
Caesar, John (Black Caesar)

(c.1763–15 Feb. 1796), fugitive slave and convict,

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recognized as the first Australian bushranger and popularly known as Black Caesar, was born on the island of Madagascar, although the precise date and place of his birth are unknown, as is his birth name. “Caesar” was a common slave name and it is probable that he was given this name while enslaved in Virginia or South Carolina. Malagasy slaves (as the residents of Madagascar were known) were highly prized in those regions. He possibly fled to the British colonial lines during the American War of Independence in exchange for promises of emancipation, or a refugee Loyalist who fled to England after the cessation of the Revolutionary war in 1783 may have owned him. In the *Book of Negroes*, which recorded the names of slaves who departed on British ships, a small number are recorded as going to Spithead in England. Among those noted were two young men aged fourteen and eighteen with the name Caesar. It is possible that either one of these was John Caesar.

In 1786 Caesar, who was listed as a servant in the parish of St. Paul in Deptford, near London, England, was charged with stealing twelve pounds from a residence. Caesar, like the majority of Black Loyalists in Britain, descended into a state of poverty, which provoked him to engage in petty criminal activity. On 13 March of the same year at Maidstone, Kent, he was charged with stealing twelve pounds from another residence, and sentenced to transportation to the British penal colony of New South Wales in Australia for seven years. He was one of twelve black convicts who boarded the convict transport ship *Alexander* on 6 January 1787. On 19 January 1788 he arrived in Botany Bay with the First Fleet.

Malnourishment was persistent among the convicts in the colony because inadequate food provisions were meted out. Caesar, who was six feet tall and muscular, was constantly besieged by hunger. On 29 April 1789 he was tried for stealing food and had his sentence extended to transportation for life. Fourteen days later Caesar stole a marine’s musket, an iron cook pot, and some food rations, and fled into the bush to avoid capture. He was seized on 6 June by another convict while attempting to steal food from the home of the colony’s assistant commissary for stores. Subsequently he was sentenced to work in chains at Garden Island, which was one the harshest and most inhumane penal colonies in New South Wales. David Collins, the deputy judge-advocate of the colony, commented that Caesar was the hardest working convict in the colony but was hopelessly stubborn.

Caesar, however, went on to display good behavior and gradually won the confidence of the penal colony’s authorities, who allowed him to work without chains. On 22 December 1789 he escaped for the second time and stole a canoe, one week’s provisions, an iron pot, a musket, and some ammunition. For a week he subsisted by stealing food from local Aborigines and robbing gardens, but when he lost his musket he found it difficult to survive in the wilderness. After being attacked by local Aborigines armed with spears, he surrendered himself to the authorities.

Governor Arthur Phillip then pardoned Caesar for his previous infractions. On 6 March 1791 he was transported aboard the *Supply* to Norfolk Island, a labor camp notorious for its harsh punishments and the horrendous living conditions endured by the convicts. He was provided a degree of independence and by 1 July 1791 was farming a plot of land at Queensborough, and was given a hog. In January 1792 he was given one acre of land and ordered to work three days a week. Two months later he had a daughter, Mary Ann Fisher Power, with a fellow convict, Ann Power. In 1793 Caesar left Ann and his daughter and returned to Port Jackson (now Sydney Harbour). In July 1794, Caesar escaped again to the woods and subsisted by pillaging farms and huts on the fringes of town. Shortly afterward he was captured. Despite being ruthlessly flogged, he contemptuously refused to acquiesce to the unyielding discipline of the colony's authorities.

In 1795 the Bidjigal leader Pemulwuy attacked a convict work party at Botany Bay, which included Caesar. This raid was an extension of a guerilla campaign against those colonists who knowingly and unknowingly violated Bidjigal law. Caesar seriously wounded the aboriginal leader by cracking his skull. Afterward the colonists celebrated him, as they believed he had killed the leader. In December 1795 Caesar escaped for the last time, leading a gang of fellow runaways in Port Jackson. During this time he was blamed for every theft in the colony. On 29 January 1796 Governor John Hunter offered a lavish reward of five gallons of rum for his capture. On 15 February of that year Caesar was shot and killed by John Winbow, an ex-highwayman and convicted felon who had served out his sentence, at Liberty Plains.

His rebelliousness fits the archetype of a free black who refused to exist in a state of subjugation and resorted to subversive activities to guarantee his survival. Sometimes his captors and jailers valued his skills, but more often, his spirit of independence was resisted by the authorities. His survival on four continents from Madagascar to North America to England, and, finally, to Australia, reflects the broad global experiences of some Africans in the eighteenth century.

Further Reading

Gillen, Mollie. *Founders of Australia: A Biographical Dictionary of the First Fleet* (1989).

Pybus, Cassandra. *Black Founders: The Unknown Story of Australia's First Black Settlers* (2006).