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Representations of Rebellion: Slavery in Jamaica, 1823-1831

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REPRESENTATIONS OF REBELLION:
SLAVERY IN JAMAICA, 1823-1831

A Thesis
Presented to
the Graduate School of
Clemson University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts
History

by
Paul Michael Brown
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Accepted by:
Rachel A. Moore, Committee Chair
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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines slavery in Jamaica between 1824 and 1831, primarily through the lens of rebellion and rebellious conspiracy. This study is largely based on legal documents, namely the criminal trials of slaves produced after the discovery of conspiracy plots to rebel in 1824 and the outbreak of a large-scale slave insurrection in 1831. While previous historians have provided rich analyses of the origins and causes of slave rebellions, this study attempts to disentangle the various representations and ideas of rebellion among slaves and slaveholders in Jamaica. I suggest that by examining rebellion-and instances of rebellious conspiracy-beyond the scope of slave agency or resistance, these trials furnish a complex portrait of slavery in the British West Indies on the eve of emancipation throughout the British dominions. This study reveals the multiple groups that directly and indirectly lent their voices to the intertwined yet conflicting representations of slave rebellion and resistance in Jamaica. Rebellion represented a rupture in the history of slavery, and while slaves resorted to physical resistance to remove themselves from that historical narrative, slaveholders in Jamaica desperately tried to rope them back into a conception of rebellion that would allow slavery to continue.

DEDICATION

Like all else I do, this is for my parents, Trish and Mike Brown.

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In many ways an acknowledgments page seems far more daunting than completing this thesis, as I could never express my gratitude for all the debts I have incurred in such a short space. My first and largest belongs to my advisor, Dr. Rachel Moore, who has happily helped me navigate this process from the beginning. Dr. Moore read through countless drafts and sat through numerous meetings, challenging me to push my analysis and refine my writing, all with an infectious enthusiasm. I am extremely fortunate to have had her as my advisor, and I value her support and insight immensely. My other committee members, Dr. Maribel Morey and Dr. James Burns, carefully read through my manuscript and provided perceptive thoughts and suggestions to improve my project. Beyond my committee, I have had the pleasure of working with a number of superb faculty members in my time at Clemson-Dr. Alan Grubb, Dr. Stephanie Barczewski, Dr. Roger Grant, Dr. Michael Meng, Dr. Michael Silvestri, as well as my fellow graduate students-all helped make Clemson the rich intellectual environment I hoped to find in graduate school. My acknowledgments would not be complete without recognizing everything Dr. Paul Anderson has given to the graduate students here at Clemson. I cannot fully express my gratitude for his guidance and wisdom at every turn these past two years.

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INTRODUCTION

On December 27, 1831, a fire broke out on Kensington estate in Jamaica, which marked the beginning of the largest slave insurrection in the history of the island. Eventually the rebellion would encompass all of the western parishes on the island and some sixty thousand slaves, 626 of whom were tried, with 312 ultimately being executed for rebellion.¹ Slaveholders in Jamaica quickly labeled the rebellion as the Baptist War, pointing to the Baptist missionaries on the island as an external source that pressured slaves to rebel. Historians traditionally understand the slave rebellion in 1831 as a major catalyst for the eventual abolition of slavery in the British Empire three years later.²

According to historian Orlando Patterson, the 1831 rebellion in Jamaica, “strengthened the hand of the abolitionists in England and led to a marked change of attitude on the part of the British government to the whole question of slavery.”³ Patterson does not limit his analysis to violent, physical rebellions but also argues that passive resistance (runaways, suicides, and various refusals to work) comprised an important feature of slave society. Patterson argues that no slave society, other than Brazil, experienced such continuous revolt as Jamaica.⁴ Patterson traces seven primary causes for the centrality of resistance in Jamaica, however the importance of his argument

¹ Brion Davis, *Inhuman Bondage* (New York, 2006), 219, and Turner, *Slaves and Missionaries: The Disintegration of Jamaican Slave Society, 1787-1834* (Urbana, I.L.), 161.

² Michael Craton, *Testing the Chains: Resistance to Slavery in the British West Indies* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1982), 291-319; Gelien Matthews, *Caribbean Slave Revolts and the British Abolition Movement* (Baton Rouge, L.A., 2006), 7; Orlando Patterson, *Sociology of Slavery: An Analysis of the Origins, Development, and Structure of Negro Slave Society in Jamaica* (Rutherford, N.J., 1975), 192-220; Turner, *Slaves and Missionaries*, 149-200.

³ Patterson, *Sociology of Slavery*, 273.

⁴ Patterson, *Sociology of Slavery*, 273.

revolves around the underlying question of agency. In Patterson's work, Jamaican slaves do not solely have agency to rebel against the planters and break the chains of slavery, but also impact the larger colonial world. While Patterson does not go so far as to argue that the slaves consciously resisted in order to change the institution of slavery throughout the British Empire, their actions inevitably had that effect.

Later works by Mary Turner and Michael Craton followed Patterson's model of the 1831 rebellion, in attempts to better understand the factors that contributed to the insurrection with each work placing a certain emphasis on the role of Christian missionaries. While Craton's work gestures towards the ability of slaves to utilize Christianity for their own purposes, Turner traces the development of missions in Jamaica and their impact on Jamaican slavery as well as Jamaican planters. Turner's work demonstrates the complicated situation of a colonial setting, as planters, missionaries, and (to some extent) slaves all pursued goals that constantly came into conflict with other groups' plans. Tension constantly erupted between missionary and planter, as the planter class became increasingly concerned with the missionaries' as a disruptive element that planned to destroy the slave system. Despite colonial opinion, Turner examines a number of missionary accounts to dispel the notion of the benevolent missionary, and instead argues that missionaries in the early nineteenth century emphasized the role of the faithful servant and the place of slavery in Christianity.⁵

Additionally, missionaries traveled across the British Empire and, whether directly or indirectly, uprooted existing religious ideas and social traditions of native

⁵ Turner, *Slaves and Missionaries*, 77.

populations to instill the Christian worldview. The remainder of Turner's work follows a similar line to previous historiography. Turner's arguments fixates on slave agency, namely the ability of slaves in Jamaica to incorporate Christianity into their existing culture and apply it to a legitimate reason for resistance. Turner's narrative builds to the 1831 rebellion, in which she argues that the slaves used Christianity as their revolutionary ideology.⁶

Craton, Turner and Patterson's analyses of nineteenth century slavery assume that slave resistance must have changed and developed in some way that led to and impacted the abolition of slavery. More recently, historians have begun to reassess the historiography of slave resistance, particularly earlier works that viewed resistance partially as an act against 'racist dehumanization' and as an assertion of humanity. The emphasis on resistance as an ability to retain humanity, historians such as Walter Johnson argue, dehistoricized the study of slavery and removed the political, personal and cultural meanings of slavery in a certain time and place.⁷ The field has therefore shifted to analyze the daily condition of enslaved humanity and their everyday forms of resistance, to understand the "bare life existence of slaves."⁸ The historiography of slavery has somewhat moved away from analyses of rebellion, as historians have attempted to understand how slaves survived under their conditions, rather than understand these large-scale ruptures of rebellion.

⁶ Turner, *Slaves and Missionaries*, 149.

⁷ Walter Johnson, "On Agency," *Journal of Social History* 37 (Fall 2003) 114.

⁸ Johnson, "On Agency," 115.

This thesis examines slave rebellion outside of the traditional lens of resistance, in an attempt to understand how slaves and slaveholders understood and constructed the implications of rebellion. Rather than highlight and explore the origins of rebellion, its roots causes, the limits and extent of slave agency, I contend that an examination of the different mental imaginations of slave insurrection constructed by slaves and slaveholders provides a new avenue to analyze rebellion. I utilize the trials that emerged out of slave rebellion or rebellious conspiracy to consider the different formations of rebellion, as well as examine what these trials might tell historians outside the realm of physical resistance. By not only listening to the slave voices preserved in these trials but also the indirect influence and persuasions of slaveholders, these trials shed light on how groups configured rebellion to their own conceptions of the history of slavery.

This analysis of rebellion then considers the multiple connections and voices in the United States, the West Indies, and Great Britain that contributed to discussions of slavery in the period before the British abolished slavery.

Trials for rebellious conspiracy and rebellion must be studied carefully, as the voices of slaves preserved do not speak to historians directly and the court officials, mainly slaveholders, constructed these trials to serve a certain purpose-to understand the causes of slave insurrection. Rebellion represented a rupture in the normal flow of history under slavery, a means of resistance from a labor force that slaveholders then attempted to rope back into a narrative that would allow slavery to persist. Slaves, slaveholders, abolitionists and proslavery supporters throughout the Atlantic world conceptualized and

understood slave rebellion according to their own perceptions of slavery, and used this to argue whether the institution could persist in the aftermath.

Chapter I explores Jamaica at the end of 1823 and into 1824, paying special attention to the multiple instances of slave conspiracy to rebel discovered by slaveholders, following the slave rebellion of Demerara in 1823. This chapter outlines the historiographical argument that underlies the thesis, namely that slave trials for rebellion and conspiracy shed light on the lives of slaves outside the context of rebellion. My argument places these conspiracies in historical context to understand why slaveholders searched so vigorously for conspiracy in the first place. Rather than examine whether they truly discovered plots to rebel, I explore what can be gleaned from the trials beyond resistance. This chapter focuses on the relationship between discussions in slaves' and slaveholders' circles, the significance of discussions on the margins of slaveholders' authority, how information passed between slave communities and how they came to fold it into their history. Ultimately, this chapter follows the work of historians such as Winthrop Jordan and Michael P. Johnson who have examined slave conspiracies to better understand what the trials tell us about the lives and voices of slaves and slaveholders, rather than an assessment of failed slave resistance. As Jordan states, ““If we judge that they ought to have been better revolutionaries than they actually were, we will fail to understand them or their oppressors.””⁹

Chapter II examines the larger discussions of slavery taking place between 1824 and 1831, particularly in Great Britain, Jamaica and the United States. This chapter

⁹ Winthrop D. Jordan, *Tumult and Silence at Second Creek: An Inquiry into a Civil War Slave Conspiracy* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1993), 128.

illuminates the multiple voices of proslavery and antislavery groups and individuals throughout the Atlantic who contributed to the resurgent abolition movement in Great Britain. Paying particular attention to newspaper articles, as well as antislavery and proslavery pamphlets, letters and articles, furnishes a complex backdrop for the 1831 slave rebellion in Jamaica. The reactions and representations of the slave insurrection emerged out of a particular Atlantic context; one in which debates over slavery in the British West Indies flourished and the possibility of emancipation loomed on the minds of slaveholders.

The thesis culminates in an analysis of the 1831 slave rebellion in Jamaica and the resulting trials conducted by slaveholders. Through a thorough examination of the resulting trials, I consider the implications of the label of the Baptist War by contemporary slaveholders in Jamaica. While British officials and historians have dismissed the explicit role of missionaries in rallying slaves to rebel, this chapter situates that label within the mindset of the slaveholders at that historical moment in an attempt to under its importance. Following an examination of the Baptist War, I interrogate the role of slave rebel leader Samuel Sharpe, the last slave executed in coordination with the insurrection and the presumed instigator among the slaves. By examining both the mentalities of slaves and slaveholders, this thesis illustrates that slave rebellion is not a fixed historical moment. Beyond the physical resistance enacted by slaves and the subsequent quelling of insurrection by slaveholders are multiple conceptions of history that attempted to understand this rupture according to their own understanding of slavery.

CHAPTER ONE

DISCOVERING CONSPIRACY: SLAVE TRIALS IN JAMAICA, 1823-1824

Around midnight on December 17th, 1823 in Jamaica, the overseer on Tremolesworth estate, Richard Gordon, heard the report of a musket and the sound of horns blowing. Gordon proceeded to investigate the situation, and discovered the door of a slave house open. Gordon testified later that as he moved closer, he “saw the negroes returning; they appeared to meet other people; they were so near him whispering in conversation he heard a voice say, ‘it is no use, it is no use.’”¹⁰

Rumors of “peculiar” behavior among the slave population did not remain limited to Gordon’s account. In an October report from W.J. Murphy to his superior William Bullock, Murphy gave the testimony of the overseer at Rigland estate in Westmoreland who, “said the negroes talked in the field, that if they behaved well they were soon to be free” and a Mr. Moore who reported two slaves had approached overseers in Hanover and in Westmoreland asking “when this free was to take place.”¹¹ To allay the slaveholders’ fears of slave revolt, Colonel Cox of the St. Mary’s regiment put three different militia companies on guard before the holidays. Cox later told Jamaican official William Bullock that St. Mary’s, on the December day that Gordon

¹⁰ *Examination of Richard Gordon to William Bullock dated 20th of December, 1823; in Papers Relating to the Manumission, Government and Population of Slaves in the West Indies, 1822-1824*, House of Commons ([London], 1825), 40.

¹¹ *Letter from S. Vaughan to William Bullock dated 9th of October, 1823; in Papers Relating...*, no. 7, 45. Vaughan presents five other reports. All express concern over their slaves supposed discussions of freedom.

heard musket fire, was “ at present perfectly quiet, and I trust will remain so.”¹²

Reporting to Bullock, his superior, Cox had cause to assure Bullock of his regiment’s ability to maintain peace in Jamaica and prove their capability. However, two days later, slaveholders brought eight slaves from Frontier Estate, in the parish of St. Mary, to trial for rebellious conspiracy.¹³

The hastily assembled slave court found all eight men guilty of conspiracy to rebel and sentenced them to be executed by hanging on December 24, 1823. According to Colonel Cox, the slaves on Frontier needed to be executed, “as an example to the other negroes, and to prevent the danger of an escape, or an attempt to release them.”¹⁴ Despite Cox’s hope that the case of slaves on Frontier estate would serve as a reminder to others who hoped to rebel, slaveholders and Jamaican officials remained concerned about the extent of insurrection among the slave population.¹⁵ In the following months, ‘discovered’ multiple plots of conspiracy in the neighboring parishes of St. George, St. James, and Hanover, all, with St. Mary, along the northern coast of Jamaica. The subsequent trials in the slave courts of the respective parishes for rebellious conspiracy hoped to understand the extent of the plots on each estates, as well as which slaves could be understood as the instigators of the supposed insurrections.

¹² *Letter from Colonel Cox to William Bullock dated 17th of December, 1823; in Papers Relating...*, no. 2, 39.

¹³ Despite the uncovering of slave conspiracies, Cox continued to put Bullock’s mind at ease and claim everything in Jamaica to be peaceful. On a letter sent December 25, 1823 Cox told Bullock of the execution of eight slaves in Saint Mary, but claimed that now everything seemed “perfectly tranquil.” Cox’s frequent assertions of tranquility to his superior demonstrate his intent to appease his superior and prove his own capability.

¹⁴ *Letter from Colonel Cox to William Bullock dated 17th of December, 1823; in Papers Relating...*, no. 2, 39.

¹⁵ *Letter from A. Hodgson, W.J. Murphy, J. Walker to Honourable H. Cox, Colonel of St. Mary’s Regiment Militia dated Dec. 21, 1823; in Papers Relating to...*, no. 2, 44.

Writing to William Bullock, the Governor of Jamaica's Secretary, after the trial of slaves in St. George on Balcarres estate, William A. Orgill reflected the fears of Jamaican slaveholders and officials after discovering the conspiracy, which, in the case of Balcarres, included stolen firearms and ammunition: "It must be obvious to his Grace, that as long as the guns remain in the possession of the disaffected we are insecure, for there can scarcely be a doubt, but that many of the Balcarres conspirators (the whole of the slaves of this property, indeed the whole of this district, having been proved to be mutually concerned)...may at a future period, when we least expect it, make use of them for the purpose for which they were by the rebels first intended."¹⁶ Slaveholders and magistrates in Jamaica not only hoped to uncover the origins of the conspiracies but stamp out all those involved in the plots, in order to guarantee that the idea of rebellion did not spread throughout the island.

The events in the British colony of Demerara several months prior to the realization of multiple plots of rebellious conspiracy in Jamaica provide an understanding for why slaveholders and officials in Jamaica looked so vigorously for unrest among their slave population in the first place.¹⁷ In August of 1823, a slave revolt broke out on the British colony of Demerara, the uprising encompassed ten to twelve thousand slaves who were quickly and brutally repressed in little over a week. According to the Demerara governor's bulletin issued after the rebellion, 255 slaves had been killed in the skirmishes

¹⁶ *Letter from William A. Orgill to William Bullock, Esquire dated April 10, 1824 in Papers Relating to...*, no. 2, 108.

¹⁷ See Michael P. Johnson, "Denmark Vesey and his Co-Conspirators," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 58, no. 4 (Oct. 2001), 915-976; "Reading Evidence," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 59, no. 1 (Jan. 2002), 202; Winthrop D. Jordan, *Tumult and Silence at Second Creek: An Inquiry into a Civil War Slave Conspiracy* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1993).

with countless others awaiting trial.¹⁸ Colonists quickly found blame in the work of the evangelical missionary, John Smith, who they labeled as an instigator of the rebellion. In the days after the insurrection, rumors and contradictions swirled out of control in Demerara and elsewhere, making it difficult to discern what actually occurred.¹⁹ In his work on the Wilberforce song among slave communities in the British West Indies, historian Hilary Beckles maintains that news about the slave trade and rumors of black rebellion “traversed the Atlantic at hurricane speed.” Sure enough, the news of revolt quickly traveled across the British West Indies.²⁰ In early September, some reports claimed that Smith had already been tried, found guilty of inciting rebellion, and shot.²¹ As news of Demerara traveled throughout the Atlantic, reactions to the revolt soon followed. To quell the concerns of slaveholders, the *Jamaica Journal and Kingston Chronicle* assured readers that although the intelligence from Demerara could not fail to excite the public mind, the question of emancipation and the events at Demerara would soon be forgotten.²² An article that appeared on January 3rd, 1824 in the *Jamaica Journal and Kingston Chronicle* provides some insight into the anxieties of the slaveholders: “we confess had it not been for the conspiracy of St. Mary’s, we should have conceived our alarm to be rather the echo of the Demerara insurrection, than as having any substantial

¹⁸ Emilia Viotti da Costa, *Crowns of Glory, Tears of Blood: The Demerara Slave Rebellion of 1823* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 1 and 222.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, 247.

²⁰ Hilary D. Beckles, “The Wilberforce Song: How Enslaved Blacks Heard British Abolitionists,” *Parliamentary History* 26 (June 2007), 116.

²¹ da Costa, *Crowns of Glory, Tears of Blood*, 247.

²² *Jamaica Journal and Kingston Chronicle*, “Review of Politics,” September 27, 1823, no. 24, 368. UW-Madison Memorial Library Microforms [Call Number 12058].

foundation.”²³ Despite the assurances of Colonel Cox that Jamaica would remain perfectly quiet, news of plots and conspiracies dominated the minds of slaveholders throughout the last months of 1823 and early 1824.

While assumptions that these plots happened exactly as testimonies express is misguided, it would be equally problematic to downplay their relevance to historians. Narratives of slave insurrections have overemphasized the large-scale rebellions and glanced over plots of conspiracy, imagined or not, which has allowed these conspiracies to be remembered simply as failed rebellions.²⁴ Rather than recognize conspiracy plots as unsuccessful, the trials can be utilized to discover how slaves discussed issues within their community, how events circulated throughout estates and how plans of collective resistance emerged. These trial documents come from official reports sent to William Bullock in Jamaica and were ultimately compiled by the House of Commons in Great Britain into a larger collection of papers relating to the manumission of slaves in the West Indies. The evidence present in the texts traveled through layers of interpretation from the courtroom to the desks of officials in Jamaica and Great Britain, and must be read carefully and properly contextualized. Certainly any conclusions must be carefully drawn out, as the modes of coercion and intimidation used to produce these testimonies is not visible through a reading of the texts. Rather than attempt to understand whether a plot to rebel existed, or to analyze why the plots failed, the testimonies provided allow a glimpse into the lives of slaves in Jamaica in 1824. Essentially, these trials should not solely be woven into a larger narrative of rebellion and resistance but also be read to explore what

²³ *Jamaica Journal and Kingston Chronicle*, Jan. 3, 1824, 598.

²⁴ See Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past* (Boston, Mass: Beacon Press, 1995), 98-107.

might have ‘leaked’ through the text about an enslaved community in a particular time and place.²⁵ The conspiracy trials that emerged in Jamaica demonstrate how information circulated within enslaved communities outside the sphere of the slaveholders, and only entered the mindset of Jamaican planters in times of perceived rebellion or resistance. The slaves brought to trial came to understand current news from conversations among slaveholders and other slaves through various networks of communication and frequently discussed rumors that dealt with their own situation on the island. Occasionally, these rumors or actions held importance to the slave population in Jamaica, and became incorporated into their own history through slave songs or stories.

I. “Deluded Victims?” Slaves’ Understanding of Wilberforce

In March of 1823 one of the leaders of the resurgent antislavery campaign in Britain, Thomas Fowell Buxton, presented a motion in the House of Commons claiming, “that the state of slavery is repugnant to the principles of the British Constitution, and of the Christian religion.”²⁶ In the same year, William Wilberforce wrote the pamphlet, *An Appeal to the Religion, Justice, and Humanity of the Inhabitants of the British Empire, in behalf of the Negro slaves of the West Indies*. Wilberforce’s pamphlet and the rhetoric of the antislavery campaign hinged on the key question: can a Christian condone slavery? The actions of Wilberforce and others in the antislavery campaign soon garnered support in Britain, according to Wilberforce: “The country takes up our cause surprisingly.”²⁷ While many British citizens rallied to the cause, the campaign did not resonate in the

²⁵ See Michael P. Johnson, “Denmark Vesey and his Co-Conspirators,” 200.

²⁶ da Costa, *Crowns of Glory, Tears of Blood*, 177.

²⁷ Mary Turner, *Slaves and Missionaries: The Disintegration of Jamaican Slave Society 1787-1834* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1982), 103.

West Indies, as slaveholders vehemently protected slavery. In Jamaica, reform proposals from Britain and the Committee of West India Planters and Merchants led to protest meetings in parishes as colonists refused to adopt any new editions to the slave code.²⁸

With the insurrection of Demerara in 1823 on one side and the abolition movement in Britain on the other, slaveholders became concerned with the state of their position in the British economy. Shortly after learning of the alleged role of missionaries in the Demerara rebellion, colonists in Barbados destroyed the Wesleyan mission and drove out the missionary.²⁹ Slaveholders in Barbados looked at the situation in Demerara and attempted to stop any possibility of rebellion among their own slaves by eliminating any supposed opportunities for insurrection. In Jamaica, concern over the enslaved population rebelling seemed warranted, as slaveholders “discovered” various conspiracies to rebel and witnessed physical resistance in one instance at Argyle estate in July of 1824. Rather than be captured and tried for rebellion, three slaves on Argyle estate committed suicide as militia approached them, while militia brought fourteen others to trial, twelve being executed. In the months before the insurrection at Argyle, slaveholders congratulated themselves on discovering and stamping out plots in the parishes of St. James, St. Mary and St. George before they could be realized. According to historian Mary Turner, plots to rebel had become rare in nineteenth century Jamaica, and the discovery of these plots could be attributed to a changing situation linked to

²⁸ See Turner, *Slaves and Missionaries*, 103-108.

²⁹ *Ibid*, 106.

missionary work among the enslaved population.³⁰ In part, Turner's argument is bound up in Jamaican slaveholders understanding of their situation, which focused on the presumed tranquility of the enslaved population until revolt.

Closer examination reveals the slaveholders might have become desensitized to the everyday discontent among the enslaved population, and instead convinced themselves the threat of rebellion did not exist.³¹ One newspaper article in Jamaica exclaimed: "For these number of years past we have been surrounded on every side by the elements of war and rebellion, and yet happy Jamaica has escaped all."³² Slaveholders in Jamaica seemed quick to forget about the discovery of a plot in 1816 (incidentally the same year as a large slave rebellion in Barbados) which purportedly included over one thousand slaves in the parish of St. Elizabeth's.³³ Even after slaveholders uncovered plots to revolt in Jamaica, the assumption remained that these slaves represented a small minority and that most of the laboring population remained peaceful and content.³⁴ Slaveholders also linked the rebellious plots of the enslaved to their own actions. Rather than tie resistance to the feelings and concerns of slaves, slaveholders blamed those estates where they uncovered conspiracy for granting their slaves the "greatest indulgencies."³⁵

³⁰ Ibid, 107. Turner's work focuses on the rebellion of 1831, and her argument rests on the impact of British missionaries in slave rebellions. Any evidence of resistance is associated with a demonstration of missionary impact on the slave population.

³¹ da Costa, *Crowns of Glory, Tears of Blood*, 207.

³² The Hermit in Vere, "For the Jamaica Journal," *Jamaica Journal and Kingston Chronicle*, Nov. 22, 1823, 492.

³³ Matthew 'Monk' Lewis, ed. Judith Terry, *Journal of a West India Proprietor 1816-1817* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 137-144.

³⁴ "Origins of Hanover Revolt," *Jamaica Journal and Kingston Chronicle*, July 3, 1824, 229.

³⁵ Ibid.

While these trials preserve the voices of slaves in some capacity, official reports of slave trials represent only muted voices of the slave population. The courts and officials imagined and constructed these plots and the subsequent trials, and the testimonies reflect their interpretation alongside those of the slaves. Although the questioning of the courts does not always appear in official reports, it becomes imperative to reconstruct what the courts asked these witnesses and how slaveholders wanted to understand the conspiracy in order to interpret slave testimonies.

At first glance, several of these trials represent one of the main concerns of slaveholders in Jamaica, as hushed discussions and praises to William Wilberforce seem to have occurred in nearly all the plots to rebel. To slaveholders in the British West Indies, Wilberforce represented the British abolition movement and a legitimate threat to their authority on the island. The testimony of William Roach in the case against Argyle estate demonstrates the presence of Wilberforce in these trials, either through the fears of slaveholders or the knowledge of slaves. “A man came from Silver Grove to know when they were to fight the buckras; [*Do you know who he was?*] John Nesbitt knows the man; [*How do you know?*] heard John Nesbitt say so... [*Did the accused speak about Mr. Wilberforce?*] heard them speak very much about Mr. Wilberforce; [*Do you know who he is?*] he must be the same gentleman who gave them their free wit the king.”³⁶

Centered on the testimony of two free teenage boys named Robert and Peter Bartibo, the trial of fourteen slaves at Unity-Hall estate in St. James further demonstrates the necessity of recreating the court’s questions. In his testimony, Robert Bartibo

³⁶ “Testimony of William Roach” in *The King vs. Jarrett, et als. belonging to Argyle Estate 14th of July, 1824*; in *Papers Relating...*, 116.

admitted to a recent altercation with one of the prisoners and claimed the slaves had drunk to the health of Wilberforce at their meetings. In part, Bartibo's statement about Wilberforce seems unprompted, an innocent explanation of what purportedly occurred at the alleged plot. "Trelawney said it would be a word and a blow between them and white people if they did not get free. [*What else did they do? or Who drank Wilberforce's health?*] Philip Haughton drank Wilberforce's health at Cunningham's house. [*What did they say about Wilberforce?*] They said Wilberforce would make them free."³⁷

Throughout the trial at Unity-Hall, discussions about the role of Wilberforce in the alleged plot continued.³⁸ The testimony of Robert Campbell the next day followed this pattern. Robert Campbell discusses meeting James "Jemmy" Campbell from Unity-Hall, who claimed to hear about the slaves being free from Spring-Garden. "Then Jemmy came out and said, though he lived in the mountains, he knew more of what was done at the sea-side than me at the sea-side. He spoke of Wilberforce going to give them free after New Year's day."³⁹

While the concern over Wilberforce and his actions being a rallying point for the enslaved seems to be constructed by the court, their fears should not be seen as the sole reason for the presence of Wilberforce within the minds of slaves. The north side of Jamaica, the location of the conspiracies at St. James and Hanover, served as outlets to the sea for the sugar-producing estates within these parishes. Cities on the north side of

³⁷ *Report of the Trial of Fourteen Negroes at the Courthouse, Montego Bay, January 28, 1824 and the following two days, on a charge of Rebellious Conspiracy; with the Arguments of the Advocates and the Speeches of the Judges*; (Montego Bay, Jamaica: 1824), 10.

³⁸ For example, the testimony of Robert Campbell, Daniel, and Jane McDonald in *Report of the Trial of Fourteen Negroes...*

³⁹ *Report of the Trial of Fourteen Negroes*, 16.

the island, "situated close to foreign colonies and surrounded by 'numerous creeks and bays, where small-decked vessels may run in at any time,' provided staging areas for Jamaica based smugglers and ports of call for their counterparts from Cuba, Saint-Domingue, and elsewhere."⁴⁰ These harbors and ports allowed for channels of communication throughout the Atlantic to flow into Jamaica, to both slaveholders and their slaves. Rumors of slave unrest, changes to colonial policies or sugar prices, or the name of an abolitionist like William Wilberforce might have all passed from the mouth of a sailor or white to a slave in the area, a scrap of news then eagerly shared with others.⁴¹

In the discovered insurrection of 1816 in St. Elizabeth's the name Wilberforce continually appeared in the testimonies, as the rebels incorporated him into a song known as "Song of the King of the Eboes."⁴² The song demonstrates the enslaved had heard of Wilberforce and understood his actions in some capacity, namely his intentions to "mek we free."

Oh me good friend Mr. Wilberforce mek we free
God Almighty thank ye!
God Almighty thank ye!

Buckra in dis country no mek we free!
Wa negro fe do? Wa negro to do?
Tek force wid force
Tek force wid force!⁴³

⁴⁰ Julius S. Scott, "The Common Wind: Currents of Afro-American Communication in the Era of the Haitian Revolution" (Ph.D. diss., Duke University, 1986), 30.

⁴¹ Scott, "The Common Wind," 9 and 115.

⁴² For further examination of slave songs, see Hilary D. Beckles, "The Wilberforce Song: How Enslaved Caribbean Blacks Heard British Abolitionists;" Matthew Lewis, *Journal of a West India Proprietor* and Karina Williamson, ed., *Contrary Voices; Representations of West India Slavery, 1657-1834* (Kingston, Jamaica: University of the West Indies Press, 2008).

⁴³ Lewis, ed., Judith Terry, *Journal of a West India Proprietor*, 139.

As Edward Rugemer states in *The Problem of Emancipation*, William Wilberforce had, “albeit unwittingly, traversed the Atlantic and embedded himself in the consciousness of this rebellious bard...Jamaican slaves now had an ally.”⁴⁴ More importantly, the name of Wilberforce and his actions in Britain did not end with the quelling of the insurrection in 1816. On his tour through Jamaica in 1823, Cynric Williams heard a song from a group of female slaves, which demonstrates how the name of Wilberforce persisted among the enslaved in Jamaica:

Hi! De Buckra, hi!
Mass Wilberforce da come ober de sea,
Wid him roguish heard and him tender look;
And while he palaver and preach him book,
At the negro girl he'll winkie him yeye
Hi! De Buckra, hi!⁴⁵

While slaveholders' remained concerned that Wilberforce had become a rallying point for slaves in 1823 and 1824, the name of Wilberforce and, to some extent, his actions to abolish slavery had already become embedded within the enslaved community. The accounts by Lewis and Williams demonstrate that while these trials do represent the fears of slaveholders to a certain extent, they also provide a glimpse into the social reality of slave life in Jamaica. While these songs have been examined as demonstrations of the process of resistance within the enslaved in Jamaica, they also present an opportunity to understand how enslaved communities constructed their history. Songs within enslaved populations throughout the West Indies told stories about the actions of slaves and slaveholders from the past, and incorporated names like Wilberforce, who existed outside

⁴⁴ Edward B. Rugemer, *The Problem of Emancipation: The Caribbean Roots of the American Civil War* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2008), 45.

⁴⁵ Williamson, *Contrary Voices*, 446.

slave communities in Jamaica, but came to be understood as a part of their history. Songs, news, and rumors traveled among slaves on various estates and became rooted within the mindsets of community. Slave songs of freedom not only echoed sentiments of war or rebellion, but also became a mode for slaves to express their shared history, and remember the past experiences of slave communities throughout the island and the Atlantic. Writing in 1835 after spending nearly twenty years in Jamaica, Bernard Martin Senior exclaimed that, “on almost every property there was a Wilberforce.”⁴⁶ Slaves not only saw Wilberforce as an ally for their freedom, but as a part of their history that should be remembered and understood.

As reports of conspiracy to rebel became increasingly present in Jamaica in 1824, concern over the actions of Wilberforce and emancipation remained in the public mind and, subsequently, the newspapers. After the trial of Golden Grove and Argyle estates, one writer attributed those sentenced to death as “the deluded victims of Wilberforcean zeal.”⁴⁷ Questions and discussions of Wilberforce both within the trials and among the slaves demonstrate the court’s power not only within the trial but also in constructing these documents. It becomes tempting to look back on these trials from 1824 and other revolts in the early nineteenth century and argue for a coherent narrative of resistance that rallied around abolitionist allies in Britain. Questions asked by the court and the subsequent witnesses’ testimonies emerged out of coercion and intimidation, and reflect attempts by the witnesses to exonerate their own roles in the plots by giving the court the

⁴⁶ Bernard Martin Senior, *Jamaica as it was, as it is, and as it may be*, (London, 1835), 160.

⁴⁷ *Jamaica Journal and Kingston Chronicle*, July 24, 1824, 323.

information it wanted.⁴⁸ Colonists in Jamaica understood Wilberforce as a deterrent to the progress of the economy of Jamaica, and slaveholders' contempt for his actions leaked into the trials. Discussions of Wilberforce present an interesting example, as his name and actions certainly existed within the enslaved community. While we cannot fully excavate its significance within these conspiracies, the name of Wilberforce demonstrates that although the courts' perspectives framed slave testimonies, these trials shed light onto the lives of the enslaved. Rather than examine slave testimony and accept it at face value, it becomes necessary to understand what the text might indirectly present to historians.⁴⁹

II. Slave Mobility and Hushed Discussions

The paucity of sources makes it nearly impossible to fully reconstruct how information moved among enslaved communities and how they constructed non-traditional networks of communication. However, evidence of similar discussions can be pulled from these trials, demonstrating that news traveled throughout estates. Several testimonies throughout these trials demonstrate the mobility allowed to certain individual

⁴⁸ See Michael Johnson, "Denmark Vesey and his Co-Conspirators," 944. Johnson deftly explains the position of those slaves who testified. "Their testimony was valuable to the degree that it revealed their knowledge of a conspiracy, but knowing about a plot could easily implicate them in the eyes of the court."

⁴⁹ See Randy Browne, "Surviving Slavery: Politics, Power, and Authority in the British Caribbean, 1807-1834;" (Ph.D. diss., UNC-Chapel Hill, 2012); Michael Craton, *Searching for the Invisible Man: Slaves and Plantation Life in Jamaica* (Cambridge, M.A., 1978); Craton, *Testing the Chains: Resistance to Slavery in the British West Indies* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1982); Emilia Viotti da Costa, *Crowns of Glory, Tears of Blood*; Eugene Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York, 1974); Michael P. Johnson, "Denmark Vesey and his Co-Conspirators;" Winthrop Jordan, *Tumult and Silence at Second Creek*; Rebecca Scott and Jean M. Hébrard, *Freedom Papers: An Atlantic Odyssey in the Age of Emancipation* (Cambridge, M.A., 2012); and John Lean and Trevor Burnard, "Hearing Slave Voices: The Fiscal's Reports of Berbice and Demerara-Essequibo," *Archives* 27, no. 107 (October 2002): 120-33.

slaves, who intended to spread news of possible action throughout enslaved communities in Jamaica. Traveling beyond plantation boundaries, including to the market to buy or sell provisions, allowed slaves an avenue to discuss news outside of the earshot of overseers and bookkeepers.⁵⁰ As evidenced in these trials, discussions of resistance or discontent occurred on the margins of the landscape, mainly at night by the slave houses during meetings or dances outside the authority of the overseer.⁵¹

In the first months of 1824, the parish of St. George witnessed three slave trials all connected to a plot in which “a system of cooperation had been established.”⁵² According to the justices present at the trial in the parish of St. George: “we are led to believe that a most extensive and diabolical plot has been laid among the slaves in this parish, which we are apprehensive may still be carried into effect unless vigilant measures are taken to prevent its bursting forth.” Evidence against the various slaves alleged that a group had held several meetings at slave houses on Balcarres estate and a dance at the slave houses at Lonely Grove plantation, both in the parish of St. George. One of the court’s main witnesses for several of these trials, a slave belonging to Mullett Hall named Jean Baptiste Corberand, testified that the slaves at Balcarres frequently met on Saturday nights and mustered.⁵³ Corberand’s testimonies frequently told the court what they

⁵⁰ Michael Mullin, *Africa in America: Slave Acculturation and Resistance in the American South and the British Caribbean* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1992), 127.

⁵¹ Walter Johnson, “Time and Revolution in African America: Temporality and the History of Atlantic Slavery” in ed., Thomas Bender, *Rethinking American History in a Global Age* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 156.

⁵² *Letter from William Bullock to Honourable Samuel Vaughan in Papers Relating to...*, no. 15, 82.

⁵³ See Testimony of J.B. Corberand and Charles Mack in *Papers Relating to...*, 88-92. Corberand and Mack both testified that slaves would meet at cow-pen on Balcarres estate and drill in regiments, primarily with sticks in lieu of guns.

wanted to hear, as he had been implicated in the plot and proved to be another slave who moved throughout the country.

Corberand admitted to his role in the plots to rebel, and served as a key source of information throughout the conspiracy trial, however his testimonies frequently varied about certain pieces of information. Corberand's multiple testimonies differed on whether Henry Oliver cut his finger or his hand during the oath, whether some people or only one individual from St. Domingue (Haiti), which estates held slaves who attended the meetings to muster, and other details about the gathering.⁵⁴ On July 12, 1824 *The Public Advertiser* of Jamaica printed that, "the evidence of Jean Baptiste Corberand... is wholly unworthy of credit... Corberand was always ready to swear to any thing which could tend, in his opinion, to raise own consequence. We have heard him with our own ears, in a court of justice, detail before a jury impossibilities, absurdities, and inconsistencies."⁵⁵ While detained in the gaol of Kingston, Corberand managed to escape and disappear from official records in Jamaica after July of 1824. Ultimately, Corberand must be understood as a court witness who saw serious benefit in shouldering blame elsewhere.⁵⁶

⁵⁴ For more evidence of the problems of Corberand's testimonies see "Testimony of Dr. Corberand" in *Papers Relating to...*, 100 and "Testimony of Prince," 108; and *The Slave Colonies of Great Britain; or A Picture of Negro Slavery, Drawn by the Colonists Themselves; Being an Abstract Laid Recently Laid Before Parliament On That Subject*, (London, 1825), 134.

⁵⁵ July 12, 1824 *The Public Advertiser of Jamaica* in *The Slave Colonies of Great Britain...*, 135.

⁵⁶ Corberand's testimonies also demonstrate the limitations of these trials, as the evidence against Jack and Prince at Balcarres led to these bench notes: "Prince and J.B. Corberand had a warm altercation, asking questions and running into long stories, but giving no direct answers." in *Papers Relating to...*, 107. Did Prince accuse Corberand of lying or was he upset that Corberand had betrayed the rebels? These testimonies do not preserve the voices of slaves completely, and frequently present what the court found to be significant more than the reality of the trial.

The frequency of the meetings aside, the court held serious concern over one meeting where the slaves supposedly administered an oath to rebel. Henry Oliver, one of the key figures of the plot, cut his finger to administer a blood oath with the obeah-man Jack.⁵⁷ According to the testimony of Charles Mack, the slaves met at one of their houses, “the house was crowded and there was a basin in the middle. The obeah man mixed blood, rum and something else and every one drank of it.”⁵⁸ The overseer at Balcarres confirmed that Oliver’s hand had two cuts on his right hand (one on his middle finger where Mack testified he cut it) and that he, the overseer, had dressed Oliver’s hand before Christmas. Concern over the oath dominated the remainder of the testimonies; as for the court it represented a serious intent to rebel.⁵⁹

On April 7, 1824, a month after the trial of Henry Oliver and other slaves on Balcarres estate, the court tried the alleged obeah-man Jack for his role in the oath and conspiracy. Much like Oliver’s finger, physical evidence of Jack’s obeah instruments and Oliver’s hand demonstrated that an oath or meeting occurred in some capacity. While other trials relied on witness testimony to reconstruct and understand the actions of rebels, Jack provided the court with his confession the following day on April 8, 1824. Jack confessed that the slaves at Balcarres possessed guns and that an oath did occur at

⁵⁷ For more on obeah see Randy Browne, “The ‘Bad Business’ of Obeah: Power, Authority and the Politics of Slave Culture in the British Caribbean” *The William and Mary Quarterly* 68 no. 3 (July 2011), 451-480; Diana Paton, *Obeah and Other Powers: The Politics of Caribbean Religion and Healing* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012) and Dianne M. Stewart, *Three Eyes for the Journey: African Dimensions of the Jamaican Religious Experience* (New York, 2005).

⁵⁸ *The King vs. Oliver, Henry &c. in Papers Relating to...*, 88.

⁵⁹ See Browne, “The ‘Bad Business’ of Obeah,” 456. Jamaica enacted an anti-obeah law in Jamaica in 1760, after evidence demonstrated that these obeah-men played some role in an insurrection entitled Tacky’s Rebellion. Other colonies soon followed as obeah came to be understood as linked to slave resistance.

the meeting at James Thompson's house.⁶⁰ Additionally, he confessed that approximately fifty slaves attended the meetings at the cow-pen and slave houses in Balcarres and admitted to administering the oath to those assembled. On a fundamental level, the supposed swear further proves the actions of the enslaved outside the watchful eyes of the overseer. Meetings and conversations that did not conform to 'buckras' wishes typically had little to no consequences if conducted outside the overseers recognized space of authority.

Evidence in the 1824 trials for rebellion conspiracy demonstrated that some of the slaves had a degree of mobility, allowing them to move from estate to estate and discuss news throughout the island.⁶¹ Certain slaves traveled throughout Jamaica, discussing news with several communities. For Henry Oliver of Balcarres estate, the presumed leader of the plot to rebel during the trials at St. George, numerous witnesses testified that he walked around the country to tell other enslaved communities of their plot to revolt. In the confession of Jack, one of the alleged rebels, he admitted, "Henry Oliver used to walk every week over the country...chiefly among the estates."⁶² Jack's confession also alludes to Henry Oliver's concern of how to spread the news to other plantations that Balcarres had revolted. Jean Baptiste Corberand testified to the same effect, that Oliver frequently walked around the country in order to tell other slaves to join the plot.⁶³ The other main witness testimony in the case against Henry Oliver and other slaves at

⁶⁰ "Confession of Jack," in *Papers Relating to...*, 109.

⁶¹ da Costa, *Crowns of Glory, Tears of Blood*, 184.

⁶² "Confession of Jack, before me [William Orgill], this 8th day of January 1824 in *Papers Relating to...*, 108.

⁶³ *The King v. Henry Oliver and others* in *Papers Relating to...*, 88.

Balcarres by a runaway named Charles Mack may have led to the trial of Unity-Hall slaves. Mack claimed that, “a man named Jemmy, belonging to Spring Garden who informed him...Spring Garden people were well provided with arms and ammunition, and had fixed upon a time to revolt.”⁶⁴

On January 28, 1824, three weeks after the trials at St George, the courts tried slaves from Unity-Hall and Spring Garden estates in the parish of St. James. As Charles Mack had claimed in his testimony during the trials at St. George, slaves at Unity-Hall testified that Jemmy Campbell, who belonged to a Mr. Whittingham, moved throughout the island discussing news. Jemmy lived in the mountains of Jamaica but held a certain degree of mobility, according to the testimony of Mrs. Whittingham. Professing he had asked her about recent news, “I said I did not know. He then said he had been at the Bay some time...He told me eight negroes had been hanged in St. Mary’s, and fourteen more were to be tried.”⁶⁵ According to the testimonies of Robert Campbell and Eleanor Brown who belonged to Unity-Hall, Jemmy asked slaves at Unity-Hall about the news by the seaside, mainly asking if word had come that way about the slaves being free.⁶⁶ While witnesses made an attempt to point fingers at the prisoners and away from their own involvement in the plot, Jemmy’s appearance in multiple trials and the testimony provided by Charles Mack, Mrs. Whittingham, and slaves at Unity-Hall demonstrated that some slaves, like Jemmy, freely moved throughout Jamaica in order to learn news.

⁶⁴ “Examination of Charles Mack, a slave belonging to Cambridge estate, in Portland, this 7th day of January 1824” in *Papers Relating to...*, 85.

⁶⁵ *Report of the Trial of Fourteen Negroes*, 14.

⁶⁶ See *Report of the Trial of Fourteen Negroes*, 14-17.

Testimonies against Jemmy did not solely claim that he traveled from place to place to rally slaves to his cause, but that he wanted to know the news and that he reciprocated by telling others the rumors he had heard. Jemmy spent time at the Bay and heard of the trials there, not only did he share this news with his owner but presumably with slaves on other estates as well. Evidence against Oliver as the organizer of the plot to rebel becomes complicated, as those who testified that he moved throughout the island, Corberand and Jack, proved to be key figures in the plot at Balcarres as well. By pointing out Oliver as the leader of the plot, and the only one among them who attempted to rally slaves from other estates throughout the parish, Jack and Corberand defused the significance of their own roles. Jack confessed to be a frequent runaway, first harbored at Mullet Hall until he came to Balcarres. His account of how he came to Balcarres also demonstrates how mobility of individuals, even runaways, allowed for connections and communications among slaves in various parts of Jamaica. Jack told the court that J.B. Corberand “carried” him to Balcarres, and promised him a reward to steal a gun from town, as Corberand had tried unsuccessfully to do steal one himself.⁶⁷ Any proof of guns or rewards aside, Jack’s confession suggests that runaways also had a part in resistance, namely their expected ability to move between estate boundaries more easily.

Witnesses in both cases testified that Jemmy Campbell and Henry Oliver asked or spread news of rebellion, and labeled them as the leaders of rebellion. While slaves on the estates in Jamaica did not form a cohesive group with the same goals and ideas, they communicated with one another and attempted to discuss news throughout the island. At

⁶⁷ “Confession of Jack,” in *Papers Relating to...*, 109.

the end of the trial of Henry Oliver and other slaves at Balcarres, the report by Robert Gray, the Senior Magistrate in the parish, states that, “Henry Oliver, said a great deal, and tried to exculpate himself; said that he was as well off as if he was free, and wanted for nothing.”⁶⁸ Despite Henry Oliver’s defense that he wanted for nothing and therefore would never think to coordinate a plot to rebel, the evidence given by Corberand and others constructed him to be the leader and organizer of the rebellion and the court accepted this as truth. According to Robert Gray, the trial proved Henry Oliver to be the “principal person engaged in the conspiracy.”⁶⁹ Of the seven slaves brought to trial from Balcarres estate, only Henry Oliver faced execution by hanging for his role in the plot. At the trial of slaves at Unity-Hall and Spring Garden, Jemmy Campbell, along with William Kerr, Trelawny and Phillip Haughton, faced deportation from Jamaica for their roles in the conspiracy. Following the slaveholders’ assumption of a tranquil slave population, the courts concluded that by getting rid of the presumed slave leaders would get rid of the problem of rebellion.

In the case of the trials at St. George’s and St. James, meetings and dances at night in the slave houses set the scene for conversations outside the authority of the overseer.⁷⁰ At Unity-Hall estate in St. James, one prisoner named Mary Ann Reid held a dance at her house, which several witnesses and prisoners attended. The overseer at Unity-Hall, a Mr. Aikman, testified that a week before Christmas he, “gave leave to

⁶⁸ The King v. Oliver, Henry & c. in *Papers Relating to...*, 90.

⁶⁹ Letter from Robert Gray, Esq. to William Bullock dated January 23, 1824 (no. 19) in *Papers Relating to...*, 92.

⁷⁰ See Eugene Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, 234-240.

Adam Webb to have a dance, but I did not give leave to Mary Ann Reid that night."⁷¹

Aikman made this decision primarily because, while Adam Webb's house resided within two hundred yards of the overseer's house, he would have to walk half a mile to reach Mary Ann Reid's house (along with the rest of the slave houses at Unity- Hall).⁷²

Distance from the houses of the overseers and slaveholders provided slaves with the ability to discuss topics and news outside of the established framework of slaveholder authority.

Jane McDonald, a slave at Unity-Hall, assured the court that none of the slaves at Unity-Hall (prisoners included) wanted to be free. However, "the free story was quite talk at Montego-Bay, and they heard of it, and came home and talked of it. They said they heard the negroes were to be free."⁷³ Both in the parish of St. James, the enslaved population at Unity-Hall most likely visited Montego Bay for their trips to the Sunday market, another venue for conversation, as Mr. Aikman's testimony provides: "I mentioned to Mr. Watt that there were meetings at the bridge on Sunday mornings: there were one hundred negroes-negroes going to market...I consider they only went there to buy and seek provisions."⁷⁴ While the courts attempted to craft these testimonies into evidence of rebellion and constant mutterings against slavery, they also demonstrate one mode in which recent news and rumors spread throughout the enslaved communities in Jamaica. Trips to the market place and hosting dances outside the authority of the

⁷¹ *Report of the Trial of Fourteen Negroes*, 17.

⁷² *Ibid.*

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 29.

⁷⁴ *Report of the Trial of Fourteen Negroes*, 19.

overseer allowed for rumors of freedom and new laws to pass between people and estates.

III. Origins of Rumors and Construction of Memory

Meetings to plan resistance or to discuss recent news frequently occurred on the margins of slaveholders' authority.⁷⁵ While we cannot fully assess whether slaves drank Wilberforce's health as they plotted to revolt, or that they swore oaths to rebel, these trials demonstrate, to a certain extent, the lives of slaves outside the gaze of the overseer. Details of emancipation, abolition and extra days off for slaves all parallel testimonies given in various conspiracy trials. These testimonies reveal a world of rumors and discussions among the enslaved population that can be, in part, reflected in debates held among the slaveholders during the same time period. In trials of slave plots and insurrection in the British West Indies, rumors of freedom from the King or another individual continually emerge as a reason for resistance.

Shortly after the discovery of the planned insurrection in 1816, Matthew Lewis wrote in his journal that part of the Song of the King of the Eboes discussed the significance of his arrival. In reality, Lewis had come to see his estates for the first time but according to, "this report, 'good King George and good Mr. Wilberforce' are stated to have 'given me a paper' to set the negroes free."⁷⁶ Lewis' arrival demonstrates that, occasionally, news and reports being discussed among slaveholders intersected with news circulating within slave communities. Slaves keen to interpret and discuss recent news picked up slaveholders' conversations, at the dinner table, around the house, or in the

⁷⁵ Eugene Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, 236-250.

⁷⁶ Lewis, ed., Judith Terry, *Journal of a West India Proprietor*, 142.

public markets and brought the information within their own community. News within slaveholder circles, like the arrival of Matthew Lewis in 1816, could be picked up by slaves' eager to uncover any piece of gossip or intelligence and subsequently reshaped to fit and impact their own lives.

A report from October 9, 1823 by the book-keeper at Caledonia estate in Westmoreland claimed he “heard a negro complain of their having Saturday stopped...when another said, never mind, they would soon have Friday also.”⁷⁷ In his testimony at the conspiracy trial of slaves in St. George on January 19, 1824 Jean Baptiste Corberand claimed that as he walked over to the slave houses one day, he saw them overcrowded. “The law was read, that they were to have three days in the week.”⁷⁸ One day after the trial of slaves in St. George, a slave woman named Venus in the same parish was tried for conspiracy. Adele, slave woman belonging to the same estate as Venus, testified against her: “if she [Venus] could get nothing else, she would take a mortar stick to help kill the white people; [*What else did Venus say? or Did Venus say there was to be a new law?*] Venus said there was to be a new law...[*What else did she say?*] at Christmas negroes would be free.”⁷⁹ In her own defense, Venus lashed out against Adele stating, “Adele said negroes were to have three days every week.”⁸⁰ With Venus' trial occurring one day after the larger trial of slaves at Balcarres estate in St. James, the court looked for evidence that supported what they had already uncovered.

⁷⁷ *Letter from S. Vaughan to William Bullock in Papers Relating to...*, 45.

⁷⁸ “Testimony of J.B. Corberand” in *The King vs. Oliver, Henry &c...*,89.

⁷⁹ *The King v. Venus*, 20th January 1824 (Buff Bay, Court House) in *Papers Relating to...*, 110.

⁸⁰ *The King v. Venus in Papers Relating to...* 111.

Interestingly enough, testimonies did not reveal that these slaves believed themselves to be free, but that they would be given Friday off according to a ‘new law.’

Several witnesses in the parish of St. James followed the testimonies of Corberand, Adele, and Venus at St. George’s and stated the slaves discussed having an extra day of freedom. In the case of slaves at Unity-Hall, one slave, Daniel, testified that he had attended the illegal dance at Mary Ann Reid’s house on Saturday a week before Christmas, where the alleged discussions of conspiracy occurred.⁸¹ According to Daniel, one of the conspirators Garrett Rainie approached him as a stranger. “He asked me how the law was that side. I said what law? He said the law about Friday and Saturday.”⁸² While Daniel denied any other discussions of conspiracy (i.e. about Wilberforce), possibly to absolve himself, his testimony revealed that conversations about changing conditions for the enslaved possibly occurred. Other witnesses testified to the same effect, that discussions about Friday and Saturday had taken place at Mary Ann Reid’s house that night.⁸³ Sam Wyllie testified that he attended the dance at Mary Ann Reid’s and that on his walk home Proby, another slave but not one accused of conspiracy (or brought as a witness), began to talk about Friday and Saturday. “Proby said that we were going to get Friday and Saturday, and if we did not get Friday and Saturday we should be free.”⁸⁴ At the trial of Golden Grove slaves in June, one witness Edward Chambers, a

⁸¹ *Report of the Trial of Fourteen Negroes*, 13.

⁸² *Report of the Trial of Fourteen Negroes*, 13..

⁸³ See *Report of the Trial of Fourteen Negroes*, 6-11.

⁸⁴ *Ibid*, 16.

slave at Golden Grove, asserted that all the prisoners talked about being free, that “all people studied about free.”⁸⁵

Apart from claims and assertions from the enslaved that they had already been given their freedom, discussions of a new law appear in several slave testimonies. Not only do these ideas repeatedly emerge within the trial of Venus, they can be seen in the multiple conspiracy plots discovered in the span of the first few months of 1824. These connections become crucial in attempting to understand how information moved within one community or spread to others. Apart from leading questions from the court and the problems of slave testimonies as discussed above, all of these testimonies contain a similar iteration of news. In each of these conspiracy trials readings or discussions of a new law seem to have taken place within communities that would give them Friday or complete freedom from slavery. In his recent work, historian D.A. Dunkley associates these sorts of discussions amongst the enslaved in Jamaica as assertions that they had always been free.⁸⁶ Dunkley constructs the concept of ‘slave freedom’ to argue that an internal conviction of freedom always existed within the enslaved, which continually altered slavery as an institution until its abolition.⁸⁷ Apart from internal conviction, slaves discussed rumors of freedom in a particular historical context that reflected both the situation in Jamaica and the broader British West Indies.

While only the testimony of Corberand presented a possible instance of literacy as he claimed that at the slave houses in Balcarres “the law was read” (which should be

⁸⁵ *The King v. Clarke et als. belonging to Golden Grove Estate in Papers Relating to...*, 126.

⁸⁶ D.A. Dunkley, *Agency of the Enslaved: Jamaica and the Culture of Freedom in the Atlantic World* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2013), 1.

⁸⁷ D.A. Dunkley, *Agency of the Enslaved*, 10.

accepted cautiously), newspapers present one avenue to analyze what conversations occurred in the slaveholders' circles at the same time as these trials. Rather than attempt to demonstrate slave literacy, analyses of these newspaper reports prove that important topics did not remain on print but poured into the dialogue of the Jamaican public.⁸⁸ Interestingly enough, slave conversations of an extra day can be related, in some capacity, to one of the main issues discussed in the Jamaican newspapers during the same time period. Slaves picked up discussions about the Sunday markets, either through newspapers or conversations between slaveholders, planters or merchants in Jamaica, and incorporated the news into evidence of a rest from labor, another day of "freedom."

The discussion over the Sunday markets that the slave populations attended became a cause for concern by late 1823. Slaves from throughout the island attended the markets at Savannah-la-Mar, Montego Bay and other larger towns namely to sell the provisions they had cultivated on their plots.⁸⁹ Several Jamaican planters and colonists sent letters to the *Jamaica Journal and Kingston Chronicle* to offer thoughts for how to slowly move these markets to another day, or to eliminate them all together. An article from the *Kingston Chronicle* from November 8, 1823 asserted that the public has frequently discussed the Sunday markets and that many people "are of the opinion that Monday would be a better day for the market than Saturday."⁹⁰ In large part, slaveholders wished to abolish these Sunday markets to facilitate Christian knowledge among the enslaved population but disputed which day the market should be scheduled. Discussions

⁸⁸ Scott, "The Common Wind," 115.

⁸⁹ Matthew Lewis, *Journal of a West India Proprietor*, 54 and 71.

⁹⁰ *Jamaica Journal and Kingston Chronicle*, "The Sunday Markets," November 8, 1823, 470.

over the Sunday markets moved into political circles as the House of Assembly attempted to pass a clause in the Consolidated Slaw Law in November of 1823 that would move the day of the markets from Sunday to Monday. The nature of the clause meant to encourage slaveholders to permit their slaves to go to the markets on Monday, and to close shops on Sunday so the slaves would find themselves unable to purchase any goods.⁹¹

Newspaper articles welcomed for the public to share their opinions on this “interesting subject,” printing several responses in the following months from individuals either for or against moving the market to Monday. In a letter published on November 22, 1823 an individual self-titled the “Hermit in Vere” proclaimed the Sunday market to be essential, for if they moved the market to a weekday, “the remainder of the day would be spent in all manner of idle dissipation.”⁹² In both enslaved and slaveholder circles in 1823 and 1824, conversations about extra days became a frequently discussed topic. While news of this ‘new law’ do not match up word for word, they represent how news traveled among the enslaved communities. As the enslaved population talked at dances, meetings and trips to the market of a new law that would give them Friday, parallel discussions of moving the day of Sunday markets occurred among slaveholders, in the newspapers and within the House of Assembly. Fundamentally, these exchanges center on a weekday being allotted to the enslaved to not work. The discussion of the markets became a topic of debate in Jamaica in late 1823 and, at its core, the information centered on giving another day to the slaves.

⁹¹ *Jamaica Journal and Kingston Chronicle*, “Review of Politics,” November 15, 1823, 483.

⁹² The Hermit in Vere, *Jamaica Journal and Kingston Chronicle*, “To the Jamaican Journal,” written October 22, 1823 and published November 22, 1823, 492.

These trials and the debates in the newspapers demonstrate, in some capacity, how the two worlds within Jamaica interacted and interpreted news. Slaves in Jamaica maintained avenues to discuss and construct news from the various areas of the island and, in some instances, throughout the Atlantic. Rebellion in Demerara and the British attempts at amelioration loomed on the minds of Jamaican slaveholders throughout 1823 and into 1824, and their conversations about the subjects moved into slave circles as well. Questions of conspiracy aside, these trials shed light on how slaves in Jamaica came to understand and discuss current events that pertained to their existence. Public and private spaces, primarily at times outside the established power relationship between master and slave, allowed slaves to circulate information and discuss recent news. Public trips to the Sunday market and the individual mobility of some slaves allowed for these conversations to move beyond the boundaries of one estate and established a loose web of stories and gossip that traveled throughout enslaved communities. Although not always the case, relationships and discussions between estates did occasionally manifest in armed resistance.

By the end of June in 1824, slaveholders concern over their slaves seemed well warranted, as they understood several slave rebellions to be suppressed. In mid July, insurrection broke out on Argyle and Golden Grove estates in the parish of Hanover, physical resistance that confirmed, in the minds of slaveholders, their fears. These two groups remained in communication with each other and made plans to resist collectively, alongside a third neighboring estate, Alexandria. The rebels left their estates and hid out in the bushes, fighting the militia until their capture a few days later. The collective

decision on the part of Argyle, Golden Grove, and Alexandria to rebel provides a window into understanding how communication of freedom and plans to rebel occurred between various communities. The “Argyle Rebellion,” demonstrates that these enslaved communities did not exist independently of each other, and slaves on neighboring estates and parishes discussed recent news and, occasionally, worked in cooperation with one another.

The resistance began with the burning of the trash houses on Alexandria estate on Sunday night. A witness to the Argyle trial, John Mowatt, remembered the fire: “John Miller said Alexandria negroes were to join them...John Miller wanted to meet the Golden Grove negroes.”⁹³ Mary Wyllie, at the Golden Grove trial, testified to a similar effect: “On Sunday night William Downer brought news to John Clarke that everybody did fight; that Argyle negroes did fight, and that Alexandria negroes had set fire to the trash-house.”⁹⁴ Testimonies revealed that conversations about resistance plans existed between the estates. William Roach of Argyle estate claimed that one man from Silver Grove (another neighboring plantation) came by one day to ask when the Argyle people planned to fight.⁹⁵ According to Rachel Crooks, another witness to the Argyle trial, she passed one of the Argyle prisoners after dinner one Tuesday who, “met another man, George Reid (not a prisoner at Argyle or Golden Grove trials), shook hands with him,

⁹³ *Trial of Colin Innis, John Malcolm, and Big Tom Brown, Saturday, 17th of July, 1824 in Papers Relating to...*, 122.

⁹⁴ *The King v. Clarke et als. belonging to Golden Grove in Papers Relating to...*, 122.

⁹⁵ *The King v. Jarrett et als. belonging to Argyle Estate in Papers Relating to...*, 116.

and asked him if he was ready...I called him, and asked him what he was going to do, he said he was going to do bad.”⁹⁶

The neighboring estates of Argyle, Golden Grove and Alexandria came into contact with one other frequently enough to plan resistance, discuss when they would begin, and how they would alert the other estates to their plot. Although they become difficult to fully uncover, networks of communication existed between neighboring estates and, more broadly, between enslaved communities throughout Jamaica. These networks did not form a cohesive unit but manifested themselves through opportunities to travel to the markets, to congregate at dances, and from news heard from slaves with individual mobility. News and rumors passed between communities, not necessarily as plots to rebel or attempts to fight but to discuss events, recent trials and other actions against their communities. Three slaves at Argyle, John Clarke, John Miller, and Ben Reynolds killed themselves rather than be captured and tried. The slave court at the town of Lucia in the parish of Hanover tried eleven slaves on Argyle estate and seven at Golden Grove for rebellion, finding them all guilty and condemning thirteen to execution. The court decided to hang the eleven slaves from Argyle on the Mill Yard on that property, and the two from Golden Grove at the market place in the town of Lucea, a highly visible and permanent message to slaves about the consequences of open resistance.

Seven years after the conspiracies uncovered in 1824, Jamaica became the sight for one of the largest slave insurrections in the history of the New World. Soon after the

⁹⁶ Ibid, 121.

outbreak of rebellion, governor of Jamaica the Earl of Belmore quickly established martial law and brought prisoners and witnesses to court. Officials brought one free woman of Montego Bay, Elizabeth Ball, to trial for exciting slaves in the market place. One witness claimed to observe, “a great stirring in the market there with several groups of negroes” as Ball spoke to the crowd, “telling them the newspapers say they are free.”⁹⁷ Another witness affirmed that Ball spoke to the slaves about freedom, and that they should fight the white people, “the same as the Argyle people.”⁹⁸ Much like the name of Wilberforce, the history of the Argyle people became inserted in the history of slaves in Jamaica not only as a mode of resistance, but a means of shared experience to understand their place in their own history.

⁹⁷ “Courts Martial, Montego Bay: Slave Trials,” January 14, 1832, C.O. 137/185, 116.

⁹⁸ “Courts Martial, Montego Bay: Slave Trials,” January 14, 1832, C.O. 137/185, 117.

CHAPTER TWO

THE QUESTION OF SLAVERY IN THE WEST INDIES

The slave rebellion in Demerara and the subsequent rebellious conspiracies uncovered in Jamaica pushed questions of slavery and its abolition into various-and several new-sectors of the British public, and subsequently into Parliament. Women in Great Britain, figures involved in the prior abolition of the slave trade in 1807, Jamaican colonists and clergy, absentee planters residing in Great Britain, and members of Parliament all held a stake in the debate over West Indian slavery and added their voices to the discussion. According to historian David Brion Davis, “1823 happened to be a pivotal one in the regeneration of the antislavery movement in Britain as mostly religious forces continued to shape the complex cultural response to Britain’s rapidly developing industrial society.”⁹⁹ The resurgence of the antislavery movement in Britain contributed to those in Britain and the West Indies invested in slave plantations and West Indian trade to push back and argue for the continuance of slavery. After 1823, debates on the abolition of slavery in the West Indies took on a distinctly Atlantic framework, as free blacks of the United States began to link their cause to that of the slaves in the West Indies. As the British public debated over the issue of slavery in pamphlets and attempted to push their conversations into Parliament, abolitionists in the United States became increasingly concerned with the antislavery movement in Great Britain.

After the Demerara rebellion, a meeting of colonists in Jamaica concluded that abolitionism was nothing less than “meditated robbery,” but “admitted slavery was a

⁹⁹ David Brion Davis, *Inhuman Bondage*, (New York, 2006), 214.

curse-upon themselves and upon their cousins in the United States.”¹⁰⁰ The fear of rebellion coupled with the resurgent abolition campaign heightened tensions in Jamaica and other British colonies in the West Indies. As colonists became increasingly aware of the possibility of abolition from Parliament, Jamaican slaveholders publicly protested any ameliorative measures proposed and lashed out against those they considered to be connected to the abolition movement. The West Indies became a battleground for pro and antislavery ideologues in Great Britain as well as the United States, a space separate from both countries but one that came to be seen as an integral part over their discussions of slavery and abolition.

I. An Atlantic Struggle for Freedom

Discussions on the condition of slavery and its abolition in the West Indies did not remain limited to Great Britain and its colonies but traveled to the United States as well. Newspapers throughout the United States, predominantly in the Southern states, reported on slave rebellions in the West Indies, particularly after large-scale slave rebellions, such as the one Demerara in 1823 or in Jamaica in 1831.¹⁰¹ While colonists in the West Indies and slaveholders in the United States felt a connection through slavery and their historical ties to Great Britain, free black activists in the United States looked across the Atlantic and linked West Indian slaves to the struggle of blacks in the United States. The work of activists such as David Walker and the newspaper *Freedom's Journal* expanded their scope of abolitionist rhetoric beyond the United States and reported on the problems of

¹⁰⁰ Rugemer, *The Problem of Emancipation*, 87.

¹⁰¹ For a more detailed examination of newspaper reports on slave rebellions see Rugemer, *The Problem of Emancipation*, 101-108.

slavery in the West Indies, constructing a transatlantic struggle for the abolition of slavery.¹⁰² *Freedom's Journal*, the first African-American owned and operated newspaper in the United States and founded by Reverend Peter Williams Jr. and other free black men in New York City, extensively covered the British abolition movement and attempted to engage the entire English-speaking black Atlantic through subscription agents in Haiti and England.¹⁰³ Connections in port cities more than likely led to these newspapers coming to the West Indies in some form or fashion, contributing to West Indian planters' sentiment that they held a precarious position within Great Britain as slaveholders during fervent abolitionist feeling.¹⁰⁴

David Walker's work, *Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World*, first appeared in Boston in 1829 but spoke to an audience beyond America, looking closely at Great Britain as a model to be exemplified by the United States in their treatment toward blacks. For Walker, the English "are the best friends the coloured people have upon earth. They are the greatest benefactors we have."¹⁰⁵ Born free in Wilmington, North Carolina, Walker traveled throughout the United States and settled in Boston in 1825. Walker's *Appeal* attempted to unite free colored people throughout the world with slaves, connecting them through their struggles under white oppression. Walker's outrage stemmed from the oppression of blacks in America-slaves and free alike-and he claimed that: "we (coloured people) and our children are brutes!! And of course are, and ought to

¹⁰² Ibid, 98.

¹⁰³ Rugemer, *The Problem of Emancipation*, 103.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid, 100-115.

¹⁰⁵ Peter P. Hinks, ed., *David Walker's Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World*, (University Park, PA, 2000), 42.

be SLAVES to the American people and their children forever!!”¹⁰⁶ Walker’s *Appeal* focused on the religious and moral injustices of slavery, and hoped to encourage action against the oppression felt by blacks.

Although a majority of Walker’s pamphlet focused on the United States, he held up Great Britain as a model that Americans should follow. According to Walker, the English “have done one hundred times more for the melioration of our condition than all the other nations of the earth put together.”¹⁰⁷ Although not explicitly mentioned, Walker’s discussion of the English alludes to the work of those abolitionists in Great Britain like Granville Sharp and William Wilberforce and their work in outlawing the slave trade. Walker’s pamphlet reached out across the Atlantic and pointed free blacks in America toward the English abolitionists who had ended the slave trade in 1807 and now meant to eliminate slavery throughout the British Empire. “If any of us see fit to go away,” Walker wrote, “go to those who have been for many years, and are now our greatest earthly friends and benefactors—the English.”¹⁰⁸ Walker did not only construct a connection amongst the colored people of the world but also between those who would work to loosen the chains of slavery. Walker associated the black abolitionist project in America with the work of those in Britain, all while recognizing a serious tension between the work of the English like Wilberforce and those colonists who held slaves.

Underlying Walker’s recognition of the English as “our greatest earthly friends and benefactors” was the problem of slavery in the West Indies. While Walker praised

¹⁰⁶ Hinks, ed., *David Walker’s Appeal*, 9.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid*, 43.

¹⁰⁸ Hinks, *David Walker’s Appeal*, 58.

the work of English abolitionists, he admitted that Great Britain maintains “colonies now in the West Indies, which oppress us *sorely*.”¹⁰⁹ In an extensive footnote, Walker pays particular attention to Jamaica to “show the world further, how servile the coloured people are.”¹¹⁰ For Walker, the island serves as a prime example of white tyranny, as 15,000 whites keep 335,000 blacks in “wretchedness and degradation.”¹¹¹ Although distributed primarily throughout the United States, Walker’s text highlights the disconnect between the West Indian colonies and Great Britain in the 1820s and into the 1830s. While the abolition movement in Great Britain gained traction, colonists in the West Indies remained steadfast in their commitment to slavery. Individuals like David Walker recognized that although the West Indies remained a part of the British Empire, slaveholders in those colonies had lost their economic and political importance in Great Britain as the debate over slavery intensified and economic interests shifted to India. While West Indian colonists denounced any ameliorative measure that would move Great Britain towards abolition of slavery, abolitionist leaders such as William Wilberforce, Thomas Buxton and Elizabeth Heyrick back in Great Britain began to be seen as champions of the Atlantic struggle for freedom.

Once in Boston, Walker involved himself in a number of abolition projects, including his role as the principal agent in Boston for *Freedom’s Journal*, rallying critical support for the newspaper in the early months after its inception in 1827.¹¹² Reverend

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 43.

¹¹⁰ Ibid, 66.

¹¹¹ Ibid. According to Hinks, Walker’s statistics for the Jamaican slave population are approximately accurate.

¹¹² Hinks, *David Walker’s Appeal*, xxiii-xxiv.

Samuel Cornish and John Brown Russwurm two born free blacks first published *Freedom's Journal* in March of 1827.¹¹³ Although primarily targeting free black abolitionists in the United States, *Freedom's Journal* extensively covered events in the West Indies and Great Britain, providing frequent reports on Britain's attempts to abolish slavery. The newspaper demonstrated that slaves in the West Indies had friends on either side of the Atlantic, and that black abolitionists in the United States had picked up their cause and linked it to the condition of slavery in their own country.

Freedom's Journal kept its readers abreast of information from the West Indies and frequently reprinted antislavery literature from Great Britain. One such article entitled, "What Does Your Sugar Cost?" appeared in *Freedom's Journal* on August 17, 1827. The article narrated a conversation between two women as one explained to the other that the true cost for sugar in Great Britain was the blood of slaves in the West Indies. One woman laments at the end of the article that in Jamaica "Eight hundred thousand have been brought there since [1690], and now there are only three hundred and sixty thousand alive. Now do you understand what your sugar cost! Life! Life! The life of man, the life of woman and little children."¹¹⁴ The publication of these articles served to bring the realities of West Indian slavery back home to Great Britain and depict the horrors of West Indian slavery to abolitionists the United States.¹¹⁵ *Freedom's Journal* claimed to show the full picture of slavery in the West Indies, attacking planters for not

¹¹³ Rugemer, *The Problem of Emancipation*, 103.

¹¹⁴ "What Does your Sugar Cost?" *Freedom's Journal*, August 17, 1827.

¹¹⁵ The concept of bringing colonial violence "home" comes from James Epstein, *Scandal of Colonial Rule: Power and Subversion in the British Atlantic during the Age of Revolution*, (New York, 2012).

providing the “full” truth. “Nothing is so stubborn as facts,” an article published in May of 1827 boldly stated, and went on to attack the claims about slavery in the West Indies made by the editor of the *New York Evening Post*. In order to demonstrate the “truth” of West Indian slavery the writer of this article provided evidence from a file of Jamaica papers that contained eighty-five advertisements for run-away slaves. “If 85 cases of this kind, in two very small newspapers, are not sufficient to refute all that has been said or written, by Mr. C. and his correspondents, there is no reliance to be placed in facts and demonstrations.”¹¹⁶ The work of *Freedom’s Journal* intended to spread their own perception of West Indian slavery to the United States and demonstrate the need for black and white abolitionists in United States to see the slaves in the West Indies as their brothers equally oppressed under the institution of slavery.

Much like David Walker’s *Appeal*, several articles in the *Freedom’s Journal* looked to Great Britain as a friend of the slaves, lauding them as philanthropists and working under “enlightened benevolence.”¹¹⁷ The efforts being made by abolitionists in England did not go unnoticed by the free blacks in the United States. Abolitionist supporters like David Walker used the model of Great Britain and the activity of its anti-slavery campaign to discuss American slavery through a different lens. During the 1810s and 1820s British government experimented with the installation of various measures to ameliorate slavery in the West Indies, in an attempt to preserve the institution.¹¹⁸ For

¹¹⁶ “Slavery in the West Indies.” *Freedom’s Journal*, May 11, 1827.

¹¹⁷ “Abolition of Slavery.” *Freedom’s Journal*, August 29, 1828; “People of Colour.” *Christian Spectator*, March 23, 1827 and “Abolition of Slavery.” *Freedom’s Journal*, August 29, 1828.

¹¹⁸ For more on the amelioration of slavery in the British Empire, see Randy Browne, “Surviving Slavery: Politics, Power, and Authority in the British Caribbean, 1807-1834;” (Ph.D. diss., UNC-

abolitionists in the United States, the question became what to do with the southern states entrenched in slavery. An article originally published by the *Christian Spectator* explicitly asked this question, claiming that something must be done soon or else “the African cause may excited as much sympathy and as liberal contributions in England and in the West Indies...Let the alarm then be continually sounded. The British slaves will soon be free citizens. Destruction awaits us [in the United States], unless something effectual is done. Something must be done.”¹¹⁹ The question of slavery connected the antislavery projects in the United States and Great Britain. Abolitionists across the Atlantic concerned themselves with the implications of Great Britain abolishing slavery, and hoped that the alarm sounded by the British would reach the ears of those in the United States.

By attempting to provide its readers with an understanding of the horrors of slavery in the West Indies as well as in the United States, the work of David Walker and the *Freedom's Journal* strongly situated themselves and their work in favor of abolition in the West Indies. Although colonists focused their petitions to maintain slavery on the audience back in Great Britain, the abolitionist project moved beyond the scope of Great Britain and its colonies. Reflecting on his travels to Jamaica in 1832, Theodore Foulks summarized the ability of abolitionists in Great Britain to spread their message and the

Chapel Hill, 2012); Seymour Drescher, *Abolition: A History of Slavery and Antislavery*, (New York, 2009); Dunkley, *Agency of the Enslaved*; Claudius K. Fergus, *Revolutionary Emancipation: Slavery and Abolitionism in the British West Indies*, (Baton Rouge, L.A., 2013); Adam Hochschild, *Bury the Chains: Prophets and Rebels in the Fight to Free an Empire's Slaves*, (Boston, 2005); Turner, *Slaves and Missionaries* and J. R. Ward, *British West Indian Slavery, 1750-1834: The Process of Amelioration*, (Oxford, 1988).

¹¹⁹ “People of Colour.” *Freedom's Journal*, March 23, 1827.

subsequent tension felt by West Indian colonists. “Their [the anti-slavery society] dogmata had crossed the Atlantic, and the labouring population of Jamaica was disturbed by undefined notions of liberty, which it was might be achieved by the resolute, and if necessary, military enforcement of the claim.”¹²⁰ Writing after the slave rebellion of 1831, Foulks laid significant blame for the insurrection on the abolitionists in Great Britain, but this passage also demonstrates the proliferation of abolition literature beyond England. Colonists in Jamaica and the rest of the West Indies recognized the mounting pressure levied against their position as slaveholders from both abolitionists in Great Britain as well as the United States.

II. Abolitionism Resurgent

As the events of 1823 in Demerara and Jamaica played out both in the colonies and back in Great Britain, members of the old abolition committee in Great Britain met in King’s Head Tavern and formed a new antislavery organization.¹²¹ They titled the organization the London Society for Mitigating and Gradually Abolishing the State of Slavery Throughout the British Dominions, and auxiliary societies throughout Great Britain quickly rallied to the cause. The Leicester Auxiliary Committee of the Anti-Slavery Society, headed by Thomas Babington, met on December 17th, 1823 to address the state of slavery in the West Indies. The committee went on to state that slavery was repugnant to the principles of the British Constitution and Christianity and determined the

¹²⁰ Theodore Foulks, *Eighteen Months in Jamaica: With Recollections of the Late Rebellion*, (London, 1833), 70-1.

¹²¹ Adam Hochschild, *Bury the Chains*, 323.

need for the interference of “an enlightened public, to circulate information and second the movements of Government, in this most just enterprise” of abolition.¹²²

The Anti-Slavery Society would become the primary group actively calling for Parliament to end slavery throughout the British Dominions, producing pamphlets, speeches, eyewitness accounts, and letters all centered around the horrors of West Indian slavery and the need for its abolition. Much like the movement to abolish the slave trade earlier in the nineteenth century the pattern of the antislavery campaign primarily used, “propaganda and popular petition campaigns followed by abolitionist motions in Parliament.”¹²³ While Wilberforce faded to the background of the movement after the publication of his *Appeal* in 1823, Thomas Fowell Buxton continued the campaign in Parliament, initially calling for amelioration rather than the full emancipation espoused by Wilberforce in his *Appeal*.

After the establishment of the Anti Slavery Society, pamphlets of antislavery literature circulated throughout Great Britain, each detailing the state of slavery in the West Indies to the larger public in the metropolis. One eyewitness account first published in the *Dublin Evening Mail* claimed to be unable to find a single “respectable” person in Jamaica and that on the island the “most disgusting sights that any part of the world can produce are to be witnessed here daily.”¹²⁴ The writer of the account decided to let the minds of the public imagine the ferocity of the slaveholders and their drivers through the

¹²² *An Address on the State of Slavery in the West India Islands, from the Committee of the Leicester Auxiliary, Anti-Slavery Society*, Anti-Slavery Society, ([London], 1823), 28.

¹²³ Drescher, *Abolition: A History of Slavery and Anti-Slavery*, 248.

¹²⁴ “Cruelties of West Indian Slavery at this Moment by an Eyewitness.” *Dublin Evening Mail*, Sept. 30, 1829; in *Recent, Affecting, and Important Information Respecting the State of Slavery in Jamaica*, Anti-Slavery Society, 5.

use of the whip. “To give you even a remote conception of it [the whip] will be impossible; would to God that I could, and that I was enabled to raise my feeble voice so as to reach the ear of every person in England and Ireland.”¹²⁵ The account allowed its audience to dwell on the horrors of slavery deemed too atrocious to be written down, all while constructing a stark line between the society in the West Indies and the ‘civilized’ society of Great Britain. Slavery came to be seen as a wedge that distinguished British society from its colonies in the West Indies, a disparity in the Empire that the British public felt the need to rectify. The article was subsequently published in the *Bristol Mercury* soon after its appearance in the *Dublin Evening Mail*, alongside an opinion produced by an editor at the *Bristol Mercury*. The editorial emphasized total, rather than gradual emancipation of slaves in the West Indies, a sentiment increasingly felt by members the abolition movement into the late 1820s.¹²⁶ According to Seymour Drescher, the society became intent on full emancipation rather than amelioration by 1830.¹²⁷ For members of the Anti-Slavery Society and the editor of the *Bristol Mercury*: “The only way to get rid of the evils of slavery, is to get rid of slavery itself.”¹²⁸

According to those involved in the antislavery campaign, these pamphlets provided the public with information that the country had no prior knowledge about, primarily centered on the atrocities of slavery. The Anti Slavery Committee also produced yearly reports that detailed the movement’s progress as well as fresh

¹²⁵ “Cruelties of West Indian Slavery at this Moment by an Eyewitness,” 5.

¹²⁶ Fergus, *Revolutionary Emancipation*, 179-180.

¹²⁷ Drescher, *Abolition*, 248.

¹²⁸ “Cruelties of West-India Slavery, at this Moment, By an Eye-witness.” *Bristol Mercury*, Oct. 27, 1829.

information on the state of slavery in the West Indies. The pamphlets spread abolitionist propaganda under the guise of providing strict facts on the condition of slaves in the West Indies. Despite conflicting accounts between proslavery and antislavery individuals on the condition of slavery in the West Indies, the ability of the abolition movement to spread their message through pamphlets helped to sway public opinion, while their petitions helped rally Parliament to their cause. Much like in the abolition of the slave trade, “petitioning remained the gold standard of abolitionist motivation.”¹²⁹ British abolitionists rallied to the cause after 1823 and continually set records in petitions and signatures, all while circulating its reports and various pamphlets to constitute the “weight” of public opinion.¹³⁰

The resurgent abolition movement that began in 1823 incorporated more factions of the British public into its fold than those involved in the abolition of the slave trade, as women lent their voices to the call to end slavery throughout the British dominions. After 1825, women played a vital role in the antislavery campaign through their activity in petitioning. The influence of women’s activism in the abolition movement was first felt by the work of Elizabeth Heyrick, a Quaker, and her pamphlet *Immediate, not Gradual Abolition*, published in 1824. While the leaders of the abolition campaign like Thomas Buxton called for gradual emancipation in Parliament, Heyrick’s piece advocated for the need of immediate emancipation to be granted to West Indian slaves. According to Heyrick: “The West Indian planters, have occupied too prominent a place in the discussion of this great question. The abolitionists have shown a great deal too much

¹²⁹ Drescher, *Abolition*, 250.

¹³⁰ *Ibid*, 245-251.

politeness and accommodation towards these gentlemen.”¹³¹ Heyrick moved advocacy for emancipation beyond words on a page, calling for the people of Leicester to boycott sugar from the West Indies and for grocers to not stock any slave-grown goods.¹³² For Heyrick, the relationship between West Indian planters and the people in Great Britain was one of the thief and the unassuming consumer. In Heyrick’s eyes, a boycott of West Indian goods “stolen” by slave labor would help force immediate emancipation.¹³³ Heyrick’s activism in the early phases of the antislavery movement pushed women elsewhere to form their own sections of the antislavery society, and to contribute to the cause.

The immediacy espoused by Heyrick’s pamphlet represented one of the first occasions where an abolitionist appealed for total emancipation, rather than amelioration, to be granted to the slaves. In 1828, the Anti-Slavery Society purchased 1,500 copies of Heyrick’s pamphlet for distribution.¹³⁴ Heyrick also attempted to reveal the political and economic weaknesses of West Indian planters through her boycott, meaning to show that Great Britain did not need slave labor to produce goods. As Clare Midgley and Kenneth Corfield have pointed out, the boycott had no noticeable affect on the import of slave-grown sugar; despite Heyrick’s claim in 1826 that nine out of ten families visited agreed to abstain from purchase.¹³⁵

¹³¹ Elizabeth Heyrick, *Immediate, Not Gradual Abolition: Or, An Inquiry Into the Shortest, Safest, and Most Effectual Means of Getting Rid of West Indian Slavery* (London, 1824), 20.

¹³² Hochschild, *Bury the Chains*, 325.

¹³³ David Brion Davis, *Slavery and Human Progress*, (New York, 1984), 183.

¹³⁴ “Elizabeth Heyrick,” British Library: Anti-Slavery Sources <http://www.bl.uk/learning/histcitizen/campaignforabolition/sources/antislavery/sugarboycott/sugboycott.html>

¹³⁵ Clare Midgley, *Women Against Slavery: The British Campaigns, 1780-1870*.

The work of women antislavery societies throughout Great Britain did not go unnoticed by the Anti-Slavery Society. At a meeting in 1825, the Committee reported, “that the number of Associations, and especially of Ladies’ Associations, for the abolition of slavery has been increasing of late.”¹³⁶ The increase of women’s participation in the antislavery campaign can primarily be seen in their work in antislavery petitions. In the 1833 petitions for immediate emancipation, estimates state that approximately 400,000 of the 1.3 million signatures were women.¹³⁷ In just four years, the women’s group in Birmingham visited more than eighty percent of the homes in the community, advocating for the immediate abolition of slavery.¹³⁸ The individual work of women like Heyrick coupled with the larger collaboration of women in antislavery societies provided another section of the British population advocating for emancipation at this time.

However, not every citizen in Great Britain rallied to the abolitionist cause. In 1803, John Gladstone of Liverpool acquired his first sugar estate and slaves in Demerara and quickly moved to acquire larger commercial interests throughout the Caribbean, including several estates in Jamaica.¹³⁹ By 1816, Gladstone owned approximately two thousand slaves, with over half working on his Demerara plantations. After the Demerara rebellion, Gladstone became a main figure attacked by the anti-slavery press, as two of his estates in Demerara, Success and Le Ressouvenir, had been the center of the

¹³⁶ *Third Report of the Committee of the Society for the Mitigation and Gradual Abolition of Slavery Throughout the British Dominions* (London: Printed for the Society, 1826), 20.

¹³⁷ Drescher, *Abolition*, 250.

¹³⁸ Hochschild, *Bury the Chains*, 326.

¹³⁹ For a more complete discussion of Gladstone’s involvement in the West Indies see Madhavi Kale, *Fragments of Empire: Capital, Slavery, and Indentured Labor Migration in the British Caribbean*, (Philadelphia, P.A., 1998), 14-26.

uprising.¹⁴⁰ Gladstone entered the slavery debate on the side of planters in the West Indies, more than likely keen to hold onto his own commercial assets tied to slavery and sugar estates in the Caribbean.

In 1830 Gladstone published a letter addressed to Sir Robert Peel (although speaking to a larger audience) detailing the present state of slavery in the British colonies and the United States. Gladstone argues that with the abolition of the slave trade in 1807, slavery in the colonies lost its “disgraceful acts of cruelty” and that now planters and slaves live connected through regulated labor and a dependence on one another.¹⁴¹ The letter goes on to claim that instances of oppression within the colonies are few and far between, similar to the amount one might see if they opened up a newspaper Great Britain.¹⁴² Gladstone’s letter attempted to undermine the claims made by the Anti-Slavery Society in Great Britain and indirectly denounced the numerous pamphlets distributed that detailed the cruelties of West Indian slavery. According to Gladstone, slavery throughout the West Indies had been sensationalized by those with a “well-intentioned zeal...whilst they are unacquainted with the negro character, and the state of society in these colonies.”¹⁴³

In an attempt to strengthen this appeal, Gladstone looked to the southern United States as an example of the need for slave labor in certain climates. For Gladstone, the

¹⁴⁰ Kale, *Fragments*, 15.

¹⁴¹ John Gladstone, *A Statement of Facts Connected with the Present State of Slavery in the British Sugar and Coffee Colonies, and in the United States of America: Together with a View of the Present Situation of the Lower Classes in the United Kingdom, Contained in a Letter Addressed to Sir Robert Peel* (London: Baldwin and Craddock, 1830), 17-18.

¹⁴² Gladstone, *A Statement of Facts...*, 18.

¹⁴³ Gladstone, *A Statement of Facts...*, 4.

“lovers of freedom” in the United States continued to utilize slave labor and treated their slaves more harshly than colonists in the West Indies. Gladstone directly critiqued the work of abolitionists in Great Britain in his discussion of slaveholders in the United States by claiming a disconnect between the state of slavery in the West Indies and the claims made by antislavery letters and pamphlets. On the subject of why slavery persisted in the United States: “The truth is,” Gladstone claimed, “they live in the same land, where all have constant opportunities of observation, and therefore become intimately acquainted with the character and the habits of the negro.”¹⁴⁴ Economically invested in the West Indies sugar trade and his holdings of slaves in Jamaica and Demerara, Gladstone certainly had reason to twist the state of slavery in the British colonies into a positive light. However, his letter also represented how both proslavery and antislavery thinkers framed their discussions about the West Indies in the 1820s. Both sides exploited and molded information on slavery in the West Indies and the United States to their advantage.

The question over the treatment of slaves did not seem to be limited to the West Indies for Gladstone. Instead, he looked to the United States, much like David Walker looked to Great Britain, as a model that their respective country should uphold. For Gladstone and others, the debate over West Indian slavery held larger implications for slavery in the Atlantic World, primarily in the United States. If the United States held firmly to the economic institution of slavery, Great Britain would be wise to continue to exploit slave labor in its West Indian colonies. Gladstone’s stake in the British colonies

¹⁴⁴ Gladstone, *A Statement of Facts...*, 23.

of Demerara and Jamaica determined his stance on slavery. Gladstone's letter represented another category of people in Great Britain lending their voice to the slavery debate.

Absentee planters or merchants invested in the goods and trade that depended on slave labor in the West Indies did not join the antislavery movement in Great Britain, but instead clung desperately to hold on to their economic investments.

While the abolitionist project in Great Britain issued pamphlets and petitions to push the question of abolishing slavery into Parliament, landholders and planters in the West Indies and Great Britain tried to hold on to their livelihood in any way possible. Gladstone's appeal demonstrates the increasingly blurred lines between the interests of Great Britain and the colonies by those who held estates throughout the Caribbean. While Gladstone never explicitly mentioned his own stake within the slavery debate, he frequently pointed to the rights of West Indians planters who, "have acquired their people the right of property [speaking about slaves]; property as effectually sanctioned and secured to them by the law of the land as any freehold estate in Great Britain can be to its owner."¹⁴⁵ Apart from the interests of absentee estate holders living in Great Britain, colonists and planters who resided in the West Indies also attempted to answer the cries of abolitionists. The abolitionist project coupled with the aftermath of rebellion and conspiracy created an incendiary situation in the West Indian colonies, as planters attempted to cling to their political and economic standing with the metropolis while lashing out against any group assumed to be associated with the abolition movement.

¹⁴⁵ Gladstone, *A Statement of Facts...*, 4.

III. A Voice in Jamaica

As the cries for amelioration and eventual abolition of slavery throughout the British colonies grew louder, colonists in the West Indies faced both a potential loss of their slaves and a loss of political and economic power in the British Empire. The decrease of the West Indian contribution to the world output of cash crops coupled with the British's growing interest in India contributed to a genuine crisis in the West Indies on their place in the Empire.¹⁴⁶ In 1832, representatives in the West Indies drafted an address to the citizens back in Britain that attempted to appeal to an economic connection between Great Britain and the West Indies that could not be found by trade in India. "Every thing which the West Indian uses comes from home; and if the Planter makes any profit, he spends the whole of it in England: whereas India is no better in this respect than a foreign country!"¹⁴⁷ West Indian colonists attempted to demonstrate their connection to the people of Great Britain, downplaying their involvement in slavery and instead appealing to their shared market economy. The colonists go on to discuss the ill treatment received by the British government and claim that the West Indies is still a "main source of prosperity," rather than a burden on the British Empire.¹⁴⁸

Despite the West Indies appeal to demonstrate their persistent importance to the British Empire, the rampant use of slave labor throughout the West Indies meant that the

¹⁴⁶ Drescher, *Abolition*, 245-6. According to Drescher, the West Indian share of cotton imports fell from 22 percent in 1814-1816 to 4 percent in 1824-1826. See also B.W. Higman, *Slave Population and Economy in Jamaica, 1807-1834*, (New York, 1984), 72. According to Higman, the Jamaican slave population declined 10.8% between 1808-1834.

¹⁴⁷ *Address to Manufacturers, Traders, and Others, on the Importance of Preserving the Colonies* (London: A.J. Valpy, 1832), 11.

¹⁴⁸ *Address to Manufacturers...* 11.

British and West Indian colonists did not share common ground over the question of abolition. While British citizens with holdings in the West Indies or stakes in the sugar trade like Gladstone wanted to continue slavery, a larger group resided on the side of abolitionists, as evidenced through the ameliorative measures. The conflicting accounts and opinions of proslavery and antislavery individuals in Great Britain and the United States did ultimately reach the ears of slaveholders and planters in the West Indies. Discontent over the antislavery campaign in England coupled with the growing decline of economic importance roused the strong sentiment in Jamaica.¹⁴⁹ Writing in 1824, Reverend George Wilson Bridges-rector at the parish of St. Ann in Jamaica at the time-summarized the declining position of Jamaica and the West Indies. “At the present moment this valuable Colony does not, unfortunately, maintain the relative situation which once it held in the system of British Empire. It is eclipsed by its more successful rivals in the East; its sun appears to be setting.”¹⁵⁰

Reverend Bridges arrived in Jamaica with his wife in 1816, becoming the rector of the parish of Manchester before moving to the parish of St. Ann in 1823. While in Jamaica, Bridges frequently spoke out in favor of slavery and against the work of abolitionists such as William Wilberforce, as well as associating the antislavery campaign in Great Britain with the work of missionaries in Jamaica. In 1823, Bridges wrote *A Voice From Jamaica*; a direct response to William Wilberforce’s *Appeal* published the same year. Although writing from Jamaica, Bridges’ intended for his pamphlet to reach

¹⁴⁹ Turner, *Slaves and Missionaries*, 105.

¹⁵⁰ George W. Bridges, *The Prospectus of a New History of the Island of Jamaica : From its Discovery to the Year 1824* (London, 1824), 6.

the public back in Great Britain, as evidenced by the fact that Bridges had the letter printed and distributed in London. More than serve as a rebuttal to Wilberforce, Bridges meant to appeal to British citizens and portray West Indian slavery in a different light than that produced by the abolition movement.

Bridges' appeal to Wilberforce also represented the increasing rift between the colonists in Jamaica and Great Britain during the 1820s. To Bridges, the work of the abolitionist leaders, both in British Parliament and in the public, did not serve as a credible source to inform the public about West Indian slavery. Situated four thousand miles away from the "realities" of slavery, Bridges and colonists in Jamaica understood abolitionists as directly responsible for the weakening political power of the West Indies as well as representing a serious threat to West Indian planters' livelihood from slave labor. Bridges acidly charged Wilberforce and the work of the antislavery movement with presenting a false picture of slavery. According to Bridges, Wilberforce and others "sit calmly in your library, compose speeches, write books, on the countries you have never visited; on the imaginary condition of a race of people four thousand miles away from you."¹⁵¹ According to Bridges, Wilberforce and others involved in the antislavery campaign had grossly misrepresented West Indian planters and their slaves in order to champion their own goals of abolition. The back and forth between proslavery and antislavery writers during this time period exemplifies the central role slavery and abolition played after the Demerara rebellion. Individuals on both sides of the Atlantic

¹⁵¹ Bridges, *New Prospectus*, 24-25.

not only became concerned with the possibility of slave revolts, but also what to do about the institution and whether or not it should be continued within the British dominions.

Bridges' account attempted to undermine the Christian message intertwined in the British abolitionist movement by claiming it was the job of the established clergy in Jamaica, not the missionaries, to teach Christianity to the slaves. Bridges personally aligned himself with this task, claiming to have baptized over nine thousand slaves in the last two years in his parish.¹⁵² Although, Bridges conveniently left out the fee of two shillings sixpence acquired per slave, as decreed by the Jamaican legislature.¹⁵³ Bridges claims that sending missionaries over to teach Christianity to the enslaved population would only "sow division and dissension" among the people in Jamaica. The assertion that the "established clergy" in Jamaica should be left to do their duty to the enslaved population belied a larger problem Bridges saw throughout the West Indies. Several instances between 1823 and 1834 would see Reverend Bridges at the head of a collection of Jamaican planters and colonists' intent on destroying missionary property or harming the missionaries themselves. Bridges response to Wilberforce demonstrated the tension felt by planters and colonists in Jamaica after the Demerara rebellion in 1823. Beset by alleged plots to conspire among their enslaved population, Jamaican colonists like Bridges looked back to Great Britain to see a resurgent abolition movement, which prepared to strike down slavery in the British colonies. For Bridges and many others,

¹⁵² Bridges, *A Voice From Jamaica: In Reply to William Wilberforce* (London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orne, Browne, and Green, 1823), 27.

¹⁵³ Craton, *Testing the Chains*, 247.

these various aspects collided at a moment “when the existence of these ill-fated colonies is at stake.”¹⁵⁴

IV. Colonists and Missionaries

As abolitionist fervor spread on either side of the Atlantic, planters in Jamaica began to associate the antislavery campaign with the missionaries who had recently arrived on the island to preach to the slaves. As Bridges noted these missionaries came to be seen as a separate force from the existing clergy in Jamaica, intent on instructing the slaves on Christianity and making them literate, leading Jamaican colonists to suspect them of antislavery connections. During times of heightened tension between the West Indies and the antislavery campaign, colonists looked to the missionaries with hostility, seeing the work of missionaries as a calculated means to weaken planters’ authority over their slaves.¹⁵⁵ The outside pressure of the antislavery campaign coupled with the fear of slave rebellion within Jamaica occasionally led to highly publicized attacks on missionaries, understood to be an extension of abolition attempts to free West Indian slaves.

In December of 1826 Reverend George Bridges instigated an attack on the Wesleyan mission in St. Ann’s Bay. The attack stemmed from the fact that the governor of Jamaica had recently assented the revised slave code of 1826, which ameliorated slave conditions to some degree but also restricted missionary work in three separate clauses.¹⁵⁶

Bridges echoed his sentiments toward missionary work in his Christmas sermon that

¹⁵⁴ Bridges, *A Voice from Jamaica*, 43.

¹⁵⁵ Turner, *Slaves and Missionaries*, 112.

¹⁵⁶ Turner, *Slaves and Missionaries*, 118. One clause in the slave code, clause 84: “re-enacted an 1816 regulation against night meetings” among the slave population in Jamaica.

year, claiming that some were here in Jamaica for political, rather than religious reasons.¹⁵⁷ Later that night, shots were fired into the Wesleyan mission where the missionary, William Ratcliffe, and his family woke up the next morning to find seven bullets on the ground.¹⁵⁸ Although there was never enough evidence to make a charge, the story traveled back to Great Britain and entered into discussions in Parliament as well as in the *Anti-Slavery Monthly Reporter*, later being reprinted in *Freedom's Journal* in 1829. The report singled out Bridges by name and attacked the impunity that followed the crime.¹⁵⁹ Ultimately, the British government disallowed the new Jamaican slave code in 1826, primarily because it obstructed missionary work. The government's decision demonstrated to Jamaican colonists that the imperial government once again refused to side with West Indian interests, all while providing the missionaries with the assumed assurance that their work would be protected by those back in Britain.

In March of 1829, the *Freedom's Journal* published an article originally printed in the *Anti-Slavery Monthly Reporter* that detailed further persecution of Isaac Whitehouse, a missionary in Jamaica. According to the report, Whitehouse was arrested for preaching without a license in August while on his way to St. Ann's Bay.¹⁶⁰ Shortly thereafter, Wesleyan missionary Joseph Orton attempted to officiate in Whitehouse's place and was also arrested "for preaching, and teaching as an unlicensed person" despite, according to the report, exhibiting "his credentials as an ordained minister, and a

¹⁵⁷ Letter from Manchester to Bathurst, June 1, 1827, no. 15, C.O. 137/165, 7-8 in Turner, *Slaves and Missionaries*, 118.

¹⁵⁸ Turner, *Slaves and Missionaries*, 118.

¹⁵⁹ "Fresh Persecution of Missionaries." *Freedom's Journal*, March 7, 1829.

¹⁶⁰ "Fresh Persecution of Missionaries." *Freedom's Journal*, March 7, 1829 and Turner, *Slaves and Missionaries*, 123.

certificate of having subscribed the oaths.”¹⁶¹ The trial of the two missionaries continued the pattern of imperial protection of missionary work, as the judge concluded that under an act passed in 1711, a license to preach for one parish entitled a missionary to preach throughout the island.”¹⁶² Rather than delve into the legal precedent involved in the decision, the *Anti-Slavery Monthly Reporter* claimed the missionaries had been discharged and that the Chief Justice believed, “the proceedings of the St. Ann’s magistrates were illegal, arbitrary, and cruel.”¹⁶³ By framing the arrest and subsequent trial as a personal attack against missionary work to instruct and preach to the slave community in Jamaica, abolitionists attempted to not simply rally support to their side but to ignite animosity against West Indian planters and their actions.

Discussions over slavery in the West Indies dominated the minds of groups in Jamaica, Great Britain and the United States throughout the 1820s and into the 1830s. As West Indian colonists attempted to maintain their increasingly tenuous position as slaveholders in the British Empire, abolitionists in both Great Britain and the United States worked to undermine the existence of slavery in the colonies. Meanwhile, planters and merchants residing in Great Britain, like Gladstone, hoped to maintain their plantations in the West Indies in any way possible. In part, debates over abolition created a precarious situation in colonies like Jamaica where colonists acted out against those they considered to be tied to the antislavery campaign, namely the missionaries who arrived in Jamaica. Coupled with a fear of rebellious conspiracy among the enslaved

¹⁶¹ “Fresh Persecution of Missionaries.” *Freedom’s Journal*, March 7, 1829.

¹⁶² Turner, *Slaves and Missionaries*, 125.

¹⁶³ “Fresh Persecution of Missionaries.” *Freedom’s Journal*, March 7, 1829.

population, Jamaican colonists became increasingly concerned with the abolition movement and the increase of missionaries in Jamaica. Much like the aftermath of events in Demerara in 1823, Jamaican colonists, like colonists in Demerara, began to link slaves and missionaries together, seeing missionaries and their attempts to teach the Christian message to slaves as a means to undermine the planters' authority. The history between colonists and missionaries in Jamaica should make it no surprise that Jamaican planters quickly labeled the slave rebellion of 1831 the Baptist War. The colonists assumed an external source as the agitator for the slaves, and they quickly found their source in the Baptist missionaries.

CHAPTER THREE:
REBELLION REALIZED

The Baptist Missionary Society first sent missionaries to Jamaica in 1813, and by 1831 they had seventeen missionaries on the island, forty different stations and the alleged attendance of thirty thousand slaves and free blacks.¹⁶⁴ The society also held one chapel in the heart of Jamaica, in the town of Montego Bay, which was “fully attended” by the “discontented among the negroes.”¹⁶⁵ Montego Bay, as Rugemer states, should be understood as the cosmopolitan center of Jamaica, an area where ideas and information circulated among various sectors of the population. “In this freewheeling city [Montego Bay] more than 2,000 slaves mingled easily with almost 6,000 free blacks.”¹⁶⁶ Despite the “freewheeling” nature of Montego Bay and the presence of a well-attended Baptist chapel, slaveholders in Jamaica did not single out Baptist missionaries as a source of agitation amongst the slaves until the conduction of trials during the rebellion of 1831. However, as the presence of missionaries on the island increased, slaveholders grew more and more concerned about the influence they might wield over the slave population who began to attend the chapels.

The trials during the slave rebellion in 1831, and the subsequent label of it as the Baptist War, emerged out of a changing situation in Jamaica not present during the conspiracy trials in 1824. More than prove the influx of a Christian message within the

¹⁶⁴ John Dyer, “Copy of a Memorial from the Baptist Missionary Society to Viscount Goderich,” no. 4, dated April 14, 1832; in *Jamaica: Slave Insurrection, Papers Respecting Slave Insurrection and Missionaries, in Jamaica*, House of Commons, ([London], 1832), 29.

¹⁶⁵ Bernard Martin Senior, *Jamaica as it was...*, 183.

¹⁶⁶ Rugemer, *The Problem of Emancipation*, 113.

slave population through missionary influence, the idea of the ‘Baptist War’ demonstrates the growing concerns of the slaveholders. As the courts searched for origins and causes of the rebellion, slaveholders attempted to fashion these trials into a narrative that situated the disturbances in the slave population outside the slaves’ own sentiments, and into an external group--the missionaries--that could be removed from Jamaica.

The subsequent slave trials carried out by slaveholders did not solely hope to uncover the origins of the insurrection, but to grab the attention of abolitionists and the people of Great Britain and advocate that the cause of the rebellion was not the miseries of slavery, but instead, the missionary presence in Jamaica.¹⁶⁷ Slaveholders understood the rebellion to be a pivotal moment in the history of Jamaica and British slavery, and attempted to reframe their slave population as passive and obedient, forced to rebel by missionaries and a few slave leaders. To quell the remaining slave population, slaveholders in Jamaica used rebel leaders’ trials and executions as reminders to others about the consequences of rebellion.¹⁶⁸ Reading these trials presents Jamaican slaveholders’ attempt to cast their slaves into a certain historical narrative, one that the slaves attempted to break away from through resistance.¹⁶⁹ While rumors of freedom (from Wilberforce, Thomas Burchell, or the King himself) among the slaves in Jamaica continually materialized throughout the nineteenth century, slaveholders held tightly to a

¹⁶⁷ Johnson, “Denmark Vesey and his Co-Conspirators,” 934.

¹⁶⁸ Jordan, *Tumult and Silence at Second Creek*, 84.

¹⁶⁹ See Walter Johnson, “Time and Revolution in African America” in Thomas Bender, *Rethinking American History in a Global Age*, 155.

history that would retain their slaves forever in bondage.¹⁷⁰ The rebellion of 1831, or the ‘Baptist War,’ and the subsequent slave trials represented a clash between two distinct conceptions of the future of slavery in Jamaica. Slaveholders, slaves, and abolitionists each held a different perspective on what the rebellion represented to the history of slavery in the British West Indies, and constructed the implications of insurrection according to their own historical understanding.

I. Reverend Bridges on the Eve of Rebellion

Certain events concerning slaveholders and their slaves prior to the rebellion gained a high level of attention both in Jamaica and Great Britain. In April and June of 1829, Reverend George Bridges once again appeared on the scene in Jamaica in two separate instances when he flogged his slave Kitty Hilton, and then a few months later punished Henry Williams, another slave, for his involvement with Wesleyan missionaries. Kitty Hilton brought a charge of “cruelty and maltreatment” against her master, George Bridges, after being flogged for a dispute between the two of them. Hilton claimed that Bridges told her to retrieve a turkey and kill it for dinner that night. However, upon returning with the dead turkey, Bridges became upset with Hilton, claiming he never told her to kill the bird. In Bridge’s testimony he admitted to ordering Hilton flogged, but ordered the watchman to perform the task, and therefore could not know the severity of the punishment.¹⁷¹ Hilton’s evidence came in the form of her body, which after the flogging, “from the shoulders down to the calves of her legs,” according

¹⁷⁰ Johnson, “Time and Revolution in African America” in Thomas Bender, *Rethinking American History in a Global Age*, 160., and Senior, *Jamaica as it was...*, 197.

¹⁷¹ Bleby, *Death Struggles of Slavery*, 83.

to Henry Cox, “was one mass of lacerated flesh and gore.”¹⁷² Cox, the presiding Custos of the parish, had a court convened and stated he never saw, “in his life, a poor creature in so miserable a state from punishment.”¹⁷³

However the case did not rest on the infliction of the punishment, or the evidence presented by Kitty Hilton, but instead on the word of Rev. Bridges against his slave Hilton. Ultimately, the court ruled in Bridges’ favor.¹⁷⁴ The *Anti-Slavery Monthly Reporter* in Great Britain closely followed the case of Kitty Hilton as told by the Jamaican newspapers and the court documents. The case resonated with their continued attempt to illustrate the cruelties of slavery in the British West Indies to the public in Great Britain.¹⁷⁵ While the assembled court in Jamaica concerned themselves with the spoken testimony of Bridges and Hilton, the *Anti-Slavery Monthly Reporter* focused on reconstructing and imagining Hilton’s mangled body and the stories told by each scar. Two different approaches pulled away multiple readings of the encounter between Hilton and Bridges, and both abolitionists and officials in Jamaica used the events discussed in the trial for their own purposes. For the court, the testimonies presented claimed Hilton to be of “notorious bad character,” which ultimately determined that not only was the flogging carried out by a watchman, and not Bridges, but also that the punishment had been justified.¹⁷⁶ The *Anti-Slavery Monthly Reporter* used the testimony and the physical

¹⁷² Letter dated May 19, 1829, in *Anti-Slavery Monthly Reporter*, vol. iii no. 18 Sept., 1830, 374.

¹⁷³ Letter dated May 19, 1829, in *Anti-Slavery Monthly Reporter*, vol. iii no. 18 Sept., 1830, 374.

¹⁷⁴ Bleby, *Death Struggles of Slavery*, 83. and *Anti-Slavery Monthly Reporter*, vol. iii no. 18 Sept., 1830, 374.

¹⁷⁵ *Anti-Slavery Monthly Reporter*, vol. iii no. 18, 373.

¹⁷⁶ Postscript of the Royal Gazette June 12, 1830 in *Anti-Slavery Monthly Reporter*, vol. iii no. 18 Sept., 1830, 377.

evidence to reconstruct an episode of resistance against Rev. Bridges' continued oppression, and another instance of unreasonable cruelty against an innocent victim of slavery. Different groups utilized the same testimony to interpret Kitty Hilton's case according to their own understanding of slavery in Jamaica and the British West Indies. While slaveholders attempted to prove Bridges to be in the right by punishing a misbehaved slave, abolitionists in Great Britain used the imagery of Hilton's lacerated body to fuel their campaign against slavery.

By June of 1829, Isaac Whitehouse had appointed a slave named Henry Williams, the head driver on Rural Retreat estate, to be the first slave leader in the Wesleyan mission society. The title demonstrated a certain level of leadership Williams held among his fellow slaves, and a level of trust in Williams from Whitehouse to bring other slaves to the Wesleyan chapel. The attorney on the estate, James Betty, warned Williams to stop his religious work and called on the rest of the Rural Retreat slaves to not attend the Wesleyan Chapel. Betty recruited the help of George Bridges to support the ban on the Wesleyan chapel, and to be sure the slaves did not continue their religious instruction under Whitehouse or Williams.¹⁷⁷

The following Sunday, Williams attended the Anglican church service, only to be sent to Rodney Hall workhouse the next day, "a place," according to Henry Bleby, "which was a terror of the slaves throughout the island."¹⁷⁸ The previous year, another slave had been named a church member by a missionary, and had died while being kept

¹⁷⁷ Turner, *Slaves and Missionaries*, 134.

¹⁷⁸ Bleby, *Death Struggles of Slavery*, 63.

to work hard labor at Rodney Hall.¹⁷⁹ The case of Henry Williams entered into the Colonial Office and led to an investigation, although nothing came of it. Despite inquiries into both Bridges and Betty, neither faced serious reprimands. Henry Williams endured several floggings and a period of labor at Rodney Hall, until finally being allowed to return to his estate. William's involvement in religious worship among the slaves did not go forgotten by slaveholders in Jamaica, as he "continued to be a 'marked man' during the time of the rebellion."¹⁸⁰ The *Jamaica Watchman* covered the case of Henry Williams, Bridges, and Betty, and ultimately the story of the slave punished for religious worship became "an object of interest to the Christian public of Great Britain."¹⁸¹

Bridges' involvement in acts of violence against slaves and missionaries provides insight into several aspects of slavery in Jamaica on the eve of the rebellion. Whether or not slaves began to receive Christianity and incorporate it within their own community, slaveholders began to associate their slaves' attending missionary chapels on Sundays or holding prayer meetings after a day of work with potential disobedience. Bridges and other slaveholders looked at the missionaries in Jamaica as an extension of the abolition movement and the imperial government, and marked slaves who associated with the missionaries not solely as Christian, but as rebellious. For slaveholders, the missionaries represented an amalgamation of all their fears. Missionaries spoke to slaves outside an environment directly linked to the master-slave relationship (in the chapel), taught them

¹⁷⁹ Turner, *Slaves and Missionaries*, 135.

¹⁸⁰ Bleby, *Death Struggles of Slavery*, 65.

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 63.

beyond the authority of the overseer, and spoke for those who, back in Great Britain, wished to see an end to slavery.

The cases of Henry Williams and Kitty Hilton, and the imperial investigation into the destruction of the St. Ann mission in 1826 demonstrated to slaveholders that, not just abolitionists, but the Colonial Office and British government watched as events unfolded in Jamaica. Slaveholders and magistrates in Jamaica continually attempted to legitimize legal action against their slaves and lay blame for slave disobedience outside the actions of the owner. For his part in the affairs against Williams, Hilton, and missionaries, Bridges projected himself as a “lone defender of the slaves against the mercenary sectarians.”¹⁸² Even before the outbreak of rebellion in 1831, Bridges and other slaveholders in Jamaica framed the history unfolding as a battle between the ‘protective’ slaveholders and the evil intentions of missionaries. In this framework, slaveholders attempted to demonstrate their slaves had deviated from their typical (supposedly) obedient behavior solely because of the presence of Christian missionaries on the island. Although slaveholders witnessed daily evidence of slave resistance through faking sickness, running away, or even committing suicide, and Jamaica held a history of slave insurrection, slaveholders refashioned the historical relationship with their slaves to one of peaceful collaboration. To slaveholders, this relationship experienced a rupture with the influx of missionary work in Jamaica, and could presumably be rectified if missionaries and abolitionists would allow slaves and their owners to exist independently.

¹⁸² Turner, *Slaves and Missionaries*, 137.

II. The Rebellion Begins

The fires began on Kensington estate in St. James on December 27, 1831 and marked the outbreak of the largest slave insurrection in the history of Jamaica. “Then the sky became a sheet of flame,” exclaimed Reverend Hope Waddell, who had been alerted to the events some hours earlier, “as if the whole country had become a vast furnace.”¹⁸³ Eventually the rebellion would encompass all of the western parishes on the island and some sixty thousand slaves, 626 of whom were tried, with 312 ultimately being executed for rebellion.¹⁸⁴ The head of military authorities in Jamaica, Sir Willoughby Cotton, issued a proclamation upon his arrival in Montego Bay on January 2, 1832, which gave free pardon to all slaves who voluntarily returned to their estates. In order to circulate this information amongst the remaining rebel groups, Cotton released a hundred prisoners and provided them with the proclamation.¹⁸⁵ Cotton hoped that his proclamation would force rebel slaves to retreat back to their estates and, along with the rounding up of prisoners and court-martial trials, end the rebellion before it consumed the island. The rebellion itself lasted for ten days, but the trials of slaves implicated in the rebellion did not end until April 19, 1832 with the trial of proclaimed leader Samuel Sharpe.

The trials, primarily carried out at Montego Bay under order of court-martial and conducted by slaveholders, followed a regular pattern to prove that prisoners on a

¹⁸³ David Brion Davis, *Inhuman Bondage*, 218-9.

¹⁸⁴ Brion Davis, *Inhuman Bondage*, 219, and Turner, *Slaves and Missionaries*, 161.

¹⁸⁵ P.P. (Commons) (no. 285), 1831-1832, 47: 288, from Turner, *Slaves and Missionaries*, 175. “Negroes, You have taken up arms against your masters...Some wicked persons have told you the King has made you free...In the name of the King I come amongst you to tell you that you are misled...All who are found with the rebels will be put to death without mercy. You cannot resist the King’s troop...All who yield themselves up, 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.”

particular estate were rebellious, proved the prisoner belonged to the estate, and concluded with a witness who admitted to seeing that prisoner commit a rebellious act.¹⁸⁶ The slave trials assessed guilt and retroactively determined the origins and “leaders” of the rebellion, which slaveholders’ linked to the actions of both slaves and missionaries. Through interrogation, torture, and manipulation, court trials and slave testimonies allowed slaveholders to reframe the information provided. Slaveholders and Jamaican officials refashioned the insurrection into not only a narrative of carefully planned rebellion, but also a historical narrative whose main driving force rested outside the slave labor force the slaveholders clung to so desperately.¹⁸⁷ Officials in the slave courts frantically searched for any possible missionary ties within the slave population, and frequently asked which chapel the prisoner attended. The special slave courts set out from a certain framework and were determined to prove that the fault lied not only with the rebel slaves but the missionaries throughout the island who planted the seed of rebellion in the slaves’ heads.

A little more than two weeks after the beginning of the rebellion, Henry Williams once again found himself on trial for undermining the slaveholder’s authority. Again, the court found itself concerned with Williams’ religion, as this time the trial examined Williams’ nightly prayer meetings, and whether they served as a means to organize the rebellion. Witnesses discussed the content of Williams’ nightly meetings, and whether he preached to other slaves about resisting against their owner’s authority. In the midst of the rebellion, slaves attempted to avoid implicating themselves in testimony, and the

¹⁸⁶ Turner, *Slaves and Missionaries*, 161.

¹⁸⁷ Johnson, “Denmark Vesey and His Co-Conspirators,” (953)

questions framed in Williams' trial made it difficult to tell the slaveholders what they wanted while maintaining their own innocence. Slaves Jemmy Jackson, Chelsea Winter, William Francis and Edward Johnson all lived on the same estate as Williams, and each were asked, in some form or fashion, whether they heard the slaves speak of rebellion at these prayer meetings.¹⁸⁸ The witnesses walked a fine line between framing their answers to appease the slaveholders, while directing the court's attention away from their own part in the rebellion.

Once again, witness testimonies failed to prove Henry Williams' involvement in any rebellious action, outside of the slaveholders assumed connection between their slaves and missionaries. Despite being unable to prove Williams' rebellious acts, the court martial determined the meetings to be against the slave law and carried out a sentence of a public whipping and a six-month imprisonment. The case of Henry Williams during the rebellion represents one example of how the court martial trials were conducted to discover the rebellious slaves throughout the island. Slaveholders and others involved in the court martial proceedings used witnesses as resources of information with little evidence to justify the claims other than the testimony. In these trials, several witnesses or prisoners saved themselves a trip to the gallows by becoming a source of testimony for slaveholders. Real or not, this information proved useful for slaveholders as they attempted to understand the rebellion and court testimony proved a useful way to

¹⁸⁸ *Jamaica: Return to an address of the Honourable the House of Commons dated 25th July 1832;—for copy of the minutes of evidence taken on the trial of Henry Williams, for administering illegal oaths during the late insurrection in Jamaica.*, House of Commons ([London], 1831), 3-6.

recreate and narrate the rebellion in a framework they deemed acceptable, one that laid complete blame on missionaries and the actions of individual slaves.

After the outbreak of the rebellion, Earl of Belmore, the governor of Jamaica, quickly established martial law and the trials of suspected rebels commenced. Slaveholders determined to end the rebellion and punish those involved utilized a vast resource of slave testimony in order to understand the rebellion. Multiple testimonies reveal a glimpse of what occurred behind the scenes of the trials themselves, an attempt by whites to manipulate witnesses not only to tell the boss what he wanted to hear but as a repository of information to serve the court's purposes. At times, the ability to provide or the willingness to create information allowed a reprieve from the gallows, for a time. The head of the court-martial and military commander-in-chief during the rebellion Willoughby Cotton reprieved John Morris of Dockett Spring Estate after he had confessed to his charges and sentenced to be hung from the neck until dead, "because of the information he could give."¹⁸⁹ By allowing the sentence to be passed in the court, Cotton told Morris that his chance to rise back from the dead rested on the information he could provide concerning the rebellion. The promise held no guarantee, but certainly allowed whites another resource of information, providing them with witnesses who might willingly offer up testimony in an attempt to spare themselves from execution.

Occasionally slaves who placed blame on others had the opportunity to reduce their own sentence. In the trial of Jeremy, a slave at Sunderland estate, the court charged

¹⁸⁹ King vs. John Morris, Special Slave Court, Montego Bay, ff. 127, C.O. 137/185.

him with setting the main house on fire, an offense that typically led to execution.¹⁹⁰ In his defense, Jeremy claimed that, “Jasmine ordered him to do it.”¹⁹¹ The court asked Jeremy who was Jasmine, to which he responded that Jasmine was the head-boiler man on the estate. More than just being ordered to set the house on fire, Jeremy claimed that he had been forced to do so as Jasmine held a machete over his head.¹⁹² The court’s question about Jasmine reflected their interest in gathering names and information about the rebellion just as much as determining whether or not a slave could be determined guilty. The court ultimately ruled Jeremy guilty of burning down the house. Unlike numerous other slaves guilty of the same offense, the court sentenced Jeremy to fifty lashes. Jeremy’s willingness to deliver another name to the rebellion, and possibly one who could be defined as a leader, allowed the court, and Jeremy, to construct a story that placed Jeremy as an obedient slave forced to rebel by Jasmine.¹⁹³

III. The Idea of the Baptist War

Contemporaries in Jamaica quickly labeled the slave rebellion as the ‘Baptist War,’ a description that deserves closer scrutiny not solely to determine the relationship between missionaries and slaves, but to better understand how slaveholders wanted to understand and define slave resistance. Examining the details of the rebellious slaves and

¹⁹⁰ See, for example: King vs. Ginny, Special Slave Court, Montego Bay, ff. 221, C.O. 137/185; King vs. Sawyer, Special Slave Court, Montego Bay, ff. 223, C.O. 137/185; King vs. George Lawrence, Special Slave Court, Montego Bay, ff. 149, C.O. 137/185; King vs. Thomas Dehany, Special Slave Court, Montego Bay, ff. 120, C.O. 137/185 and King vs. Rewan, Special Slave Court, Montego Bay, ff. 213, C.O. 137/185. A number of trash houses and slaveholders’ houses were set on fire toward the beginning of the rebellion, more than likely meant to serve as a sign to other slaves that the rebellion had started and that a certain estate planned to join.

¹⁹¹ King vs. Jeremy, Special Slave Court, Montego Bay, ff. 218, C.O. 137/185

¹⁹² King vs. Jeremy, 218.

¹⁹³ Johnson, “Denmark Vesey and his Co-Conspirators,” 944.

the organization of the rebellion, Theodore Foulks analyzed the roots of the rebellion similar to the courts and Jamaican slaveholders: “the germ of this insurrection was not indigenous, but must have been imported from some other part of the world.”¹⁹⁴

Slaveholders discovered that Thomas Burchell, a Baptist missionary of the Montego Bay chapel, had become a discussion point among the slaves. According to Samuel Sharpe and other slaves, Burchell had left for England in May 1831 and would come back to Jamaica with the slaves’ “free papers.”¹⁹⁵ The first evidence of supposed Baptist influence comes from an early trial on January 10, 1832, followed by another testimony on January 17 that willingly offered up one rebel as a Baptist.¹⁹⁶ However, while these early testimonies discuss the influence of supposed Baptist rebels unprompted, the environment of these slave trials quickly shifted to a focus on the role of Baptist missionaries and slaves who identified as Baptists, according to witnesses. Trials and testimonies soon revolved around determining whether a witness would finger a prisoner as a Baptist. These trials allowed slaveholders to perpetuate and refine the idea of the rebellion as a ‘Baptist War,’ and whites present in the trial, sitting on the court, and throughout Jamaica followed the mode of thinking constructed in the courts and constructed it into their own perceived reality. Following these slave trials, slaveholders framed the insurrection as inextricably linked to the Baptist missionaries on the island.

Beginning with trials on January 24, testimonies did not simply receive information about slaves being connected to the Baptists, but explicitly sought to uncover

¹⁹⁴ Foulks, *Eighteen Months in Jamaica*, 101.

¹⁹⁵ Turner, *Slaves and Missionaries*, 155.

¹⁹⁶ King vs. George Brifsett, Special Slave Court, Montego Bay, ff. 125, CO 137/185.

any Baptist ties to each prisoner. According to Mary Turner, of the ninety-nine slaves court-martialed at Montego Bay, “no less than twenty-five were allegedly connected with the Baptist mission or the Native Baptists.”¹⁹⁷ Word quickly spread from the courtroom that Baptist missionaries played a crucial role in instigating the rebellion. The trial of John Sharpe, belonging to Miss Ann Williams, began with a foreordained outcome. Before testimony, the transcript read that the court believed John, “to be a Baptist leader of the sect.”¹⁹⁸ With a clear knowledge of what the whites wanted to hear, witness John Christie told the court that the prisoner, “is a Baptist, had heard him preach and attended his meetings at night.”¹⁹⁹ Perhaps realizing he had stepped into a story that implicated himself in the rebellion, John Christie subsequently claimed he never heard John “preach they were to be free.”²⁰⁰ The two responses demonstrate the delicate contest played out in court testimony, as witnesses fashioned an account that matched the presumptions of the court, all while attempting to be sure they avoided incriminating themselves as Native Baptists. In the days following John Sharpe’s trial, court-martials tried to find any way to connect prisoners to the Baptists. In the trial of John Clarke, the witness John Hine willingly provided the name of another Baptist, John Gordon, who supposedly attended Thomas Burchell’s chapel.²⁰¹ Joseph Payne testified that Richard Stewart was the “head

¹⁹⁷ Turner, *Slaves and Missionaries*, 153.

¹⁹⁸ King vs. John Sharpe, Special Slave Court, Montego Bay Trials, ff. 172, C.O. 137/185.

¹⁹⁹ King vs. John Sharpe, ff. 172.

²⁰⁰ King vs. John Sharpe, ff. 173

²⁰¹ King vs. John Sharpe, ff. 176.

ruler” on the estate, which Payne, the court, or possibly both meant to mean that Stewart had been a Baptist ruler.”²⁰²

The trial of John Hunbar, a slave belonging to J.H. Morris, on January 31 reflected the circumstances of several other trials carried out during the court-martial, where the courts tried to determine whether the prisoner had been involved with the Baptists but ran into conflicting accounts. According to William Johnston, Hunbar had been head driver on the estate and a Baptist, the slaves on the estate “listened to his advice.”²⁰³ However, George Richardson claimed the prisoner “has no influence over others, he is of no religion.”²⁰⁴ Both Richardson and Johnston belonged to J.H. Morris, same as John Hunbar, but constructed two different accounts of Hunbar’s identity on the estate. Ultimately, the court-martial heard that Hunbar possibly associated with the Baptists and quickly determined him to be guilty of rebellion, ordering his execution.²⁰⁵ Returning from Montego Bay after the majority of the rebellion had been quelled, the governor of Jamaica, Earl Belmore exclaimed: “It is certain, however, that an opinion generally prevails that the insurrection which now happily is quelled, has been the work of the Baptists.”²⁰⁶ Slaveholders had reworked slave testimony extracted under interrogation, torture, or threat into a historical reality that placed the Baptist missionaries

²⁰² King vs. Richard Stewart, Special Slave Court, Montego Bay, ff. 206, C.O. 137/185. Joseph Payne’s testimony claimed that Stewart was the head ruler on the estate. The trial document follows this statement up with a space and then “means Baptiste ruler.” Payne could have collected himself and stated he meant Baptist ruler, the court could have asked him if he meant Baptist ruler, or the transcriber could have simply made a note in the document.

²⁰³ King v. John Hunbar, Special Slave Court, Montego Bay Trials, ff. 211, C.O. 137/185.

²⁰⁴ King vs. John Hunbar, ff. 211.

²⁰⁵ King vs. John Hunbar, ff. 212.

²⁰⁶ *Extract of a Despatch from the Earl of Belmore to Viscount Goderich dated Montego Bay, Jamaica, 10 February 1832* no. 1; in *Jamaica: Slave Insurrection, Papers Respecting Slave Insurrection and Missionaries, in Jamaica*, House of Commons ([London], 1832), 5-6.

in direct line with the rebellious slaves. Testimony leaked out of the court-martial as truth and, for slaveholders, represented a space to shift blame toward a certain group.

A virulent passage from the editor of the Cornwall Courier, Mr. Dyer, represents how slaveholders readily accepted the role of missionaries and preachers in the rebellion: “Shooting is, however, too honourable a death for men whose conduct has occasioned so much bloodshed, and the loss of so much property. There are fine hanging woods in St. James’s and Trelawny; and we do sincerely hope that the bodies of all Methodist preachers who may be convicted of sedition may diversify the scene.”²⁰⁷ For some, these religious officials needed a visual reminder much like the slaves who rebelled, and slaveholders intended to give them a lasting memory of what would happen should rebellion break out again. Writing after the rebellion, Theodore Foulks continued to frame the insurrection in a way that not only absolved the guilt of slaveholders, but would allow the continuance of slavery in Jamaica should a few factors be removed. “The rebellion,” Foulks claimed, “was publicly distinguished by the negroes as the ‘Baptist War.’”²⁰⁸ For Foulks, the slaves identified the root cause of the insurrection, not the slaveholders or the courts. Although imperial authorities absolved missionaries of Baptists and other denominations of any fault in the causes of the rebellion, the labeling of the rebellion as the ‘Baptist War’ reflected the mindset of slaveholders at the time, and how they imagined slavery moving forward.²⁰⁹

²⁰⁷ Bleby, *Death Struggles of Slavery*, 112.

²⁰⁸ Foulks, *Eighteen Months in Jamaica*, 112.

²⁰⁹ Turner, *Slaves and Missionaries*, 187-190.

While slaveholders remade the Baptists into a crucial part of the rebellion and its organization, certain testimony point to the Baptist chapel playing an indirect role in the planning of the insurrection. Religious dynamics aside, the construction of a Baptist chapel attended by slaves allowed another space for groups of slaves from various estates to congregate and exchange information beyond the established control of their owner or overseer. John Davis, a slave connected to the rebellion and held as a prisoner, confessed while in jail: “Daddy Ruler Sharpe, and Taylor, Gardner, Dove and all the other head people in the rebellion, went to the Baptist church, Montego Bay...At the church one of them said, they had better put of the war until after Christmas. Daddy Ruler Sharpe and Taylor said ‘no,’ and very nearly knocked the man down for so saying.”²¹⁰ Robert Gardner’s testimony claimed that he heard “that the time was fixed and thing determined upon was in Christmas, at Montego Bay. It was determined upon after we had been to morning prayers at our chapel.”²¹¹ The Baptist chapel at Montego Bay shortened distances between various estates and allowed slaves to discuss news they had heard, and potentially build a system of trust amongst one another. Much like slaves on Argyle estate in 1824, Sharpe, Gardner and others came together to discuss their plot to rebel and formed a sense of community. Rather than build this with neighboring estates simply by

²¹⁰ *Confession of John Davis, now a prisoner, dated Feb. 1, 1832*; in *Slave Insurrection: Copy of the Report of a Committee of the House of Assembly of Jamaica, appointed to inquire into the Cause of, and Injury sustained by, the recent Rebellion in that Colony; together with the Examinations of Oath, Confessions and other Documents annexed to that Report*, House of Commons ([London], 1832), 30.

²¹¹ *Confession of Robert Gardner dated February 11, 1832*, no. 8; in *Slave Insurrection: Copy of the Report of a Committee of the House of Assembly of Jamaica, appointed to inquire into the Cause of, and Injury sustained by, the recent Rebellion in that Colony; together with the Examinations of Oath, Confessions and other Documents annexed to that Report*, House of Commons ([London], 1832), 35.

proximity, the Baptist chapel allowed slaves on multiple estates throughout parts of the island to come together and join the discussions supposedly headed by Sharpe and others.²¹²

For the judge Richard Barrett, the Baptist preachers certainly had stirred up the rebellion not just through religious instruction but also by allowing slaves to move about the island. The Baptist missionaries had a system of issuing tickets to slaves who had become Native Baptists, which allowed them free access to all parts of the island.²¹³

Barrett saw the issuing of tickets to slaves to be a continual problem if allowed to persist.

“If they act under leaders and have passports under the name of tickets which will carry them over the island, that under such circumstances we may expect periodical

rebellions.”²¹⁴ Although slaveholders mainly concerned themselves with uncovering the preachings of the Baptist missionaries and their role in telling the slaves the injustices of slavery, these testimonies touch on a more tangible, physical cause of the rebellion.

Discussions of resistance had to occur on the outskirts of the landscape of slavery, away from the earshot of overseers or others who would stomp out the plans. While Henry Oliver, Jemmy Campbell, Jean Baptiste Corberand and Jack had to rely on stealth to

²¹² For more on how slaves in Jamaica shaped the Christian message and the missionaries to their own usage see Michael Mullin, *Africa in America*, 242; Turner, *Slaves and Missionaries*, 80-93; and Shirley Gordon, *God Almighty Make Me Free: Christianity in Pre-Emancipation Jamaica* (Bloomington, I.N., 1996), 19-67.

²¹³ *The Examination of an Oath of the Honourable Richard Barrett, before the Committee appointed to inquire into the cause of, and injury sustained by, the recent Rebellion among the Slaves in this Island; in Slave Insurrection: Copy of the Report of a Committee of the House of Assembly of Jamaica, appointed to inquire into the Cause of, and Injury sustained by, the recent Rebellion in that Colony; together with the Examinations of Oath, Confessions and other Documents annexed to that Report*, House of Commons ([London], 1832), 7.

²¹⁴ *Examination of the Honourable Richard Barrett; in Slave Insurrection: Report from the Jamaica House of Assembly Committee...*, 8.

avoid being caught moving throughout the island, slaves who received Baptist tickets had free access to walk throughout the various estates.

IV. The Need for Samuel Sharpe

Slaveholders decided that the presumed leader and organizer of the rebellion, Samuel Sharpe, would be the last slave to be put to death in April of 1832. Multiple accounts and testimonies written during and after the rebellion mixed together and intertwined to construct Sharpe as a uniquely intelligent slave capable of rallying others to his cause. Henry Bleby's account of Sharpe's march to the gallows reflects the common characteristics of a slave rebellion leader: "His execution excited much interest; and a considerable number of spectators assembled to witness it. He marched to the spot where so many had been sacrificed to the demon of slavery, with a firm and even dignified step...In a few moments the executioner had done his work, and the noble-minded originator of this unhappy revolt ceased to exist."²¹⁵ Numerous accounts labeled Sharpe as the singular slave who imagined and organized the rebellion and as an eloquent speaker with the ability to persuade others to his cause.

The need or desire of the slaveholders to uncover the leaders of rebellion, and subsequently mark them as atypical examples of the slave labor force reflects another attempt to drag a majority of slaves back into their masters' history, and define leaders like Samuel Sharpe in opposition to the majority.²¹⁶ Slaveholders not only manipulated testimony to serve their own purpose but also constructed their own history of the

²¹⁵ Bleby, *Death Struggles of Slavery*, 130.

²¹⁶ Johnson, "Time and Revolution in African America: Temporality and the History of Atlantic Slavery" in Bender, *Rethinking American History in a Global Age*, 154.

organization of the rebellion, a narrative that saw one slave of “rebellious character” manipulating and influencing others to rally to the cause. Slaveholders used the construction of a leader to ignore the networks of trust needed to rebel, or admit the possibility of unrest among the slave population and instead define the rebellion as the work of one slave. The idea of the slave leader remains a crucial facet of slave rebellions throughout the Atlantic in the nineteenth century. Samuel Sharpe in Jamaica, like other slave rebellion leaders, does not solely represent individual acts of defiance against slavery, but also an attempt by slaveholders to work slave rebellion back into a historical process that could maintain slavery as it existed.²¹⁷ The execution of Sharpe not only marked the end of the rebellion, but a return to the world constructed by the slaveholders in which their slaves remained passive and obedient.

Sharpe had been named a “Ruler” or “Daddy” among the slaves who had become part of the Baptist church, identified as Native Baptists and supposedly lived somewhat freely throughout Montego Bay.²¹⁸ Henry Bleby’s account presents one of the most detailed descriptions of Samuel Sharpe, in both his physical presence and his unique characteristics. Bleby had the opportunity to have several conversations with Sharpe while in jail, constructing an account that contributed to the mystique of Samuel Sharpe. “He was of the middle size; his fine sinewy frame was handsomely moulded, and his skin as perfect a jet as can well be imagined. His forehead was high and broad, while his nose

²¹⁷ Walter Johnson, “Time and Revolution in African America: Temporality and the history of Atlantic Slavery” in Bender, *Rethinking American History in a Global Age*, 155. Johnson discusses the different dynamics of slave rebellion leaders throughout history, examining how they might imagine or understand one another and how they should be conceptualized.

²¹⁸ *Confession of Robert Gardner in Slave Insurrection: Report from Jamaica House of Assembly Committee...*, 38.

a lips exhibited the usual characteristics of the negro race. He had teeth whose regularity and pearly whiteness a court-beauty might have envied, and an eye whose brilliancy was almost dazzling. I had an opportunity of observing that he possessed intellectual and oratorical powers above the common order.”²¹⁹ For slaveholders and whites at the time, the physical description of a slave could be directly linked to the character or nature of the person who embodied those qualities.²²⁰ While Bleby’s account meant to highlight the injustices of slavery and the valor of the slave rebels, his description of Sharpe followed the line of how slaveholders attempted to understand a slave leader. The physical characteristics of pearly white teeth, jet-black skin, and strong frame all reflect features that might belong to any slave, but Bleby accompanies them with detail that distinguishes Sharpe from the average rebel. His teeth would be admired by a “court-beauty” and his eyes held a “brilliancy” that mark him as someone uniquely separate from the slave in the field. Bleby’s construction of Sharpe’s physical qualities seemingly marked him as historically determined to lead and organize a slave revolt. To Bleby and the slaveholders, an examination of Sharpe’s body allowed one to recognize he transcended the average slave and used that power to influence them into a revolt. Sharpe’s physical qualities reflected his superior intellectual capabilities, features not held by the ordinary slaves he swayed to his cause, a construction that made him a singular problem for slaveholders. Without Sharpe, as imagined by slaveholders in Jamaica, there could be no rebellion.

²¹⁹ Bleby, *Death Struggles of Slavery*, 127.

²²⁰ See Walter Johnson, *Soul By Soul: Life Inside the Antebellum Slave Market*, (Cambridge, M.A., 1999), 135-161 and Winthrop Jordan, *White Over Black: American Attitudes toward the Negro, 1550-1812*, (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1968), 17-51.

Court testimony and prisoner confessions not only distinguished Sharpe as the leader of the rebellion, but as a uniquely gifted slave. Multiple accounts described Sharpe as literate, intelligent, organized and, perhaps most importantly, acknowledged him as a singularly gifted speaker. Thomas Dove confessed in the gaol of Savanna-la-Mar before his execution that Sharpe, “told the negroes that their freedom was given them since last March; that he (Sharpe) had read it so in the newspapers.”²²¹ When asked why he believed Sharpe, Dove replied that Sharpe had been “born and brought up on the Bay, was intelligent and could read, and besides was head leader at the Baptist church.”²²² Dove had reasons for shifting blame away from his own actions, as he had been appointed “Colonel Dove” during the rebellion, and seen as one of Sharpe’s main followers.

For Edward Barrett, a slave in the parish of Westmorland who was sentenced to be executed on February 9th in Savanna-la-Mar, his mistaken trust in Sharpe proved a fatal mistake. While in jail, Barrett confessed that he had been “ill-advised” by Sharpe to rebel, identifying Sharpe as the sole reason he joined the insurrection.²²³ Robert Gardner, another “Colonel” during the slave rebellion, claimed Sharpe’s oratory skills whipped other slaves into frenzy. According to Gardner, Sharpe told them that, “the King sent the

²²¹ *Confession of Thomas Dove, February 11, 1832; in Slave Insurrection: Copy of the Report of a Committee of the House of Assembly of Jamaica, appointed to inquire into the Cause of, and Injury sustained by, the recent Rebellion in that Colony; together with the Examinations of Oath, Confessions and other Documents annexed to that Report, House of Commons ([London], 1832), 34.*

²²² *Confession of Thomas Dove, February 11, 1832; in Slave Insurrection: Copy of the Report of a Committee of the House of Assembly of Jamaica..., 34.*

²²³ *Examination of Thomas McNeel; in Slave Insurrection: Copy of the Report of a Committee of the House of Assembly of Jamaica, appointed to inquire into the Cause of, and Injury sustained by, the recent Rebellion in that Colony; together with the Examinations of Oath, Confessions and other Documents annexed to that Report, House of Commons ([London], 1832), 11.*

law [to be freed] since March last, and it has been withheld by the whites; rise at once and take it. He kept talking this way, made the slaves mad.”²²⁴ Slaves determined to play down their own role in the rebellion provided whites with the information they wanted. These testimonies pointed to Samuel Sharpe and made him out to be not just literate but persuasive, willing to lie in his speeches to the slaves if it would bring about resistance against the whites.

The accounts of these slaves touch on the main feature of Sharpe that allowed slaveholders to cast him as the sole instigator of the rebellion. Sharpe’s trial attempted to establish him as a mobile slave who had been frequently seen with the “Baptist people among the mountain” and as a slave who spoke and preached to his fellow slaves.²²⁵ According to the testimonies and Bleby’s account, Sharpe’s speeches left the other slaves “spell-bound,” which projected his rebellious intentions onto them but did not define the actions of the other slaves. Sharpe represented the ultimate fear of white slaveholders—a literate slave with the ability to move throughout the island, speak passionately and persuasively to his fellow slaves, and who held a directly connection with Baptist missionaries as a Native Baptist ruler. “Daddy” Sharpe’s death marked the end of the rebellion and, slaveholders hoped, broke the spell he had cast over the majority of the slave population in Jamaica.

Although the court’s construction of Sharpe hinged on a distinct ability to persuade other slaves to revolt, Sharpe undoubtedly played a role in the organization of

²²⁴ Examination of Robert Gardner; in *Slave Insurrection: Report from Jamaica House of Assembly Committee...*, 35.

²²⁵ King vs. Sharpe, Special Slave Court, Montego Bay, ff. 304-313, C.O. 137/185.

the rebellion. Multiple sources confirm that Sharpe moved freely throughout Montego Bay, and read newspapers, “he would then bring up all the news, and it spread among the negroes.”²²⁶ As one of the leaders of the Native Baptists, Sharpe did have opportunity to speak to other slaves and commanded a certain level of authority within the chapel, which extended into the daily lives of slaves. “The duty of leaders,” Gardner stated, “is to go round to the estates belonging to our church, and to see how the negroes are getting on, and to report the same to the minister.”²²⁷ Much like Henry Oliver and Jemmy Campbell during the trials of 1823, Sharpe purportedly traveled throughout Jamaica and spread news of freedom to various estates. While Oliver and Jemmy asked who would join their plot or who planned to rebel, Sharpe supposedly asked who would join a work strike, not who would involve themselves in physical resistance. After Christmas, Sharpe wanted the slaves to sit down and refuse to go into the fields and work, limiting themselves to passive, not physical resistance. Given the network of religious meetings, Sharpe and others spread their influence “through St. James, parts of Hanover and Trelawney, and into Westmoreland, St. Elizabeth, and Manchester, an area of 600 square miles.”²²⁸ Sharpe’s claim of wanting passive resistance until physical resistance became absolutely necessary comes from Henry Bleby’s account of his conversations with Sharpe as the leader awaited execution. Ultimately, Sharpe and others proved to be more than willing to enter into armed revolt against whites, as several slaves quickly grabbed

²²⁶ *Confession of Robert Gardner in Slave Insurrection: Report from Jamaica House of Assembly Committee...*, 38.

²²⁷ *Confession of Robert Gardner in Slave Insurrection: Report from Jamaica House of Assembly Committee...*, 38.

²²⁸ Turner, *Slaves and Missionaries*, 155.

machetes and guns while others, including Robert Gardner and Thomas Dove, had been given military titles such as colonel and captain. Whether advocating only passive resistance or preparation for both, Sharpe came to be understood as the main leader who told the slaves about freedom and urged them to organize into some form of resistance.

Slaveholders needed to identify individual slaves like Samuel Sharpe during slave insurrections. Their desire to maintain slavery in Jamaica after the rebellion demanded they find a singular cause for the insurrection that, after being eliminated, could allow the relationship between slaves and their owners to return to a presumed tranquility. Marking Samuel Sharpe as a uniquely intelligent and persuasive slave delineated his experience under slavery as distinctly different from the other slaves who rebelled, and marked him as a rupture in the normal flow of the history of slavery. The construction of Sharpe as the sole leader of rebellion allowed for whites to ignore the feelings, trust, and networks of communication built among the various estates and slave communities who ultimately decided to join the rebellion. Rather than sixty thousand slaves demanding freedom through physical or passive resistance, slaveholders attempted to submerge the stories of the other slaves and construct a narrative of slave rebellion centered on Sharpe's leadership and persuasion. Many slaves simply joined the rebellion spontaneously after the fires broke out that night, but for slaveholders Sharpe represented a leader who had organized and sparked the rebellion. Instead of sixty thousand voices shouting, whites in Jamaica attempted to reduce the noise to one distinctive slave awaiting execution who exclaimed: "I would rather die upon yonder gallows than live in slavery!"²²⁹ The other

²²⁹ Bleby, *Death Struggles of Slavery*, 129.

slaves had simply been left spellbound by Sharpe's news of a freedom that had not, and could not, come to Jamaica.

V. "...we all believed this freedom business"

What, then, of the slaves not remembered as leaders? The accounts left behind through these trials only provide a small glimpse into how most slaves imagined themselves and their rebellion. The discussions that helped fashion the rebellion—those asking who else might fight, deciding whether or not they should rebel and if they could succeed—are lost to time. However, the trials that came out of 1816 (conspiracy detailed in the journal of Matthew Lewis), 1823 and 1831 saw multiple groups of slaves who believed they had been freed. The continual belief in emancipation emerged from particular historical moments, which led slaves to identify the arrival of individuals like Matthew Lewis or Thomas Burchell as bringers of their freedom. After hearing the confessions of two slaves involved in the rebellion of 1831, Linton and McKinlay, Reverend Thomas Stewart identified this claim: "I think, moreover, that the rebellion will break out again, not only from the same causes which I have stated to have occasioned the late one, but from the confession of two prisoners, Linton and McKinlay, that in about three or four years the negroes will break out again, for they cannot help believe that the King had given them freedom."²³⁰ Sitting in jail in Montego Bay, Linton exclaimed, "we

²³⁰ *The Examination, on Oath, of the Rev. Thomas Stewart, Rector of the Parish of Westmorland, before the Committee appointed to inquire into the cause of, and injury sustained by, the recent Rebellion among the slaves in this Island; in Slave Insurrection: Copy of the Report of a Committee of the House of Assembly of Jamaica, appointed to inquire into the Cause of, and Injury sustained by, the recent Rebellion in that Colony; together with the Examinations of Oath, Confessions and other Documents annexed to that Report*, House of Commons ([London], 1832), 24.

all believed this freedom business, from what we were told and from what we heard in the newspapers... Those who cannot read always gave 5d to those who can read the papers to them when they hear they contain good news for them.”²³¹ Whether it came from news of the abolition movement, conversations amongst each other or slaveholders, or the sermons given by missionaries, slaves in Jamaica understood that the concept of emancipation existed, and that it should come soon.

For some slaves, their part in the 1831 rebellion meant to physically erase the shared past under slavery and assemble a new history for the island of Jamaica.²³² For many slaves in 1831, the first step to determine their future after the revolt entailed destroying the past ruled by the slaveholders. The trial of Adam, Bina, Samuel Hayward and Charlotte, all slaves at Moor Park in the parish of St. James, represents how some slaves concerned themselves with what to do about their shared past under slavery, and what that might mean moving forward. For Adam, burning the estate house and the slave houses on Moor Park did not solely represent a signal to alert others to the rebellion. When one slave said he would leave the slave houses for others to live in, “Adam said no he would have them burnt, they would have no brown people on the property-that they lived there long enough.”²³³ Another witness at Moor Park, a slave named Charley, claimed that Adam said to take away their papers and put them in the fire “that they were all masters for themselves-they no have no master again.”²³⁴ For Adam, the burning

²³¹ Rugemer, *The Problem of Emancipation*, 113.

²³² Johnson, “Time and Revolution in African America,” 160.

²³³ King vs. Adam, Bina, Samuel Hayward and Charlotte, Special Slave Court, Montego Bay, ff. 160, C.O. 137/185.

²³⁴ King vs. Adam, Bina, Samuel Hayward and Charlotte, ff. 160.

down of the estate house and the slave houses did not just represent an act of open defiance, but an attempt to separate himself and others from slavery. The burnt slave houses served as a testimony that the slaves would not return to Moor Park, and would remake a future distinct from their shared past under slavery.

Bernard Martin Senior's account of his time in Jamaica presented the story of slaves from Woodstock estate who saw 1831 as a fixed moment in time that could change the course of their history. The Woodstock slaves admitted to going to the Baptist chapel at Montego Bay and claimed, "that about Christmas there would be a star fixed to one corner of the moon, which was to be a signal to them that all labour for whites was to cease; because, if they disregarded these injunctions, and went to work for only one single day after Christmas, they never could again have a chance of freedom, and would for ever remain in bondage."²³⁵ In this vision, the past and the future coalesced in the moment of rebellion in 1831, which would determine whether these slaves would be able to make a new history for themselves or would be consigned to live under slavery like those in the past. Robert Gardner, one of the colonels of the rebel slaves, claimed that the slaves heard constant discussions of freedom and allegedly recommended they ask "a respectable gentleman passing by" if the slaves would be freed at Christmas. "This was my advice," Gardner said, "for we heard so much from newspapers, and people talking, that we did not know what to believe or do."²³⁶ Much like the conspiracy trials of 1824, the conversations about freedom among the slave population in Jamaica emerged

²³⁵ Martin Senior, *Jamaica as it was, is...*, 197.

²³⁶ *Confession of Robert Gardner*; in *Slave Insurrection: Report from Jamaica House of Assembly Committee...*, 36.

not out of an internal conviction among the slaves but from a specific historical context, in which discussions of abolition existed throughout the Atlantic. The antislavery movement and the subsequent backlash from slaveholders like Reverend Bridges and others made the institution of slavery and possible emancipation a heated topic by 1831, and the rebellion emerged out of a larger framework of these debates over slavery.

Apart from Samuel Sharpe's conception of freedom and desire to die rather than remain in slavery, other slaves proved ready to join the slave uprising, and brought their own goals and purposes into the foray. Rather than link their resistance to the teaching of missionaries or the excesses given by their owners, these slaves demonstrated a desire to remove themselves from slavery. Whether because of a belief in their freedom, a vision of the future, or an attempt to eliminate the history of slavery, these slaves affixed their own definitions to the insurrection and resisted their owners to fight for that goal.

During the rebellion, slaveholders turned militiamen proved bent on enacting vengeance on the rebel slaves. On one estate in Trelawney, all the slaves had been pardoned by Sir Willoughby Cotton in person an hour earlier but were later called out by the estate's attorney, John Gunn, who ordered the second driver of the slave gang to be shot.²³⁷ Evidence of brutal vengeance outside the realm of Cotton's and other leaders' authority demonstrated slaveholders' determination to stamp out the rebellion at its very roots. Alongside the executions carried out by militia throughout the island, hangings and shootings ordered by the court-martial provided a lasting testament to the vengeance of whites. Whether hanged in the gibbet erected in Montego Bay, or sent to be hanged at

²³⁷ Turner, *Slaves and Missionaries*, 161.

their estate, these rebel slaves served as a lasting reminder to other slaves about the dangers of rebellion. In his work on spiritual terror and slaveholder authority in Jamaica, Vincent Brown addresses the use of slave corpses by slaveholders as a reminder to other slaves to be a “staple feature of social control in slave society...Severed heads,” Brown goes on to write, “stood sentry over the plantation landscape, watching passerby-white, black, and brown-conveying warnings to potential rebels and assurance to supporters of the social order.”²³⁸ For whites in Jamaica, the time had come to rein the slaves back into slaveholders’ constructed social order and historical framework. The gallows became testament to the failure of the rebellion, and the rebels hanging from them demonstrated that any future attempts by slaves claim their freedom would lead to the same conclusion. While slaves received and incorporated rumors or news of their freedom and fashioned a history in which emancipation had already been granted to them, slaveholders attempted to cling to their control over Jamaica and its future as a slave society through visible reminders of the failed insurrection.

After the rebellion, missionaries in Jamaica quickly found themselves to be the target of slaveholders’ anger as much as the rebellious slaves. The label of the ‘Baptist War’ held significant contemporary meaning for slaveholders and planters in Jamaica, a framework that followed a line drawn since the arrival of missionaries. White colonists defined the society of Jamaica in tandem with the institution of slavery, and any group or force that came to be understood as opposed to slavery threatened the future of slavery on

²³⁸ Vincent Brown, “Spiritual Terror and Sacred Authority: The Power of the Supernatural in Jamaican Slave Society” in *New Studies in the History of American Slavery* by: Edward E. Baptist and Stephanie M.H. Camp, (Athens, GA, 2006), 184.

the island. As soon as the rebellion had been suppressed and martial law withdrawn by the militia, a wave of violence swept across the western parishes in Jamaica from the Colonial Church Union, founded by Reverend Bridges in an attempt to drive Baptist missionaries off the island. The C.C.U. destroyed chapels, brought leading missionaries to trial, and attempted to restore their idea of order to the island, all while blaming the imperial government for threatening the slave system.²³⁹ The destruction of missionary chapels began in Montego Bay on February 6, 1832, as planters, overseer, bookkeepers joined alongside attorneys and proprietors destroyed the Baptist chapel in the town.²⁴⁰ The union served as the basis for whites that not only opposed the rebellion and the presumed role of the missionaries in its organization, but understood the consequences of the slave insurrection should it become a rallying point for the abolition movement. On February 22, 1832 the *Cornwall Courier* published an article urging all men to join the C.C.U. “The result of the rebellion has been to open the eyes of the community to the utter incapacity of our laboring class as combatants, and has completely dispelled that idle panic which pervaded the island...but we must prepare for other contests. The very defense of our lives and properties will be construed by the Anti-Colonists, into a crime of the deepest dye. They will rave for the unexpected failure of their insurrectionary plot, and a crusade will be preached up against us, and permitted by Government.”²⁴¹

Following the rebellion, slaveholders’ concerns lied in the course that might be undertaken by the British government that would lead the British West Indies further

²³⁹ William Knibb, *Facts and Documents connected with the late insurrection in Jamaica, and the violations of civil and religious liberty arising out of it*, (London, 1832), 17.

²⁴⁰ Turner, *Slaves and Missionaries*, 166.

²⁴¹ Knibb, *Facts and Documents connected with...*, 16.

toward the abolition of slavery. The C.C.U. continued to persecute any one possibly affiliated with the insurrection, which included not only missionaries but free coloreds and blacks as well. Skirmishes erupted in Falmouth, St. Ann's Bay, and Savanna-la-Mar in the coming months, as the unionists declared united resistance to imperial policy.²⁴² In December of 1832, the Colonial Office issued a royal proclamation to define imperial policy and, after protests by the C.C.U. in St. Ann's Bay had been suppressed by two hundred troops sent by the new governor of Jamaica, the Earl of Mulgrave, the imperial government had finally quelled the proslavery group led by Reverend Bridges.

Ultimately, the title of the Jamaican slave rebellion in 1831 as the Baptist War reveals more about the situation among slaveholders and other white colonists on the island than it does about the relationship between slaves and missionaries. In 1824, whites blamed the estates associated with the conspiracy plots to rebel for granting their slaves the greatest excesses, finding the roots of rebellion not within the slaves hopes or discussions of freedom but in the actions of the owners or overseers. Slaveholders uncovered a similar link in 1831, as the fault for conversations of freedom or simply intentions to rebel rested on the actions of missionaries across the island. Whites in Jamaica who owned slaves or held a stake in the benefits of slave labor desperately tried to make sense of slave rebellion within the contours of a master-slave dynamic in which the slave could only react to the actions of whites. The idea of the Baptist War reflects the assurance of slaveholders that the intention of slaves to rebel could only emerge from an external instigator. This idea of rebellion linked the concept of a tranquil slave population

²⁴² Turner, *Slaves and Missionaries*, 185.

at peace with their enslavement to an outside force (missionaries, excesses, a unique slave leader) that only appeared at times of slave insurrection. Slaveholders submerged the acts of everyday resistance they witnessed (instances of runaways, suicide, faking sick, etc.) for a narrative of rebellion that confined their labor force to eternal slavery should the outside cause of slave revolt simply be removed from the island.

From the conspiracy plots of 1824 to the large-scale insurrection of 1831, slaveholders ignored their slaves' attempts to uncover and discuss any possible rumors or information that held news about their freedom. Rather than see these convictions among the slave population as internally motivated, the frequency of discussions of freedom among slaves in Jamaica escalated while the same conversations dominated the minds of whites on the island. Whether it was following the insurrection in Demerara in 1823 or the outburst of antislavery and proslavery literature with the resurgent abolition movement throughout the 1820s, news and rumors among slaves in Jamaica intersected with those in the larger Atlantic World. Conversations of freedom, slave unrest, or imperial policy among the slaves coincided with events happening outside of Jamaica, but as slaves discussed possibilities of freedom or intentions to rebel, they hoped to break both their physical and historical chains and construct a world in which they would not be enslaved.

CONCLUSION

In 1834, Great Britain emancipated nearly 800,000 slaves throughout its dominions, with the 1831 rebellion in Jamaica remembered as a key turning point in the fight against slavery.²⁴³ This thesis has attempted to untangle the various understandings and ideas of rebellion in Jamaica between 1824 and 1831 and the larger historical processes that coincided with moments of slave insurrection. By examining not just the roots or causes of rebellion but how slaves and slaveholders in Jamaica imagined and constructed slave insurrections allow historians to better analyze slavery in a particular historical moment.

It then becomes vital to this conception of slave rebellion to examine smaller acts of insurrection and instances of conspiracy. Trials for rebellious conspiracy or for small-scale insurrection, like Argyle estate in 1824, should not solely be understood as failed or aborted rebellion, but examined to understand why the idea of rebellion entered the minds of slaves and slaveholders. Ultimately, the period between 1824 and 1831 in Jamaica should not be understood solely as one of maturation or creolization among the enslaved population, or framed by the master-slave relationship that assumed only reaction from slaves based on the actions of their owners.²⁴⁴ News of freedom and possibilities of rebellion (which occasionally led to actual rebellion) frequently materialized amongst slaves in Jamaica and subsequently entered the mindset of slaveholders throughout the

²⁴³ See Michael Craton, *Testing the Chains*; Gelien Matthews, *Caribbean Slave Revolts and the British Abolition Movement*; Mullins, *Africa in America*; Turner, *Slaves and Missionaries*. The rebellion led to two Parliamentary Inquiries on the state of slavery in the British West Indies, and has been linked to the 1833 Slavery Abolition Act. The Act, passed in 1834, was followed by a four-year period of forced “apprenticeship.”

²⁴⁴ Walter Johnson, “On Agency,” *Journal of Social History* 37 (Fall 2003): 113-124.

first half of the nineteenth century-in 1816, 1823 and 1831. Moreover, the idea of maturation or creolization in the history of slave rebellion inevitably leads to a teleology that locates the image of a “successful rebellion” only toward the end of the history of slavery, coinciding with emancipation.²⁴⁵

Rather than tie slave uprisings together into a cohesive narrative that ends in emancipation, the various constructions of rebellion and the subsequent trials can be used as a lens into the lives of slaves and their owners at a particular moment. Numerous voices and events contributed to the various beliefs of freedom and the decision to rebel among slaves in Jamaica, from the deeds of slaves in other colonies like Demerara, to the words of abolitionists such as William Wilberforce, and even to discussions of ameliorative slave laws among planters and slaveholders in Jamaica. Slaves’ incorporation of news and rumors becomes a vital measure of understanding why rebellion occurred and how it was imagined in a particular place and time. The overlap of news of other slave uprisings, antislavery literature or discussions of whites from Great Britain bringing over “free papers” with convictions of freedom demonstrates how slaves and slaveholders imagined and constructed rebellions out of a particular historical context.

²⁴⁵ For more on how slaves impacted and changed the institution of slavery see, for example, Randy Browne, “Surviving Slavery;” D.A. Dunkley, *Agency of the Enslaved*; and Laurent Dubois, *A Colony of Citizens: Revolution and Slave Emancipation in the French Caribbean, 1787-1804* (UNC Press, 2004).

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