died of an unknown disease and his father, like so many enslaved Africans, committed suicide rather than live in servitude. The Duke of Montagu, whom Sancho served, recognized his quick mind, gave him books, and encouraged his learning. Sancho spent most of his life as a footman and ultimately as a butler. After leaving the service of the Montagu family, he set up a grocer’s shop in Charles Street, Westminster.

Sancho’s book of letters appealed to his many literary friends to oppose slavery. He also adopted the cultural nuances of an Englishman. Sancho opposed the institution of slavery, but his letters were more satirical than strident. It was a voice of hushed tones rather than fiery denunciations against slavery. In a 1778 letter to a Mr. Fisher, Sancho wrote, after receiving some books from him about the subject of slavery, describing the practices as an “unchristian and most diabolical usage of my brother Negroes-the illegality- the horrid wickedness of the traffic” (Sancho, 1782, 111). There silences in the writings of Sancho about other blacks in eighteenth-century London represents a great injustice for posterity. Sancho did write against slavery, and his letters portrayed a man familiar with literary culture and an expanded grasp of reasoning delineated by the age he lived. His letters conveyed elements of British patriotism and civic pride.

His displeasure with the mob during the 1780 Gordon riots without a doubt identifies him not as one of the common people, but rather as an assimilated black who carved out a place for himself in the fabric of British society. He did not participate, and he offered a strong rebuke to the rioters. He clearly identified with the ruling elite in his eyewitness account of the mob action. Sancho described the situation as the “maddest people and he maddest times London was ever plagued with” (Sancho, 1782, 169). He considered Lord George Gordon insane and bemoaned “the worse than Negro barbarity of the populace,” (Sancho, 1782, 170) and wrote that “there is about a thousand mad men, armed with clubs, bludgeons, and crows, just now set off for Newgate, to liberate, they say, their honest comrades” (Sancho, 1782, 174). He offered that “it is thought by many who discern deeply, that there is more at the bottom of this business than merely the repeal of an act” (Sancho, 1782, 174).

Sancho did not write about seeing any blacks in the mob of the Gordon Riots, yet he offered a perplexing observation of the riots, siding with English authority and compared the rioters to worst of black behavior. Sancho's class position afforded him the viewpoint of an acculturated black Englishman disdainful of the riotous actions of the crowd, but saw whites exhibiting behavior he associated with the worse actions of blacks. His commentary about the mob confirmed other views that the crowd acted on motivation other than anti-Catholicism.

### Conclusion

Although there were only three blacks involved in the 1780 Gordon Riots, their actions and fates garnered extensive coverage in the contemporary. These three black narratives do not clarify what specific grievances compelled blacks to join with others who perhaps shared their desire to extract some satisfaction by destroying objects of oppression. Possibly these blacks suggest a commonality of belief in English liberty with their white counterparts in the riots. The blacks involved in the Gordon Riots were not skilled artisans or tradesmen but were domestic servants or free blacks. Their motives in joining the crowd remain unexplained, but they perhaps felt some sense of anger at their circumstances or sought to change their situation that eventful day in 1780. Their occupations as servants may have produced some hidden hostility to their position in English society, and once they witnessed the rioters in action something compelled them to make fateful decisions to strike at symbols just like their white working-class brethren. These actions taken by the three blacks clearly united them with white rioters who expressed their grievances during the Gordon Riots.

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Figure 1 Roberts, Henry. (1781). *An Exact Representation of the Burning, Plundering and Destruction of Newgate by the Rioters on the memorable 7<sup>th</sup> of June 1780*. British Museum. London. © Trustees of the British Museum

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