

The Emancipation Wars

Overview

Above all of the acts of resistance towards slavery, non – violent and violent, there were three rebellions in the British West Indies that stood out. Those three were the [Bussa Rebellion in Barbados, Easter 1816](#), the [Demerara Revolt in Guyana, August 1823](#), and the [Sam Sharpe Rebellion in Jamaica](#) which took place in December 1831. The order in which the three rebellions occurred was similar; it was influential as well as extensive. Among all three rebellions there was one common factor. It was a time in which ameliorative proposals (gradual improvement in the slave's way of life) were being made in Britain. This gave way to widespread rumours that there were measures taking place in metropolitan Britain to grant slaves their freedom but planters were withholding them (Emancipation Rumours). In all three cases this rumour aided in the agitation for freedom and precipitated rebellion. While some historians use these rebellions to make the case that slaves emancipated themselves, others are less liberal. None, however, deny that these later rebellions were pivotal to the passing of the Emancipation Act August 1, 1833.

Bussa/Barbados Rebellion 1816

Unexpected

The Bussa rebellion of 1816 was not that expected as it is believed that slaves began to plan the rebellion soon after the House of Assembly discussed and rejected the imperial Registry Bill in November 1815 (Beckles 90). This Bill called for the registration of colonial slaves. As a result of this the rebels had discussed from February to rebel in April. The rebellion surprised the white community who believed slaves were well treated and enjoyed a level of freedom not had in other territories. One planter commented that he slept with his chamber open on that given night (Beckles 89).

Organization & Leadership

Each plantation actively involved in the insurrection had a leader. Two crucial plantations were Simmons Plantation, lead by John and Nanny Grigg and mostly importantly Jackey, as well as Bailey plantation, lead by King Wiltshire, Dick Bailey, Johnny and Bussa after whom the revolt was named.

Jackey was a Creole slave head driver at Simmons Plantation in the parish of St Phillip. He was very instrumental in the build up to the rebellion as he coordinated meetings and discussions about revolting. Coercion played a part in getting some slaves to take part, as John who was Jackey's assistant practiced this as he threatened that slaves' houses would be burnt if they did not take part (Beckles 91).

Bussa, after whom the rebellion is named, is seen as the key player and overall leader of the 1816 rebellion. Bussa was an African driver at the Bailey Plantation at St. Phillip and to assume

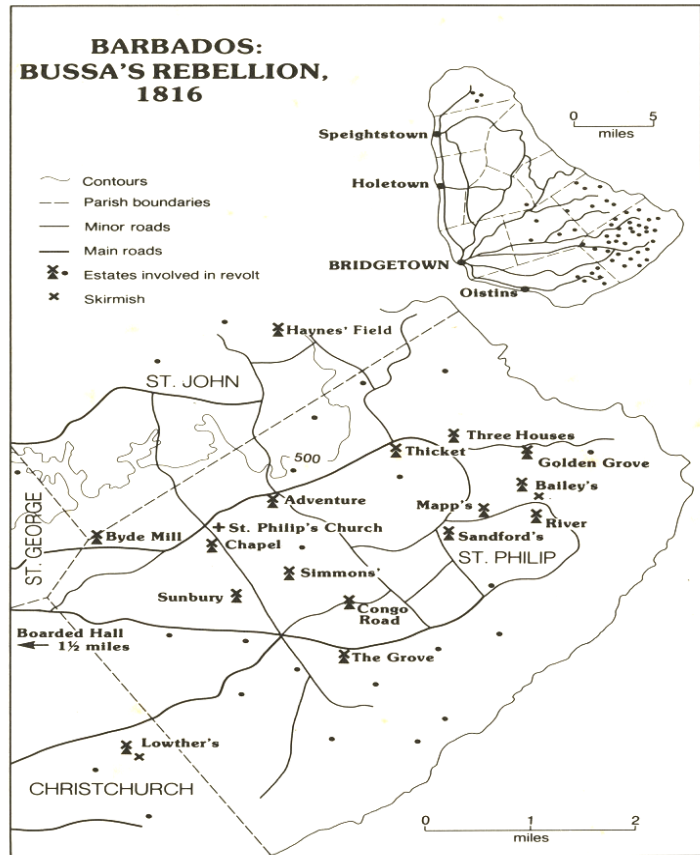
the position he did, it is believed that he was respected by both slaves and planters alike. He was the only African in his position and it is said that 92% of the slave population was Creole. The *Times newspaper*, Barbados, 1876, describes the rebellion as “The war of General Bussa” (Beckles and Shepherd 191). Bussa commanded a total of 400 enslaved men and women to fight against the whites. Historians Beckles and Shepherd, point to a possible military leadership style employed by Bussa (192).

Further Planning & Organization

In the planning and organization of the rebellion, slaves were not alone; a propaganda campaign was being done by three free coloured literate men; Cain Davis, Roach, and Richard Sarjeant. Each had a role to play in contributing to the rebellion. Davis, for instance, held meetings with slaves from several different plantations. He informed slaves of the emancipation rumours. This is important as this propagated the slaves’ desire to be free. Sarjeant played his part as well, employing the same tactics as Davis, as well as to mobilize slaves in the central parishes. The final day of planning took place at the River plantation on Good Friday night April 12. It was disguised by the cover of a dance, and leaders such as Bussa, Jackey, and Davis were present. The Rebellion was to begin on Monday and from there the start of arsonist attack upon the white community, canes and buildings. The subsequent panic from the attacks would result on Tuesday or Wednesday, the murder of the white men across the island. That was not the case as the rebellion broke out earlier than originally planned believed to be the result of drunken slave relaying erroneous information to the rebels (Beckles 88).

The Rebellion

The Rebellion started Easter Sunday Night April 14. It broke out with canes being burnt in St Phillip, signaling prematurely to rebels in central and southern parish that the rebellion had begun. Rebellion quickly spread from the parish of St. Phillip to neighbouring parishes where there were minor outbreaks of arson but no skirmishes with the militia. However in parishes such as St. Lucy and St. Peter there was no reported fighting. Up to seventy estates were affected, leaving whites fleeing to Bridgetown in considerable panic. There has been debate on how many whites were



Source: *Testing the Chains*

actually killed during the rebellion but it is believed by historians to be one or two. There was no great massacre done by the rebels, or damage to property, mostly plunder and burned canes. All in all, it is said that up to 25% of the years sugar crop was burnt and property damage was estimated at £175,000 which undermined the economic base of the planters (88).

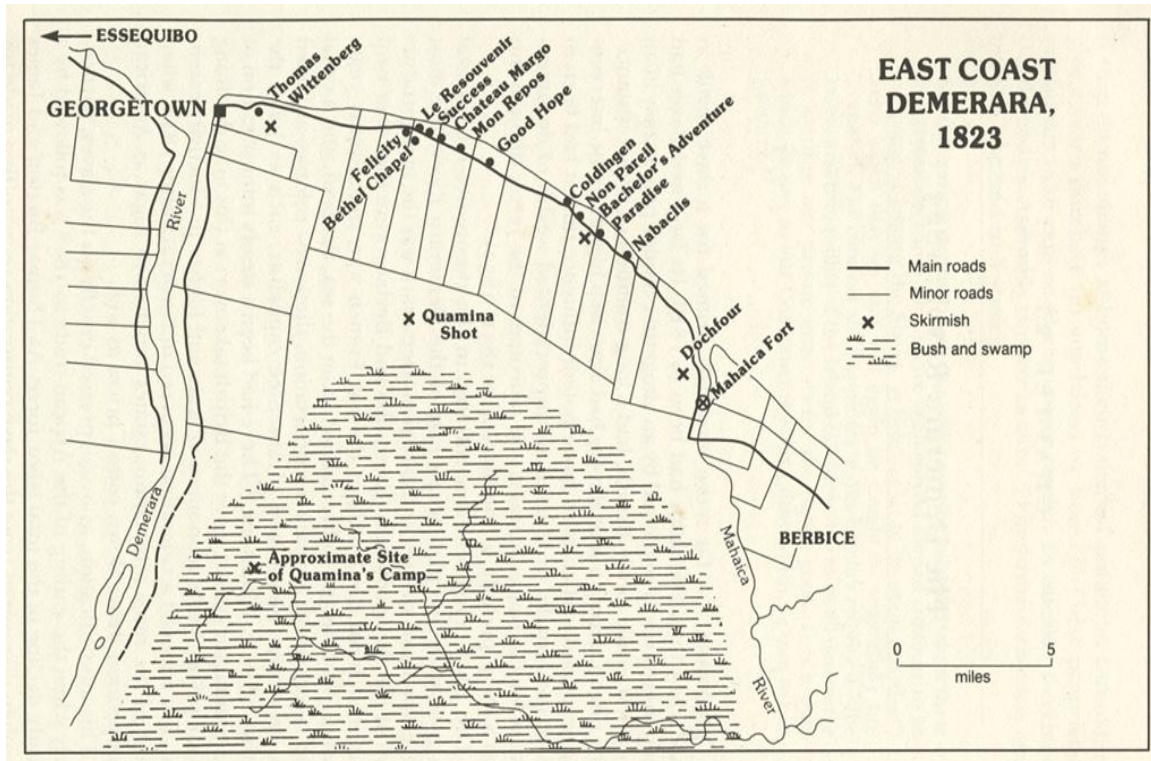
White's Response/Punishment

Colonel Codd, the commanding officer, acted promptly by imposing Marshall Law in the early hours of Monday April 15. Rebellion was short-lived as it was put down by the militia and the

imperial troops (slave soldiers) in three days and effectively over within a week. The Governor stated that one hundred and forty four (144) persons were executed by September under Marshall Law, seventy (70) were sentenced to death while one hundred and seventy (170) deported to neighbouring islands. Barbados' topography made it quite easy to put the insurrection down as the land was mainly flat. Slaves who were captured in rebellion, through torturous methods ended up incriminating others which led to further captures. Marshall Law lasted eighty nine (89) days after it was imposed. Public punishments were done such as floggings and executions; which also served as notice to slaves of what they would receive if such action was ever replicated (Beckles 87).

Demerara Revolt 1823

Demerara is a historical region in Guyana that experienced a Rebellion in 1823, which is regarded by some as more influential than that in Barbados 1816. In addition to outnumbering



Source: *Testing the Chains*

how many slaves were actively involved in revolt, it served as a very important part of history that shaped Guyana for many years to come.

Reasons why they revolted

Like every other colonial territory under slavery, slaves of Demerara were not accepting of living a life of servitude and sought to resist slavery in any way they could. Planters were divided over activities of missionaries but united in opposition to metropolitan interference. They opposed angrily instructions sent by the Colonel Secretary, Lord Bathurst, in 1823 for ameliorating slave conditions. The attitudes that the planters displayed was a key contributing factor to the reasons for revolting added to their delayed implementation of ameliorative proposals. This perpetuated

the opinion among slaves that it was their freedom being withheld. Demerara revolt was mainly dominated by emancipation rumours, the driving force behind their call for freedom (Craton 106).

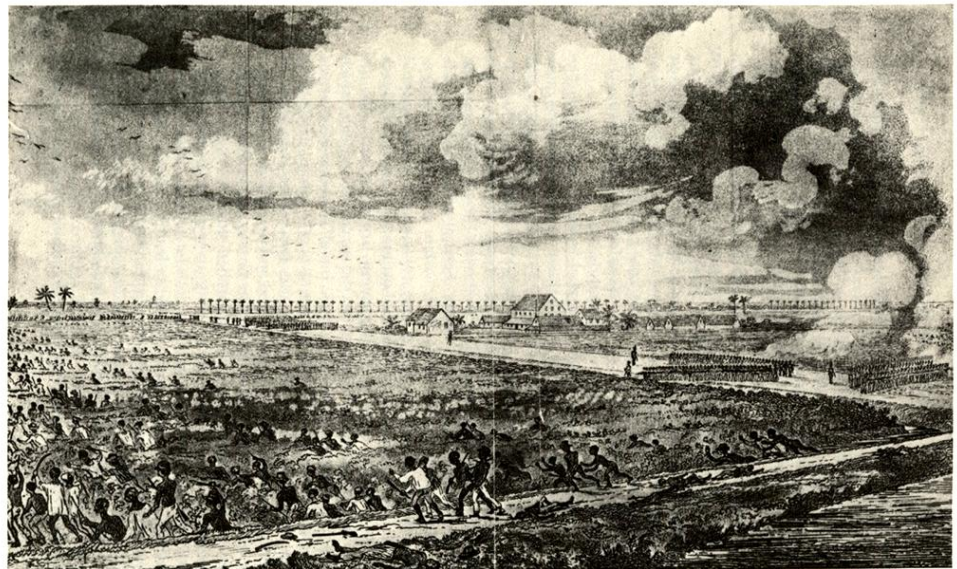
Planning & Organisation

It was believed that there was no great deal of planning before the revolt. On the morning of Sunday August 17, 1823 at Plantation Success, slaves met together to discuss their plans. The leaders of the Demerara revolt were believed to be Jack Gladstone who was a cooper on Plantation Success and his father Quamina who was a senior deacon at John Smith's church. Gladstone and others planned the uprising but Quamina objected to any bloodshed and suggested that they should go on strike. Quamina went to see John Smith and two other slaves. He informed him of their plans to revolt but Smith had urged them not to revolt. Instead Smith encouraged them to exercise patience and wait until the new laws came out. He also asked Quamina to tell the other slaves especially the Christians not to rebel. Quamina obeyed and sent two of his companions to prevent them from rebelling. Quamina's call apparently fell on deaf ears because despite his efforts they rebelled the following evening of Monday August 18. Their plan was to seize all guns on the plantation, lock up the whites during the night and send them to the governor to bring the new law the next day (106). As is the case throughout most rebellions, there were slaves who were loyal to their masters. This resulted in a house slave names Joseph Packwood who told his master John Simpson about the planned revolt. Simpson told Governor Murray who rode up to Ressouvenir and met a large group of Africans on the road. They demanded their rights and Governor Murray told them to go home which they refused to do. Shortly afterwards Marshall Law was imposed (106).

The Rebellion

Initially, Demerara revolt involved no great violence. Some historians have noted that only a couple of whites were killed. Most slaves were Christians and for the most part non-violent but nevertheless got revenge on the whites that didn't flee as they seized and locked up white managers and overseers on approximately thirty seven (37) plantations between Georgetown and East Demerara. By placing them in stocks this is where violence had erupted and it is reported that a few white men

were killed. Christian slaves who didn't want to lose their religious character refused to take part and stood loyal to their masters. On a plantation called Bachelor's Adventure as many as 2000 slaves

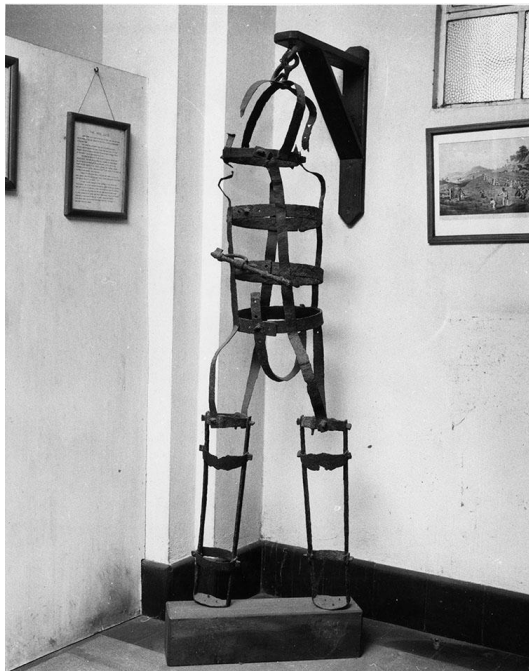


Battle at Bachelor's Adventure, August 20, 1823. The thousand ill-armed rebels confronting Colonel Leahy's militia and regulars were mown down and dispersed in minutes. The rest of the campaign was a bloody mopping up.

confronted Lieutenant Colonel John Leahy and his military. After much deliberation between slaves and Lieutenant Leahy, the slaves did not back down one even suggested to take them as hostage but Jack said no. The continued defiance from the slaves made Leahy order his troops to shoot. Some fled, some surrendered, but as many as 150-200 slaves were shot dead (106).

White's Response/ Punishment

On Tuesday August 19th, the response and punishment that came after was severe. Real resistance by the slaves was over in two weeks mostly because of their poor organization. After Martial Law was declared, rebels were dispersed with great bloodshed. Hundreds of slaves were killed, many executed and Negro houses were fired. There were fourteen (14) slaves who received death sentence but had it commuted and were sold or deported. Implicated slaves were sentenced to up to one thousand (1000) lashes, some sentenced to solitary confinement while others would be in chains for life. At Doch Four, 10-15 slaves were killed. At Good Hope six (6) slaves shot dead, while it was reportedly the same for Beehive plantation and Elizabeth Hall had forty (40) slaves killed (106).



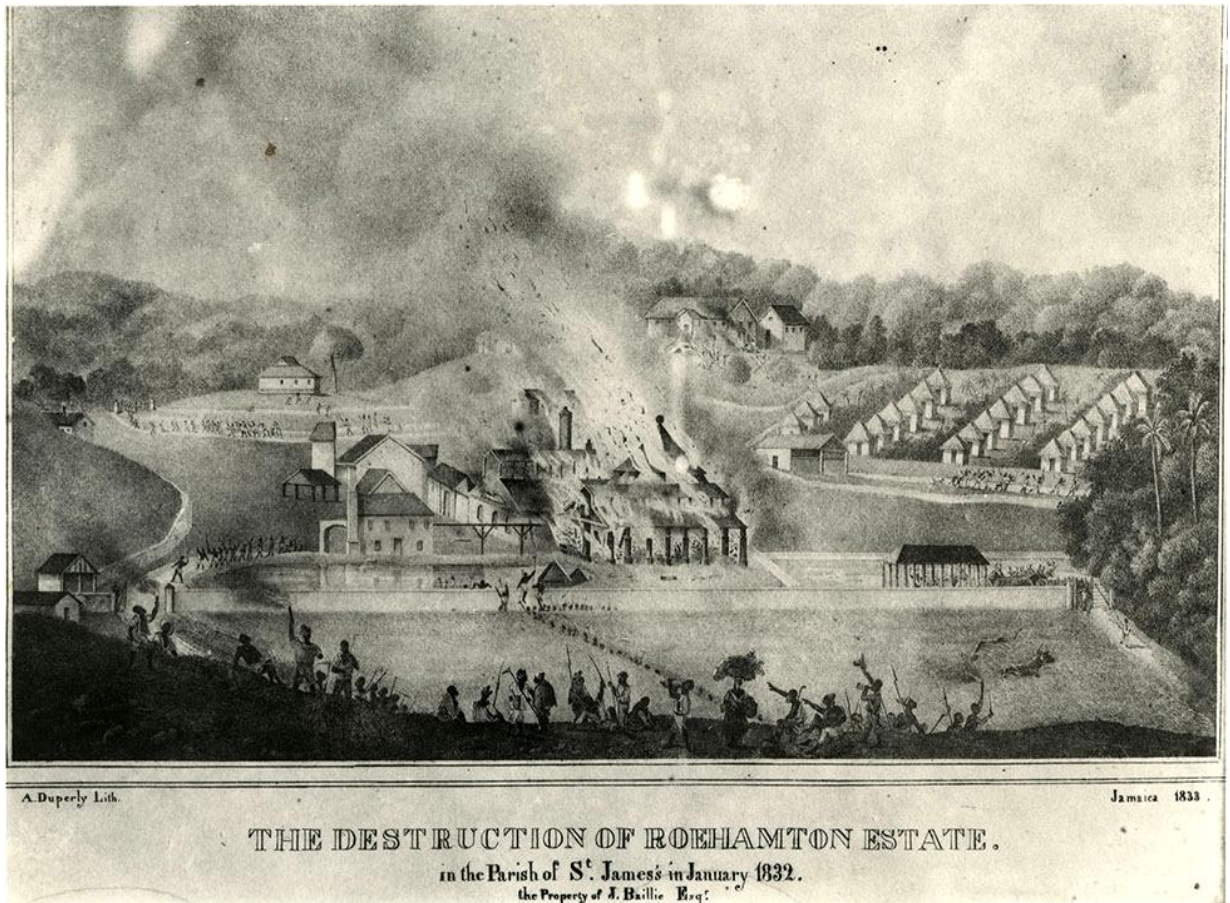
An iron gibbet

Jack Gladstone, Quamina's son was believed to be deported to St. Lucia while Quamina who many considered as one of the leading characters of the rebellion was tracked down with the help of dogs and Indians and was shot and killed in Chateau Margot. Widely believed to be on September 20. Quamina was gibbeted at a roadside in front of Success estate. On August 25 Governor Murray set up a court martial for ring leader, those found guilty were shot or hanged. Heads were cut off and nailed to posts.

Over two hundred (200) slaves were beheaded and their heads placed on stakes at the parade grounds in Georgetown, Plaisance to Mahaica in east Demerara. Slaves who were not ring

leaders were given full pardon, provided that they surrendered within forty six (46) hours as stipulated by the governor (106).

Christmas/Sam Sharpe Rebellion



In 1831, Jamaica experienced what was considered as one of the largest slave rebellions in the British Caribbean. The Sam Sharpe rebellion was described as the longest and most influential of the three emancipation era revolts. It was called the Christmas rebellion because of the time that the revolt took place which was shortly after Christmas.

Like many plantation societies, the slaves far outnumbered their white counterparts and in Jamaica that figure was twelve to one (12-1), while the slave population was three thirds Creole. The Sam Sharpe Rebellion took on a religious aspect, much like that of the Demerara revolt.

Many slaves were Christians, mostly Baptists, hence, it is also called the Baptist War (Craton 109).

Leaders



Samuel “Daddy” Sharpe rose to prominence and would assume leadership. Born in the Parish of St. James, he was a house slave and was widely believed to be named after his master. He was a Baptist deacon who was intelligent, literate, ambitious, and also displayed a talent for eloquence

and was said to be an excellent orator (Craton 109). Other leaders included:

Colonel Johnson who was a Slave Leader of Retrieve Estate successfully fought against the militia, commanded by Colonel Grignon on December 28 (Reckord 117).

Captain Thomas Dove from Belvedere Plantation who like Sharpe was literate.

Captain Robert Gardner, who was the head wagon man at Greenwich Plantation (Beckles and Shepherd 196).

Reasons why they revolted

There were various reasons why slaves of Jamaica revolted in 1831.

- Like Bussa's revolt in 1816 and Demerara in 1823, there was also the emancipation rumour. Sharpe had said to slaves that their freedom was granted by the King but withheld by the masters.
- Rebellion was precipitated by political excitement stirred by economic stress, and a few whites that slaves could say were their allies.
- Events in England such as the Westminster debates also contributed.
- Slaves believed Thomas Burchell who was a Baptist missionary was bringing back "free paper" on a visit to England that he made. When he did not, they were angry and said they were deceived.
- They strongly believed in the Bible, and held the notion that Sam Sharpe put forward that man should serve one master not two.
- Missions were a source of slaves' philosophy; missionaries were seen as instrumental to the outbreak in planter's eye and seen as dangerous.
- Planters cutting short their Christmas holiday.
- Planter's attitude also pushed slaves to revolt. Historians note that planters were in protest to abolition of slavery. So much so, that they made inflammatory speeches and publications in newspapers. These actions and attitudes contributed to the slaves' agitation and discontent (Reckord 108-125).

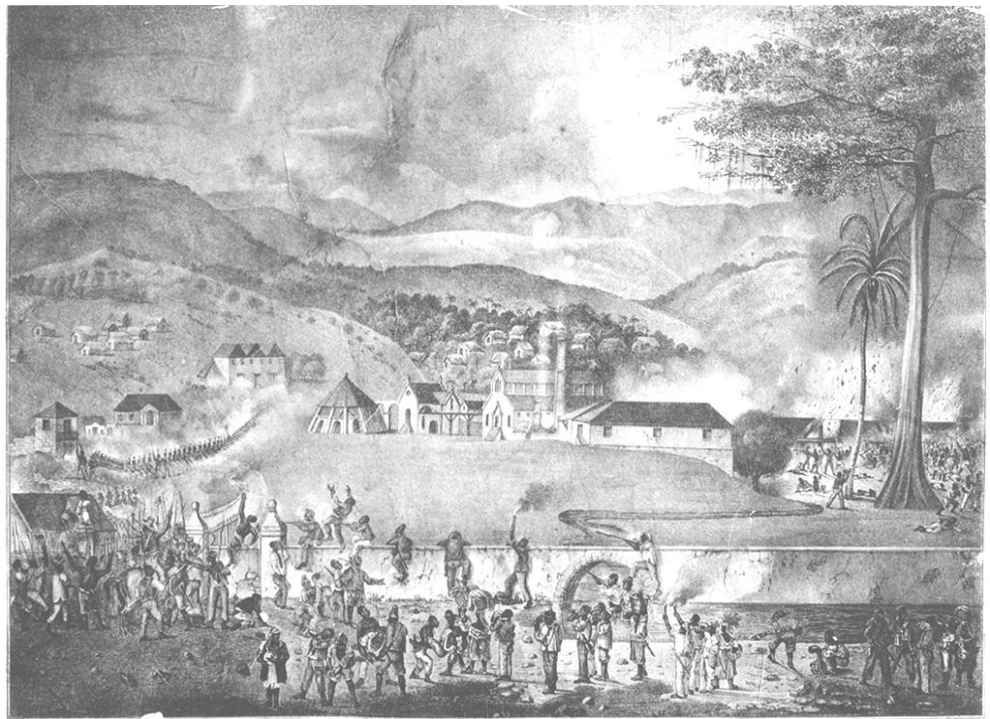
Planning & Organisation

During this time, some slaves in leadership position like that of Sharpe were given limited freedom of movement and as such, they used that opportunity to meet undercover of traditional holiday celebration or religious service to discuss plans to revolt. At the end of prayer meeting a select few remained behind to hear and discuss the plans all the while swearing on the Bible to follow the plan. Sharpe insisted that after the Christmas holidays when harvest is due, slaves were to sit down and refuse to work until their masters acknowledged they were free and agreed to pay them wages (Reckord 113). In planning the revolt Sharpe used examples from Demerara and slave disturbances in America to encourage them to rebel. In the latter stages, Sharpe and his aides spread influence to Hanover, Westmoreland, Manchester, St. Elizabeth and Trelawney (c600 miles in all); persuading other slaves to join in the planned rebellion. On arrival from England missionaries were made aware of the plans to strike. The missionaries discouraged them and told them not to look to them for support. Shortly before the rebellion began on December 27, William Knibb told them not to listen to the words of the wicked men and that they should not be led away. Blythe another missionary echoed the sentiments of his fellow missionaries and consequently they (slaves) were disappointed and even offended him. They were furious and accused Blythe of deserting them and threatened to take revenge upon him (Reckord 116).

The Rebellion

Slaves demanded more freedom and a working wage and promised not to return to work until their demands were met by the plantation owners. Upon refusal of their demands, the strike escalated into a full rebellion. On Monday December 27, 1831, rebellion broke out on the Kensington estate in Montego Bay. The outbreak was signaled by beacons made of the cane thrash houses. Whites not already in town for Christmas fled to Montego Bay, Falmouth, Lucea, Hanover, Black River and Savana-la-mar.

The militia commanded by Colonel Grignon beat a strategic retreat to Montego Bay after a skirmish at old Montpelier on December 28. Martial law was proclaimed by Governor Lord



THE ATTACK OF THE REBELS ON MONTPELIER OLD WORKS ESTATE.

Belmore, and military commander Sir Willoughby Cotton acted promptly and efficiently with a 5 pointed pincer campaign against the rebel fastness on upper Great River. The Christmas rebellion mainly comprised of armed rebellion, withdrawal of labour and most notably, destruction of property (Reckord 117). A rebel military core known as the Black Regiment lead by Colonel Johnson (Slave Leader) of Retrieve Estate successfully fought against the militia, commanded by

Colonel Grignon on December 28. The militia retreated to Montego Bay after a skirmish at old Montpelier on December 28.

The Black Regiment further invaded hills, estates, inviting more slaves to join them, burning properties on the border on St. James and setting off a trail of fires through the Great River Valley in Westmoreland and St. Elizabeth. One hundred fifty slaves attacked the western interior regiment, the commander of that group waited until the slaves were within thirty five (35) yards then fired. Approximately twenty five slaves and one white were (25) killed and another four wounded (Craon 305).

The Sam Sharpe Rebellion being the largest rebellion at that time to take place in Jamaica took longer than usual to suppress but when that moment finally came it was so done chiefly because of the lack of expertise in warfare and the lack of organization and cooperation among slave groups.

White's Response/ Punishment

Even though it is said that the militia took control of the rebellion by the end of the first week in January, historians have noted that suppression took fully two months because of the slave's guerilla tactics, and the country's well suited terrain (Reckord 118). The Maroons assistance and cooperation was important as with their help the militia acted with excessive savagery against the slaves. The Maroons helped to track and hunt down rebels. In fact Maroons from Moore and Charles Town were shipped into Falmouth to further assist. Women and children were shot on sight and slave homes and provision grounds were systematically burned and there were numerous judicial murders by summary court martial (Beckles and Shepherd 199).

A number of slaves lost their lives, it is reported that 14 free coloured died in rebellion, 200 slaves died in fighting, 312 executed and 300 flogged. Some rebel leaders were killed in fighting, captured or surrendered.



A slave being whipped

Pardon was offered by Sir Willoughby Cotton for all who returned to work on the estates within 48 hours. He also released one hundred (100) rebel prisoners to circulate this news on the estate. Militia men presided over court martial's; in St. James, ninety nine (99) slaves were tried, eighty one (81) were executed. (Reckord 120-121). It is believed that Samuel Sharpe was among the last set of persons last to be executed, He however spent a while in jail before he was hanged, and while in jail Reverend Henry Bleby visited him a few times. Bleby lamented that Sharpe regretted the extensive destruction of property and life from the conspiracy that he had promoted. It was not part of his original plan as he did not wish to destroy the estates nor anybody injured, as the only objective was to obtain freedom. Samuel Sharpe was hanged at Montego Bay on May

23, 1832. Before being hanged his last words were “I would rather die upon Yonder Gallows than to live in Slavery” (Craton 321)

In all, six hundred and twenty-six (626) were tried and three hundred and twelve (312) executed. Executions mainly took place in the form of hanging as 72% were hanged while 28% were shot. In St. James, slaves were gibbeted and erected in the public square in the centre of the town. The bodies remained until a fresh batch came. Such public displays served to horrify slaves who took part and was the planters’ way of trying to drive fear in them. In Lucea, the condemned were put in carts, with their arms pinioned, ropes around their neck and white caps on their heads, they eventually met their death.⁷¹ The Baptists were blamed more than any other church groups, as it is said that they had the most subordinate chapel and gave authority to black deacons. The missionaries fled to Kingston while Burchell and Knibb fled to England. Subsequently, the militia burned the chapels (Reckord 124).

Damage

Apart from £175,000 on military operation, the total cost of the rebellion was approximately £1,154,589 which historians note would be about £50,000,000 today. The cost of the rebellion includes. Injury sustained, slaves setting fires to buildings, burning cane fields, robbery, plunder, loss of labour and slaves killed in rebellion or executed (Craton 312).

In final analysis, it can be concluded that slavery in itself was an unjust and inhumane institution that was bound to ‘resistance’ from slaves. They were not content with living a life of servitude, especially one that entailed brutal treatment and methods of dehumanization. It can be said that British planters themselves were to be blamed for the many insurrections which took place in the British West Indies as the way in which slaves were treated, only helped to make the

situation worse than it already was. The Sam Sharpe Rebellion was a very important rebellion. It served as the last major rebellion in the British Caribbean before emancipation was declared a few years after. It is believed that this insurrection was one of the key reasons why it was passed as it is often said that it sped up measures that were being taken place. It is for this reason why the importance of the Sam Sharpe rebellion cannot be understated as it can be said to serve as a catalyst for the freedom that we now enjoy today.

Table showing Slaves total number of slaves tried and executed

Parish	Total Tried	Total Executed
Hanover Courts Martial	58	27
Hanover Civil Courts	82	60
Trelawny Courts Martial	70	24
St. James Courts Martial	99	81
St. James Civil Courts	81	39
Westmoreland Courts Martial	26	12
Westmoreland Civil Court	52	20
St. Elizabeth Courts Martial	73	14
Portland Courts Martial	23	7
Portland Civil Courts	5	5
St. Thomas in the Vale Courts Martial	9	—
Manchester Courts Martial	15	13
Manchester Civil Courts	16	7
St. Thomas in the East Courts Martial	12	1
St. Thomas in the East Civil Courts	5	2
Total	626	312

(Source: Reckord, Mary. "The Jamaican Slave Rebellion of 1831" *Past & Present*. 108-125. (1968). No 40. Web. July 3rd 2013.)



A Proclamation.

By His Excellency the Right Honourable Somerset Lowry Earl of Belmore,
Captain General and Governor in Chief of this His Majesty's Island of Jamaica,
and the Territories thereon depending, in America, Chancellor, and Vice
Admiral of the same.

WHEREAS, Notwithstanding His Majesty's Royal Proclamation, denouncing his
high displeasure against all Slaves who should offend against the Laws by which they
are governed, or resist the authority of their Masters or Managers, many slaves in certain
parts of this Island, under the pretence that orders have been sent out by His Majesty for
their emancipation, have proceeded to the most flagrant outrages and destruction of pro-
perty: And, Whereas, the death of many of them, actually in arms, and the exemplary
punishment already inflicted after trial upon several ringleaders in this Rebellion, must have
convinced all Slaves engaged therein, that it is in vain to oppose the overwhelming force
which is assembled to reduce them to obedience: And, Whereas, there is reason to believe
that numbers are deterred from returning to their duty by a fear of that punishment which
their rebellious practices merit, I have therefore thought fit, to issue this my **PROCLA-
MATION**, promising and assuring to all Slaves who have been misled by the misrepresen-
tations of cunning and designing persons, His Majesty's most gracious pardon, Provided
they do, within the space of ten days from the date hereof, surrender themselves at the
nearest Military Post, or return peaceably to the plantations to which they belong, and re-
sume their ordinary occupations, quietly submitting themselves and obeying all the lawful
commands of their Masters or Managers: And I do hereby declare and make known, that
those principals and chiefs who shall be proved of having instigated or directed the
destruction of the lives and properties of the peaceable inhabitants of this Island, are
specially excluded from the benefit of this Proclamation.

Given under my hand and seal at arms, at Montego-Bay, this third day of
February, in the second year of His Majesty's reign, Annoque Domini, One
Thousand Eight Hundred and Thirty-two.

BELMORE

*Proclamation by the Earl of Belmore promising pardon to all slaves who will surrender
or return to which they belong, having rebelled thinking they were emancipated*

“ Head Quarters, Montego Bay,

“ January 2, 1832.

“ Negroes!

“ You have taken up arms against your masters, and have burnt and plundered their dwellings. Some wicked persons have told you that the King has made you free, and that your masters withhold your freedom from you. In the name of the King, I come among you, to tell you that you have been misled. I bring with me numerous forces to punish the guilty, and all, who are found with the rebels, shall be put to death without mercy. You cannot resist the King’s troops. Surrender yourselves and beg that your crimes may be pardoned. All who yield themselves up at any military post immediately, provided they are not principals and chiefs in the burnings that have been committed, will receive His Majesty’s gracious pardon; all who hold out will meet with certain death.

“ WILLOUGHBY G. COTTON,

“ Major-General Commanding.”

Willoughby G. Cotton's speech to the slaves



A plan of the parish of St. James together with a part of the parishes of Hanover, Westmoreland & St. Elizabeth, 1832. Areas underlined in red were those involved Christmas Rebellion.

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