

Anticipating Freedom: Slave Rebellion, Amelioration, and Emancipation in Barbados,
1816-1838

by

Kristina A. Williams

Department of History
Duke University

Date: _____

Approved:

David Barry Gaspar, Supervisor

Susan Thorne

Jocelyn Olcott

Thavolia Glymph

Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of Doctor
of Philosophy in the Department of
History in the Graduate School
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ABSTRACT

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Abstract

Anticipating Freedom explores the numerous ways enslaved and freedpeople shaped the politics and policies of gradual emancipation in the British Atlantic World, using Barbados as a case study. It binds antislavery debates, legislative reforms, and slave resistance into one conceptual frame to reveal the processes that informed the British Parliament's decision to pass the Emancipation Act of 1833, thereby conditionally freeing thousands of enslaved men, women, and children across the Anglophone Caribbean.

As a major sugar-producing colony for the British Empire, Barbados offers a unique context for studying emancipation in the Atlantic World. At first glance, the prospect of freedom seemed impossible due to the planters' utter dependence on slave labor. Still, emancipation in Barbados was achieved through the unyielding determination of enslaved people to resist their captivity and the antislavery legislation initiated by abolitionists in London. Hence the project is arranged both chronologically and thematically. It begins with Bussa's Rebellion of 1816 — the only large-scale slave insurrection in the history of Barbados — and its impact on British Parliamentary reforms designed to lessen some of the coercive aspects of slavery during the 1820s. Then, I examine the rise of slave resistance in the months leading up to Emancipation Day and their effect on the Emancipation Act of 1833. My dissertation concludes with a

discussion on the implementation of conditional freedom known as 'Apprenticeship' in 1834 and the factors that led to its premature demise in 1838.

Anticipating Freedom argues that the covert and explicit means through which men and women of African descent resisted enslavement influenced the British Parliament's decision to implement an intermediate period between slavery and absolute freedom in Barbados. This revelation is significant because it broadens our understanding of what factors were taken into consideration during the antislavery debates between the London abolitionists, planters, Members of Parliament, and Barbados legislators. Moreover, by prioritizing the wants, needs, and desires of enslaved and freedpeople in Barbados, we step away from romantic notions often associated with emancipation to focus on the quotidian realities of a society no longer ruled by slave labor.

Dedication

For Nora.

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Introduction

Barbados, a small and unassuming island of only 440 square kilometers in area became part of a global system of exchange that helped to shape the development of the modern world as we have come to understand it. In 1627, English merchants under the leadership of Captain John Powell established a settlement on the coral-covered island with a modest core of farmers and white indentured servants responsible for growing various crops such as tobacco, cotton, and indigo for export to European markets. Life in the tropics was grueling for these early settlers as they were ill-equipped to handle the stifling heat, and the flora, and fauna.¹ The settlers endured and continued to till the land to the best of their ability. Thirteen years later, however, the colony was on the brink of economic collapse when Barbados tobacco was close to being declared “the worst that grows in the world.”² Cotton harvesting did not fare any better. The London market was oversaturated with the product. The planters of Barbados turned to cultivating indigo, but overproduction caused low prices and the island’s economy would only be sustained for a few years. The settlers were desperate. They had only two

¹ There is archeological evidence to support the idea that Barbados had Taino and Kalinago settlers before English colonization. These early settlers may have been victims of Spanish raids throughout the sixteenth century which might explain why English colonists do not mention them in their writings. See, Jerome S. Handler, "The Amerindian Slave Population of Barbados in the Seventeenth and Early Eighteenth Centuries." *Caribbean Studies* 8, no. 4 (1969): 38-64.

² Hilary Beckles, *A History of Barbados From Amerindian Settlement to Caribbean Single Market* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2006), 17.

options remaining: turn to a system of subsistence agriculture or find another commodity that had the power to generate satisfactory profits. Enter sugar cane.

Historians have argued that the Portuguese and the Dutch were largely responsible for introducing Barbados planters to the sugar business.³ At the end of the sixteenth century, the Portuguese had gained a reputation for mastering the art of sugar cane cultivation with plantations in São Tomé, a colony located on the Equator in the Gulf of Guinea, and in Pernambuco and Bahia, two colonies located in Brazil's northeastern region.⁴ By 1600 Brazil had become the largest sugar exporter in the world which indicated a shift in the global economy. Meanwhile, the Dutch, looking to get a foothold in the sugar industry, attempted to snatch control of Pernambuco from the Portuguese leading to a civil war beginning in 1645. For nearly ten years, Portuguese planters battled the Dutch until they were finally pushed out in 1654. The struggle over

³ There is a long scholarly tradition that not only promotes Dutch involvement in English sugar development in the early-mid seventeenth century, but also that Barbados experienced a "sugar revolution". See the following studies for more information: Richard S. Dunn, *Sugar and Slaves: The Rise of the Planter Class in the English West Indies, 1624-1713* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1972); Richard B. Sheridan, *Sugar and slavery; an economic history of the British West Indies, 1623-1775* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974); Hilary Beckles, "The Economic Origins of Black Slavery in the British West Indies, 1640-1680: A Tentative Analysis of the Barbados Model." *The Journal of Caribbean History* 16, (May 01, 1982): 36-56.; John J. McCusker and Russell R. Menard, *The economy of British America, 1607-1789* (Chapel Hill: Published for the Institute of Early American History and Culture by the University of North Carolina Press, 1985); Hilary Beckles, *White servitude and Black slavery in Barbados, 1627-1715* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1989); Higman, B. W. "The Sugar Revolution." *The Economic History Review* 53, no. 2 (2000): 213-236.

⁴ For additional information about the development of sugar plantations in Brazil see, Stuart B. Schwartz, *Sugar Plantations in the Formation of Brazilian Society: Bahia, 1550-1835* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

Pernambuco dismantled Brazil's monopoly over sugar production leaving a void that needed to be filled.

Unwilling to submit to defeat, the Dutch took advantage of the situation by providing English colonists in Barbados with all the resources needed to enter the sugar business. As Richard S. Dunn explains, "The Dutch obligingly showed the English how to process the cane, supplied them with African slaves on easy terms, and sold their product in Amsterdam at generous prices, because sugar was still a very scarce and much desired commodity."⁵ Tropical islands like Barbados were far better suited for growing sugar than tobacco or cotton due to the climate and composition of the soil. Once planters gained a knack for the process of growing sugar, they achieved profitable results. Between the 1650s and the 1670s, Barbados planters exported nearly 15,000 tons of sugar, roughly 65 percent of the total amount of sugar exported from the British colonies.⁶ The transition to large-scale sugar production had a major impact on the lives of early settlers. Small yeoman farms gave way to big plantations owned and operated by individual proprietors who now used African slave labor rather than the labor of indentured servants.⁷

⁵ Dunn, *Sugar and Slaves*, 61.

⁶ Beckles, *A History of Barbados*, 29.

⁷ B. W. Higman estimates that "Barbados received about 360,000 enslaved people and in 1770 had a population of just 70,000." See, B.W. Higman, *A Concise History of The Caribbean* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 132.

The increasing demand for Barbados sugar in European markets gave way to socio-political transformations on the island. By the end of the seventeenth century, the sugar planters emerged as the ruling class of the rapidly growing British colony. In 1661 the planters having dominated the government of the island passed a series of laws to disenfranchise enslaved Africans. The planters implemented a coercive system of management to promote work discipline. Enslaved men and women were driven to their physical limits working the fields. When the slaves failed to meet their quotas, they were whipped by an overseer, driver, or master. There were no concessions made for women regardless of their condition (pregnant or nursing). Circumstances were just as bad, if not worse off the field. Housing and sanitation were poor. Food rations were meager. The slaves in Barbados did not have provision grounds to supplement their diets like their counterparts in Jamaica and elsewhere. These factors have contributed to high mortality rates and low fertility among the enslaved population. As a result, the planters of Barbados relied on a constant imported supply of African-born laborers to operate their sugar plantations.

Reports of the poor conditions associated under Caribbean slavery reached the British metropole and led to several investigations under the influence of abolitionists in Parliaments during the 1770s. At the same time, enslaved men and women in the French colony of Saint Domingue and the British colony of Jamaica, among other colonies, were engaged in collective armed struggles for freedom. By the turn of the nineteenth

century, slave rebellions increased in size and intensity, forcing planters and policymakers to reckon with a not-so-distant future without slavery. This dissertation, *Anticipating Freedom* draws attention to that critical historical juncture. It examines the political, social, and legal processes that undergirded the decision to abolish slavery in the British Empire (including the British Caribbean) on August 1, 1834. In one swift imperial ruling, it seems that thousands of enslaved men, women, and children, were formally notified that they were no longer chattel or property due to the legislation passed by William Wilberforce and other abolitionists in Parliament. These anti-slavery advocates allegedly had pushed for eliminating slavery in the colonies motivated by an unwavering sense of altruism that overrode the economic interests of the Empire. While historical accounts of the efforts of the British abolitionists are crucial to understanding the journey to emancipation, they tend to neglect the significant contributions that were made by enslaved men and women.

Anticipating Freedom builds on a robust body of scholarship to recast enslaved people at the center of antislavery struggles, using Barbados as a case study.⁸ It

⁸ The abolition of slavery in the British Atlantic World has been the subject of many generative studies. See, Ragatz, Lowell J. Ragatz, *The fall of the planter class in the British Caribbean, 1763-1833; a study in social and economic history* (New York: Century Co, 1928); Eric Williams, *Capitalism & Slavery*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1944,1994); Seymour Drescher, *Econocide: British slavery in the era of abolition* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1977); Elsa Goveia, *Historiography of British West Indies: To The End of the 19th Century* (Washington: Howard University Press, 1980); Robin Blackburn, *The overthrow of colonial slavery, 1776-1848* (London: Verso, 1988, 2011); William A. Green, *British slave emancipation: the sugar colonies and the great experiment, 1830-1865* (Oxford University Press, 1991); Thomas Holt, *The Problem of Freedom: Race, Labor and Politics in Jamaica and Britain, 1832-1938* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992); Michael Craton, *Empire, Enslavement and Freedom in the Caribbean* (Princeton: Marcus Weiner, 1997);

chronicles the various ways in which enslaved men and women shaped the politics and policies of emancipation. Hence, my analysis is arranged both chronologically and thematically. It connects the covert and overt forms of slave resistance to slavery with Parliamentary debates on gradual emancipation to offer a fuller picture of how emancipation was achieved in Barbados.⁹ According to David Lambert, British policymakers understood freedom from slavery as “the ability to work in a capitalist wage system,” while humanitarians viewed it as an opportunity to mold slaves into

Frederick Cooper, Thomas C. Holt, Rebecca J. Scott, *Beyond slavery : explorations of race, labor, and citizenship in postemancipation societies* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000); Mimi Sheller, *Democracy After Slavery: Black Publics and Peasant Radicalism in Jamaica and Haiti* (London: Macmillan, 2000); Demetrius L. Eudell, *The political languages of emancipation in the British Caribbean and the U.S. South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press: 2002); Diana Paton, *No Bond But the Law: Punishment, Race and Gender in Jamaican State Formation 1780-1870* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004); Christopher L. Brown, *Moral capital: foundations of British abolitionism* (Chapel Hill: Published for the Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture, Williamsburg, Virginia, by the University of North Carolina Press, 2006); David Brion Davis, *Inhuman Bondage: The Rise and Fall of Slavery in the New World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006); Gelien Matthews, *Caribbean Slave Revolts and the British Abolitionist Movement* (Baton Rouge, LSU Press, 2006); Pamela Scully, Diana Paton, and Bruce M. Taylor. *Gender and Slave Emancipation in the Atlantic World* (Duke University Press, 2008); Gale Kenny, *Contentious Liberties: American Abolitionists in Post-Emancipation Jamaica, 1834-1866* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2011); Claudius K. Fergus, *Revolutionary Emancipation: Slavery and Abolitionism in the British West Indies* (Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 2013); Natasha Lightfoot, *Troubling Freedom: Antigua and the Aftermath of British Emancipation* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015).

⁹ Overt resistance refers to subversive activities that were direct, destructive, and often violent (i.e., rebellion, insurrection, revolt, and riot). Covert resistance embodies activities that largely went unnoticed by abolitionists (i.e., suicide, infanticide, slow work performance, destruction of plantation equipment, theft, feigned ignorance, and self-harm). Before and after the slavery was eradicated on August 1, 1834, Afro-descended people utilized both forms of resistance depending on their goals and aims. Some engaged in activities that would threaten plantation productivity while others acted in direct opposition to their masters. For discussions on covert means of resistance, see Michael Craton, *Testing the Chains: Resistance to Slavery in the British West Indies* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982); Hilary Beckles, *Afro-Caribbean Women & Resistance to Slavery in Barbados* (London: Karnak House, 1988); Barbara Bush, *Slave Women in Caribbean Society, 1650-1838* (Kingston: Ian Randle, 1990).

proper Christian subjects.¹⁰ Slave owners in Barbados and across the British Caribbean wanted to maintain cheap and subservient labor at all costs, while the people in bondage wanted complete control over their lives and labor. In order to balance these incongruent expectations, members of the British Parliament crafted a compromise with Caribbean planters in the form of an apprenticeship system woven into the Abolition of Slavery Act in May 1833. Imperial legislators believed that this course of action would provide slave owners and slaves with the time needed to “adjust” to freedom. There is some historical evidence to support that the subversive activities of enslaved and free Black women played a crucial role in the decision to adopt apprenticeship in Barbados. This interpretation is significant because it broadens our understanding of the factors that were taken into consideration in the creation of abolition with apprenticeship legislation. To establish proper codes of conduct and patterns of behavior for freedpeople was of great importance to legislators. Emancipation should therefore be understood as a complex process of transformation as opposed to a singular moment in time or as an event. It involved many distinct elements.

In April 1834 the Barbados House of Assembly was the last of the British colonial legislatures to accept the British Parliament’s Emancipation Act with the caveat of apprenticeship for the emancipated slave. Under this new order of Emancipation with

¹⁰ David Lambert, *White Creole Culture, Politics and Identity During the Age of Abolition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 175.

Apprenticeship, the slaves were transformed into wage-earning laborers while their masters assumed the role of employers. As apprentices, many ex-slaves were still required to work the land of their former owners. In return, ex-masters could no longer use violence to force the newly freed slaves to work. Employers were also required to pay apprentices wages for extra labor performed both on and off the plantation. On paper, apprenticeship appeared to be a suitable alternative to unconditional freedom in the minds of abolitionists, legislators, and slave owners. In reality, however, the scheme was a colossal failure: as it favored the economic, legal, and political interests of ex-slave masters, and neglected the desires of freedpeople. Under apprenticeship, former slaves continued to fight their employers for many of the same rights and privileges they had been seeking during enslavement (including concessions for pregnant and nursing women, freedom from violence and coercive forms of punishment, labor beyond the confines of the plantation, and material allowances for infants and children). Sometimes the apprentices would call on stipendiary magistrates to help mediate conflicts between themselves and planters. But more often than not, magisterial intervention was not particularly. The planters regularly found creative ways to circumvent the rulings of the magistrates.

Archival Sources and Notes on Terminology

Anticipating Freedom draws on a range of disparate sources to trace the effects of antislavery politics from the late eighteenth to the 1830s. Reports from the Barbados

House of Assembly, official correspondence between legislators on both sides of the Atlantic, trial records, petitions, and antislavery publications all attempted to describe how enslaved people were treated on sugar plantations in Barbados during the early stages of reform. Masters of slaves in Barbados made the argument that the slaves of the colony were better treated than any other slaves across the British Empire. Abolitionists claimed, however, that the enslaved were reduced to a state of ignorance and depravity due to planter negligence and greed. Liberal-leaning politicians irritated by planter arrogance used antislavery texts to help them mount a defense against masters once a plan for gradual emancipation was accepted in the House of Commons.

Caribbean newspapers such as *The Barbadian*, *The Barbados Globe*, *The Barbados Mercury*, and *Bridge-Town Gazette*, and *The Liberal* among several others figure prominently in the dissertation. These documents focus on a variety of critical issues and themes that shaped the path to freedom in Barbados and beyond. The planters of the British Caribbean turned to the colonial newspapers to air their grievances with British officials over policies of emancipation. These documentary sources also contain runaway slave notices and news detailing individual and collective forms of slave resistance that masters used to make the case before the passage of the Abolition Act of 1833 that enslaved people were incapable of handling absolute freedom. I rely heavily on newspapers to reconstruct various perspectives and attitudes towards emancipation. The records of stipendiary magistrates are deployed at the end of the dissertation. These

sources divulge how ex-slaves reconstituted their lives in the post-slavery period. Apprentices worked within and against state-sponsored systems of support to claim legal rights and privileges when employers attempted to exploit their labor and their loved ones.

Such archival sources or “fragments”, as Marisa Fuentes referred to them, are far from complete due to the irregular methods by which history is produced and the ravages of time.¹¹ Still, they do offer a glimpse into a society experiencing significant change. To get closer to the quotidian lives of enslaved and freedpeople, I attempt to read against the record to reveal what may have motivated or inspired their decision-making before and after the abolition of slavery. For people of African descent, freedom meant more than liberation from a lifetime of servitude. It was also the opportunity to claim legal rights they had been denied under slavery. This distinction is crucial as it encourages us to think about people of African descent as important political actors whose activities were driven by specific morals, principles, and values.

Terminology also plays a critical role in the dissertation: categories of race, gender, and class shaped the lived experiences of colonial actors located on both sides of the Atlantic. I refer to the people of Barbados with any African ancestry as people of African descent because skin color was the common marker of difference in the colony.

¹¹ Marisa Fuentes, *Dispossessed Lives Enslaved Women, Violence, and the Archive* (Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016). Also, see Michel-Rolph Trouillot’s canonical text on power, historical production, and silences within the archive: Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the past: power and the production of history* (Boston, Mass: Beacon Press, 1995).

It should be mentioned that people of African descent could be enslaved or free within the timeframe in which they were situated. The people of Barbados who had both African and European ancestry are called people of color. Hilary Beckles estimates that by 1828 roughly 53 percent of the population of Barbados was composed of free people of color.¹² The actors most central to the inquiry of this dissertation are called slaves, bonded people, and enslaved people. When describing collective forms of armed resistance that the enslaved initiated, I use the terms insurrection, rebellion, revolt, and uprising interchangeably. As for the actors involved in these activities, I call them rebels and insurgents. I call white slave holding people of Barbados masters, mistresses, planters, proprietors, or the planter elite when referring to them as a collective political body. I refer to former slave owners after 1834 as employers, planters, and proprietors and former slaves as apprentices, employees, ex-slaves, freedpeople, and laborers.

¹² Beckles, *A History of Barbados*, 88. The dissertation does not feature an extensive discussion on free people of color as their political aims tended to diverge from that of enslaved people prior to 1834. For more information see, Jerome S. Handler, *The unappropriated people: Freedmen in the slave society of Barbados* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974); Pedro L. V. Welch, and Richard A. Goodridge. *"Red" and black over white: free coloured women in pre-emancipation Barbados* (Bridgetown, Barbados: Carib Research & Pub, 2000); Melanie J. Newton, *The Children of Africa in the Colonies: Free People of Color in Barbados in the Age of Emancipation* (Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 2008).

The Journey From Slavery to Freedom

Bussa's Rebellion of 1816 in Barbados and its aftermath, form the subject of Chapter 1 of the dissertation. On Easter Sunday, April 14, 1816, enslaved men, and women who lived and labored in the central and southern parishes of St. Philip, Christ Church, St. John, St. Thomas, St. George, and parts of St. Michael, set fire to the sugar cane fields, and destroyed the homes of white masters by order of General Bussa, an African born slave living on the Bayley's plantation in the parish of St. Philip. The insurrection was short-lived. In a matter of days, the militia suppressed the insurrection. However, the insurgency sent shockwaves throughout the Caribbean and the British Empire. Legislators on both sides of the Atlantic used the uprising to generate support for pro and antislavery campaigns. The proslavery campaign used the rebellion to discredit the work of abolitionists, gain leverage to obtain financial compensation from London, and to justify the continued dependence on slave labor. In contrast, the abolitionists attempted to expose the brutality of slavery and weaken claims about paternalistic masters and their "happy" slaves. For the insurgents, the uprising was an attempt to dismantle the slaveholders' power by burning the means of production as they grew tired of waiting for "allies" in Parliament to come to their defense. Chapter 1 also examines a peculiar case involving Will and Kitt, two enslaved men who belonged to the Long Bay Plantation of St. Philip's parish who were accused of participating in the

uprising. Their trial record reveals just how colonial officials used subversive slave action to undermine planter authority.

Chapter 2 discusses the development of ameliorative reforms introduced by Members of Parliament in London in the aftermath of Bussa's Rebellion. These reforms addressed many issues including slave punishment, manumission, material allowances for slaves, the treatment of pregnant women, and much more. Slave owners in Barbados were vehemently opposed to ameliorative policies. They suggested that they might only adopt them if emancipation was no longer an option. Eventually, policymakers in London and Barbados planters compromised and passed the Consolidated Slave Law of 1826, which was designed to "improve" the lives of the enslaved while protecting the economic interests of slave owners. Chapter 2 does not address whether amelioration was a successful project per se. Rather, it examines how some of the reforms altered the master/slave relationship in the years that preceded emancipation. For the first time in the history of Barbados, the planters were actually liable to face serious criminal charges when found guilty of harming enslaved people without just cause. At first glance, amelioration seemed to offer the slaves a sense of security and redress. In reality, however, the reforms exacerbated tensions between masters and slaves.

By the 1830s protests in opposition to slavery from the enslaved population increased in number and intensity across Barbados from rural to urban spaces. Chapter 3 of the dissertation examines the debates that emerged in the wake of these outbursts,

and how planters used the rebellions to justify the introduction of an apprenticeship system in Barbados. The conduct of Black women is at the center of these debates.

Enslaved women of Barbados were some of the most vocal opponents to chattel slavery. Slave owners portrayed enslaved women as conniving, manipulative, and deceitful often accusing them of inciting enslaved men to revolt. From the point of view of slave masters, enslaved women were not worthy of unconditional freedom because they did not generally behave in a “respectable” manner. Their preoccupation with the conduct of enslaved women suggests that emancipation was not only about liberating people of African descent from captivity and enslavement. It was also about sculpting ex-slaves into obedient British subjects.

Chapter 4 of the dissertation explores the tensions that emerge under Apprenticeship until its premature demise in 1838. Both abolitionists and legislators located in the British metropole thought that Apprenticeship would result in “humane and amicable labour relations.”¹³ They were confronted, instead with the unyielding determination on the part of ex-slave owners to maintain control over Black laborers in a manner akin to slavery. This chapter shows the numerous ways in which ex-slaves tried to combat the authority of former slave owners. Sometimes apprentices appealed to local magistrates to mediate conflicts with their employers. When magistrates failed to

¹³ Beckles, *A History of Barbados*, 138.

act in their favor, laborers traveled to Bridgetown, the capital town of Barbados, to appeal to the governor to intervene on their behalf. By combining antislavery debates, ameliorative reforms, and slave resistance in one conceptual frame, *Anticipating Freedom* reveals not only how people of African descent defined freedom, but also how they tempered their expectations when state actors failed to acknowledge their autonomy. The dissertation also asks a question that is relevant far beyond its specific historical context: how do we properly define agents of social and political change?

Maps



Figure 1: Map of the Caribbean



Figure 2: Map of Barbados

Chapter 1 “Everything They Were About Was a Hanging Matter”: Reframing the Politics of Bussa’s Rebellion of 1816

On the evening of Easter Sunday, April 14, 1816, Sarah Marshall, the wife of Barbados planter John Thomas Lord, watched in horror as fires slowly engulfed the sugar plantations scattered throughout the southeastern parish of St. Philip located eleven miles northeast of Bridgetown, the capital of Barbados.¹ When the flames reached her estate’s perimeter, Sarah ran down the stairs leading to the main entrance of her home where she spotted Will Lord, a fisherman and slave standing in the yard. She quickly approached Will to inquire about the meaning of the fires, Will responded that “it was the negroes who had risen on account of their manumissions being detained... they were great fools for their doings... for everything they were about was a hanging matter.”²

The fires Sarah and Will observed were initiated by slaves belonging to the Bayley’s Plantation in St. Philip’s parish. Around eight o’clock in the evening, they ignited a heap of sugar cane trash signaling enslaved men and women to set fires to cane

¹ John Thomas Lord Esq. owned two estates in Barbados with his brother Samuel Hall Lord until his death in 1818. The first estate called ‘Long Bay’ comprised 145 acres and it was in the parish of St. Philip. The second property was called the ‘Pool’ estate. It was in St. Johns parish. The Long Bay estate was purchased sometime during the 18th century and produced aloes and cotton, but no sugarcane due to the cursory depth of the soil and the sheer force of the Northeast trade winds. John Thomas Lord purchased the Pool estate in June 1813 from an absentee proprietor, Hon. Thomas Graham, of Oldbury Court, Gloucester. The property consisted of a sugar plantation with roughly 366 acres, a mill for crushing cane and some undisclosed number of slaves. See James C. Brandow, *Genealogies of Barbados Families: from Caribbeana and the Journal of the Barbados Museum and Historical Society* (Baltimore: Genealogical Pub. Co., 1983), 388-393.

² The Petition of Samuel Hall Lord, 10 March 1818, C.O. 28/87, The National Archives, Kew, London, UK.

fields on other plantations nearby.³ In a few hours, a large portion of St. Philip's parish was set ablaze. The flames spread from estate to estate. According to one observer, they "carried desolation and ruin in their train."⁴ Soon, rebellious slaves located in the central and southern parishes of Christ Church, St. George, and St. John armed themselves with axes, bill hooks, bludgeons, and every other weapon they could get their hands on. They then broke into several houses, looted various items, destroyed the furniture, and in the words of one witness, "committed great outrages."⁵ By two o'clock the following morning, April 15, 1816, the island was officially placed under martial law.⁶

Local and imperial troops were then deployed to the island's interior where most of the rebels were based. Upon initial contact with military forces, the rebels dispersed in various directions to avoid capture.⁷ The scene was chaotic. Rebels quickly found themselves overpowered by troops. One white resident recalled that "had the negroes gained ascendancy over us in their struggle, the most horrible seems to have followed, but thank God, the efforts of the militia and regular troops were too powerful for

³ Anonymous, "Colonial Sketches," *Barbados Globe* (Bridgetown, Barbados), May 10, 1869, 3. *Readex: Caribbean Newspapers*. <https://infoweb-newsbank-com.proxy.lib.duke.edu/apps/readex/doc?p=EANACN&docref=image/v2%3A145EB306A91D13D6%40EANACN-14E8B202C3BE4468%402403828-14E819ABA2252278%402>.

⁴ Anonymous, "Colonial Sketches," 3.

⁵ Anonymous, "Colonial Sketches," 3.

⁶ John Poyer, *History of Barbados* (text) with manuscripts, "An Account of the Late Negro Insurrection...". [n.p., n.d.]. MSS. New York Public Library, 1.

⁷ Poyer, "An Account of the Late Negro Insurrection...", 1.

them.”⁸ Casualties were said to be anywhere between a few hundred to a few thousand once the scrimmage came to an end. By September 21, Governor James Leith reported that officials had executed 144 slaves under martial law, sentenced 70 to death, and condemned 123 to transportation.⁹ Barbados legislators estimated that proprietors lost roughly £175,000 of sugar cane and land to the fires.¹⁰

The 1816 slave uprising became popularly known as Bussa’s Rebellion in reference to its alleged African born leader, Bussa or Bussoe.¹¹ The details surrounding Bussa’s origins and his arrival to Barbados are unclear, but Hilary Beckles believes that he served as a head ranger for the Bayley’s plantation in St. Philip’s parish where the uprising began.¹² As an elite slave, Bussa worked on behalf of the estate manager in the field. He likely supervised the daily operations ensuring that laborers remained on task and met their quotas each day. The rebel leader may have also mediated conflicts between workers and the manager, making him an authority figure in the eyes of many on the Bayley’s plantation. Bussa’s grievances with the slave system were not material in nature; they were ideological. He was less willing to accept a lifetime of servitude,

⁸ Poyer, “An Account of the Late Negro Insurrection...”, 1.

⁹ Governor Leith to Lord Bathurst, 21 September 1816, C.O. 28/85, The National Archives, Kew, London, UK.

¹⁰ Hilary McD. Beckles, “The Slave-Drivers’ War: Bussa and The 1816 Barbados Slave Rebellion”, *Boletín de Estudios Latinamericanos y del Caribe*, No. 39 (Diciembre de 1985), pp. 88.

¹¹ Hilary McD Beckles, *Bussa The 1816 Revolution in Barbados*, University of the West Indies, Cave Hill and the Barbados Museum and Historical Society (St. Ann’s Garrison, Barbados, 1998), p. 16.

¹² Many scholars have examined the Barbados slave insurrection of 1816 over the last several decades. The most cited studies have been written by Hilary Beckles and Jerome Handler. These two scholars have debated at length over the origins, causes, and ideological foundations of the revolt which Beckles’ refers to as Bussa’s Revolt. See *Sunday Advocate* March 26, April 16, 30, 2000; *Daily Nation* April 5, 15, 2000; *Sunday Sun* April 9, 2000; *Sunday Nation* April 23, 30, 2000.

despite the privileges he likely received as a head ranger. In the words of Hilary Beckles, “Bussa and his fellow rebel organisers rejected the slave owners’ world in its entirety- its values, institutions, and social relations.”¹³ He refused to live in a society that revered chattel slavery as it stripped Africans and their descendants of their humanity, decency, and dignity. During the revolt of 1816, Bussa was allegedly captured while leading a regiment against military forces. He was eventually tried as a primary leader and then promptly executed.

This 1816 incident was the first of three major slave insurrections in the British West Indies during the beginning stages of gradual abolition.¹⁴ It was followed by the 1823 uprising in the colony of British Guiana (Demerara) in which slaves across fifty plantations from Georgetown, the capital to the southeastern territory of Mahaica came together to demand unconditional freedom.¹⁵ This insurgency, like the episode in Barbados, was carefully coordinated: masters of slaves were completely taken by surprise when the estates went up in flames. But like other slave insurrections of the same period, it was quickly suppressed as local militia were deployed and rebels were

¹³ Beckles, *Bussa The 1816 Revolution in Barbados*, p. 16.

¹⁴ See the following studies for more information: Mary Reckford, “The Jamaica Slave Rebellion of 1831,” *Past and Present* 40 (July 1968): 108-125; William A. Green, *British Slave Emancipation: The Sugar Colonies and the Great Experiment* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976); Michael Craton, *Testing the Chains: Resistance to Slavery in the British West Indies* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982), *Empire, Enslavement and Freedom in the Caribbean* (Jamaica: Ian Randle Publishers, 1997); Mary Turner, *Slaves and Missionaries: The Disintegration of Jamaican Slave Society, 1787-1834* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1982); Emilia Viotti da Costa, *Crowns of Glory, Tears of Blood: The Demerara Slave Rebellion of 1823* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

¹⁵ Mahaica is located roughly 22 miles southeast of Georgetown.

either killed on the spot or executed later. Many other slaves were charged with lesser crimes. They were sentenced to up to 1,000 lashes and subjected to hard labor for the rest of their lives.¹⁶

Eight years later in 1831, the slaves of Jamaica were also embroiled in a massive slave rebellion, by far the biggest, longest, and most serious uprising in the British Empire had experienced up to that time. Before the 1830s, resistance to enslavement occurred so frequently in Jamaica where fugitive slaves established robust maroon communities in the island's remote hinterland for well over a century. By the late 1820s, the Jamaican authorities noticed that the enslaved population had become increasingly obstinate especially as debates on emancipation intensified on both sides of the British Atlantic. Here again, as in Barbados (1816) and British Guiana (1823), the enslaved people of Jamaica believed that masters were withholding freedom that had been granted to them by Parliament in England. Tensions in Jamaica were extraordinarily high. Masters grew more paranoid as Christmas Day approached in 1831. The Christmas holiday provided those in bondage with a unique opportunity to revolt as they were given two consecutive days off from work to travel across different plantations to attend religious services and indulge in Christmas celebrations.¹⁷

On Monday December 27, 1831, an insurrection broke out in St. James parish and

¹⁶ Michael Craton, *Empire, Enslavement and Freedom in the Caribbean* (Jamaica: Ian Randle Publishers, 1997), 289.

¹⁷ Craton, *Empire, Enslavement and Freedom in the Caribbean*, 291.

then spread to the westward parishes, involving roughly 300 plantations and over 20,000 slaves. Centered in an area with a sizable Baptist following, the rebellion became popularly known as, 'The Baptist War'.¹⁸ The Baptists were known for encouraging slaves and free people to run their own religious services and to recruit new members. Robin Blackburn has noted that revolt spread quickly, extending far beyond Baptist control.¹⁹ Eventually, local troops and militia were assembled to crush the rebels, some of whom were led by a Black commander referred to as Colonel Jackson.²⁰ The rebels employed maroon-style guerrilla tactics of warfare, dashing the hopes of the colonial authorities for a quick defeat. It took officials two weeks to regain control over the afflicted areas. In the end, 14 whites and over 200 rebels were killed during the revolt; and 312 rebels were executed, while property valued at £1,132,440 was destroyed.²¹

The battle for colonial authority is the subject of this chapter and is an underlying theme throughout the dissertation. In his book *White Creole Culture, Politics and Identity During the Age of Abolition*, David Lambert argues that the Barbados slave revolt of 1816 was a "moment of pro-slavery and antislavery struggle over the representation of

¹⁸ For more information on the Baptist War read the following: Reckord, Mary. "The Jamaica Slave Rebellion of 1831." *Past & Present*, no. 40 (1968): 108–25. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/650070>.; Michael Craton, *Testing the chains: resistance to slavery in the British West Indies* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982); Claudius K. Fergus, *Revolutionary Emancipation: Slavery and Abolitionism in the British West Indies* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2013)

¹⁹ Robin Blackburn, *The Overthrow of colonial Slavery 1776-1848*, (London: Verso Publishers, 1988), 432.

²⁰ Blackburn, *The Overthrow of colonial Slavery*, 432.

²¹ Blackburn, *The Overthrow of colonial Slavery*, 432.

Barbados and its imagined position within a slave world or free world.”²² In essence, the insurrection became the basis for justifying pro-and antislavery campaigns throughout the British empire. The abolitionists in Parliament understood the attacks led by slaves against their masters as a natural consequence of chattel slavery, while the Barbados planters claimed that slave resistance resulted from metropolitan interference. Lambert’s assessment of the discourses surrounding Bussa’s uprising is valid. Elite white men on both sides of the abolition debate did use the incident to promote their political agendas after 1816. However, this chapter argues that the anti-slavery debates that emerged at the turn of the nineteenth century motivated enslaved men and women to attack their masters in Barbados. There is sufficient evidence to support the idea that the slaves of Barbados were led to believe that an official decree of freedom had been given to them by abolitionists in Parliament, but the planters were refusing to accept it. This alleged decree of emancipation was a slave registration bill that had been presented in the House of Commons in 1815. When planters and legislators based in the British metropole debated over the registration bill, the slaves in Barbados listened closely. They perceived political deliberations over the fate of slavery in the colonies as an indicator that emancipation was on the horizon. But as time passed with no movement towards freedom, enslaved men and women grew more anxious and agitated. The 1816

²² David Lambert, *White Creole Culture, Politics and Identity During the Age of Abolition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 107.

attack was fueled by unmet expectations.

This chapter also examines how a failed attempt at self-liberation transformed colonial relationships in the era of gradual emancipation. After rebel forces were subdued and martial law was lifted, Barbados authorities worked swiftly to arrest and charge all slaves they suspected of participating in or furthering the attacks on Easter Sunday. Those found guilty of conspiracy to incite insurrection or colluding with rebels were either condemned to death or sentenced to transportation for life. When slave masters like John Thomas Lord tried to intervene in court proceedings involving their slaves, colonial officials undermined their authority. This revelation is significant because it demonstrates that there were many political and social consequences of subversive slave action. While the rebel slaves of Barbados were unable to topple the planter class in the 1816 uprising, they did unsettle the foundation under which masters derived their power.

Claims of Innocence: The Trial of Will Lord & Kitt

Will Lord was a fisherman and slave belonging to John Thomas Lord's Long Bay estate in the parish of St. Philip in Barbados. On the night of April 14, 1816, Will saw fires erupt throughout the parish. He immediately told his mistress Sarah Lord to stay inside her home. By midnight the fires appeared to increase in number and intensity as the parish was engulfed by flames. Sarah and her family proposed taking their boat 11 miles west to Bridgetown. They assumed it would be safer there than in St. Philip, but

Will suggested that it would be better to stay at home because her property was safe.²³

Will may have thought that by continuing to occupy the property, it would be less vulnerable to attack. Heeding Will's advice, Sarah and the rest of her family remained on the estate.

John Thomas Lord was at his other property called the 'Pool' in St. Johns Parish located about 6 miles north of his Long Bay estate when the initial fires broke out. Troubled by the flaming scene, he mounted his horse and galloped to Long Bay in St. Philip's parish. On the way up to his estate, there he spotted Will guarding the front door of the main house. John dismounted his horse, and Will walked it over to the stable, and then immediately returned to the yard. He spent the rest of the day patrolling the perimeter of the house to ensure that no rebels came onto the property. According to John's testimony, Will appeared "afflicted at the distress of his mistress and her family."²⁴ John spoke highly of Will and the concern he appeared to demonstrate during the height of the revolt. He referred to Will "as being the servant in whom he had always the utmost confidence from his irreproachable conduct and always found him ready at his command."²⁵

The archive does not contain testimony from Will on what transpired that

²³ Mr. Lord's Petition Following the 1816 Insurrection, 10 March 1818, C.O. 28/87, The National Archives, Kew, London, UK.

²⁴ Mr. Lord's Petition Following the 1816 Insurrection, 10 March 1818, C.O. 28/87, The National Archives, Kew, London, UK.

²⁵ Mr. Lord's Petition Following the 1816 Insurrection, 10 March 1818, C.O. 28/87, The National Archives, Kew, London, UK.

hapless night. Perhaps, he did risk his life to protect the Lord family. If so, this act speaks volumes about his character and his attitude to chattel slavery. Slave revolts throughout the Caribbean between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries were risky endeavors. There was no guarantee that collective forms of mass action against the planter class would successfully upend a lifetime of servitude.²⁶ However, many slaves were willing to put their lives on the line because the horrors of bondage were far too much for any person to endure. One can only imagine the thoughts and feelings that stirred in Will during the attacks. Was he frightened? Confused? Emboldened?

Perhaps Will assumed the rebellious slaves were likely to be defeated by local and imperial troops. Perhaps Will believed that protecting the Lords would help secure the safety of his wife and children once the revolt was suppressed. Maybe he thought displays of loyalty would guarantee freedom for him and his family. One can only speculate. Yet, we must also entertain the possibility that he may not have been acting in the Lords' best interest. Why did Will encourage Sarah to remain on the estate when she

²⁶ Instead of waiting for the monarchy to initiate ameliorative measures, the slaves of Saint Domingue under the leadership of Toussaint L'Ouverture led a struggle for freedom that spanned 12 years (1791-1803). When Bonaparte's expedition was defeated in 1803, Haiti became the first Black republic in the western world. See the following studies for information on the Haitian Revolution: eds. David Barry Gaspar and David P. Geggus, *A Turbulent Time: The French Revolution and the Greater Caribbean* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997); David P. Geggus, *The Impact of the Haitian Revolution in the Atlantic World* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2001); Laurent DuBois, *Avengers of the New World: The Story of the Haitian Revolution* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004); Ada Ferrer, *Freedom's Mirror: Cuba and Haiti in the age of Revolution* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014); Marlene Daut, *Tropics of Haiti: Race and the Literary History of the Haitian Revolution in the Atlantic World, 1789-1865* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2015); Julius Scott, *The Common Wind: Afro-African Currents in the age of the Haitian Revolution* (New York: Verso, 2018).

presented him with a suitable means of escape? Why did Will case the perimeter of the property leaving Sarah and her relatives alone in the main house? Was he looking for someone? How could Will single-handedly guard the house from an invasion by the rebels? Regardless of Will's intentions, he met an unfortunate fate when the revolt was quelled.

On Monday, April 15, 1816, after martial law was imposed, members of the Barbados House of Assembly opened an investigation into the roles of the primary actors responsible for organizing, participating in, or furthering the uprising. Enslaved persons and free people of color who were found guilty of conspiracy to revolt were quickly sentenced to death, while others were convicted of lesser offenses and were either jailed or shipped to work camps in Honduras or other parts of the Americas as punishment. A new climate of fear and panic emerged in Barbados. Local authorities scrambled to maintain their fleeting supremacy over the enslaved. Will was arrested on May 7, 1816, and then arraigned for the following charges: "for joining the rebels or carrying arms with them or being associated with them or having warlike instruments in his possession or on his person, or having plunder in his possession or on his person."²⁷ The indictments were broad in scope. Perhaps officials believed they would have a greater chance at catching all the individuals responsible for the Easter uprising,

²⁷ Proceedings of a Court Martial by Order Colonel John Pollard Mayers, 7 May 1816, C.O. 28/87, The National Archives, Kew, London, UK.

if they made the charges broad. It is possible, however, that uninvolved men and women were condemned to death for crimes they did not commit.

It appears that Will's arrest was based on the testimony provided by two men: Cuffy Ned, a slave belonging to the Three Houses plantation, and Frank, a slave from the River plantation both located in St. Philip's parish. Neither of these witnesses was tried. Cuffy Ned was deemed of having bad character and his master got him included in the number of convicts sent to Honduras because he was esteemed dangerous to the estate.²⁸ Frank, however, was thought to be of good character and continued to live on the River plantation long after Will's trial.

According to the court record of Cuffy Ned's testimony:

That on Monday after Easter the witness saw prisoner Will Lord some time in the course of forenoon at Bayley's plantation. That prisoner had a switch in his hands—That a man called to prisoner to take weapons into his hands, but he refused at that time to take anything in his hand. -That the prisoner did not fall in the regiment but faced the regiment and shewed them how to place their feet- That he can't [say] whether the prisoner join'd the rebels when they went-That witness did not see prisoner with any plunder.²⁹

Cuffy Ned's testimony is fascinating for several reasons. First, he could not definitively state whether Will joined the rebel forces, only that he was at the Bayley's plantation with a switch in hand. At first glance, these actions appear suspicious, but

²⁸ Petition of Samuel Hall Lord, 28 June 1818, C.O. 28/87, The National Archives, Kew, London, UK.

²⁹ Proceedings of a Court Martial by Order Colonel John Pollard Mayers, 7 May 1816, C.O. 28/87, The National Archives, Kew, London, UK.

there may be an explanation behind them. According to a deposition provided by John Thomas Lord, Will left for the Bayley's estate during the early hours of April 15 with the goal of bringing his wife and children to Long Bay for safety. If the plantation was overrun by rebels upon his arrival, Will would need some type of weapon to defend himself and his family from the possible threat of violence. Hence, the switch that was allegedly in his possession. Confronted with rebels whom Cuffy Ned refers to as the "regiment," Will supposedly told them how to adjust their feet. Perhaps Will attempted to fake an allegiance to the rebels by showing them how to move their bodies to exert more power. Or Will might have joined the rebels. This may also explain why he had a weapon in his grasp. Also, it is impossible to determine with absolute certainty if Cuffy Ned's recollection of Will's whereabouts the night of the attack was accurate. Ultimately, Will's conviction was not based solely on Cuffy Ned's testimony.

Later in the proceedings, it seems that another witness was supposed to testify against Will, but this person failed to appear before the court. The trial adjourned for the day and reconvened at eight o'clock on Thursday morning with a statement provided by Frank, a driver on the River plantation:

That on Monday afternoon, the day after Easter, witness saw the prisoner Will Lord come out of dwelling House of the River Plantation with a tray full of bottles of liquor-That one gang then in the year took a bottle from the tray, broke the neck and drank-That prisoner said to the man "you shall not have anymore as every man is plundering for himself"- That after this witness hear prisoner say "which is the driest of those trash heaps, give some fire that I may burn it."- That on this Tom Jones and a man called Deago, said to the prisoner "you shall not have the fire to burn it." That prisoner and another man then went to the mill to

put the same in the wind-That the other man loosed the mill and the prisoner went to tall tree and attempted to move it so as to turn the mill in the wind, but was not able alone, to do so. That the prisoner with the party of rebels then quitted the River plantation.³⁰

Frank's claims against Will were incriminating. Will may have plundered some bottles of liquor from the main house and tried to burn sugar remnants, but Ned never mentions this kind of activity in his testimony. Frank's deposition also relies heavily on hearsay—the statements of Tom Jones and a man referred to as "Dego." According to Mr. M. Howard, both Frank and Dego were of "good character" and Dego in particular "behaved himself with the greatest propriety" during the insurrection.³¹ However, there is no information provided on the character of Tom Jones. After Frank gave his testimony, Will was called to take the stand during which he vehemently denied the charges against him. The court adjourned to deliberate and reconvened shortly thereafter to present their verdict. Will was found guilty. He was sentenced to death by hanging under the direction of the Royal Regiment.³²

The slave Kitt, a field laborer and fisherman who also belonged to the Lord plantation, met a similar fate. On July 16, 1816, Kitt was brought before the General Colonial Court Martial and arraigned on the following charges:

³⁰ Proceedings of a Court Martial by Order Colonel John Pollard Mayers, 7 May 1816, C.O. 28/87, The National Archives, Kew, London, UK.

³¹ Letter from M. Howard to William Gill Esq, 2 June 1816, C.O. 28/87, The National Archives, Kew, London, UK.

³² Proceedings of a Court Martial by Order Colonel John Pollard Mayers, 7 May 1816, C.O. 28/87, The National Archives, Kew, London, UK.

For having been concerned in raising, furthering, committing or carrying on the late mutinous slave insurrection, as a principle in the (same) or having been concerned in raising, furthering, or carrying on the said mutinous slave insurrection, as an accessory there to by some unlawful way, or ways or means.³³

Unlike Will, Kitt was accused of organizing or aiding the uprising as a primary actor, a crime punishable by death. In response to the charges against him, Kitt pleaded “not guilty.” James Sargeant, a free mulatto, then came forward as a witness for the prosecution. James claimed that he was traveling with a gun in hand from the Wood’s plantation back to his home the day after Easter when he spotted Kitt armed with a watchman’s sword in the company of several men who were attempting to carry down the road a wounded man belonging to Mr. Marshall. The men informed James that the injured man had been attacked by rebels the previous night at Mr. Belgrave’s estate. During James’ conversation with these men, Kitt allegedly got ahold of a rebel’s gun and accused James of acting against them. At the end of this exchange, Kitt supposedly told James that Mr. Belgrave had gone to Mr. Blade’s estate and “they would have him out or have the house down before night.”³⁴

After James was dismissed from the stand, Cuffy Ned of the Three Houses plantation was then produced as a witness for the prosecution. He claimed that he saw Kitt in the yard of the Bayley’s plantation the day after Easter, where a gang of rebels

³³ Proceedings of a General Colonial Court Martial held by General Edward Codd, 6 July 1816, C.O. 28/87, The National Archives, Kew, London, UK.

³⁴ Proceedings of a General Colonial Court Martial held by General Edward Codd, 6 July 1816, C.O. 28/87, The National Archives, Kew, London, UK.

had taken control of the property.³⁵ Cuffy Ned maintained that Kitt was armed with a bill and something that looked like a lance. He remained on the property for some time before making his way to the River plantation nearby. According to testimony provided by Daniel, a slave belonging to the River plantation, Kitt, was armed with a bill, near the door to the study when several rebels stormed the house. He allegedly entered the house with the rest of the men, but his whereabouts after that initial invasion are not mentioned in the depositions. The archive does not contain any exculpatory evidence regarding Kitt's actions on the night of April 15, or his relationship to the Lord family. We know that Cuffy Ned and Daniel were said to be of bad character and that they were eventually included with the band of convicts destined for Honduras. In the end, Kitt was found guilty of the charges brought against him. He was sentenced to death by hanging.

After Will and Kitt were sentenced, Bathsheba Lord, the mother of John Thomas Lord, tried to obtain a statement of the charges held against them from the local authorities. Her efforts appear to have been ignored or blocked. Mrs. Lord then enlisted her other son, Samuel Hall Lord for help. He composed a petition to John Spooner, President of the Barbados council detailing the "special good conduct" of these men during the insurrection.³⁶ Between July 1816 and June 1818, the Governor of Barbados

³⁵ Proceedings of a General Colonial Court Martial held by General Edward Codd, 6 July 1816, C.O. 28/87, The National Archives, Kew, London, UK.

³⁶ Petition of Samuel Hall Lord, 28 June 1818, C.O. 28/87, The National Archives, Kew, London, UK.

Lord Combermere carried out an investigation of the legitimacy of Samuel's appeal. In a letter dated June 28, 1818, to Earl Bathurst, Principal Secretary of State for the War and Colonial Department, Combermere drew attention to Samuel's petition along with commentary provided by himself and Lieutenant Colonel Howell, President of the Court Martial among other members of the Barbados council.

Samuel's petition contended that on the night of April 14, 1816, the Lord family residence called the Long Bay Castle containing forty white people and two estates (Long Bay and Pool) were not damaged or destroyed due to the "unshaken fidelity and attachment of the negro slaves employed on said estates."³⁷ Combermere seemed unconvinced by this statement. He argued that there were many cases in which slaves claimed to have protected their estates, they were found guilty of "all sorts of excesses upon the neighboring estates."³⁸ Combermere's assertion seems a bit specious and implies that the enslaved people were inherently duplicitous. Is it possible that some slaves pretended to protect their estates while damaging others? Absolutely but in the context of Will's case, it seems unlikely. Several members of the Lord family placed Will at the Long Bay estate on the night of April 14 until the following morning. At some point during the afternoon of the April 15, Will left the Long Bay estate for the Bayley's plantation nearby to find his wife and children. He then returned to Long Bay with his

³⁷ Petition of Samuel Hall Lord transmitted by W. Carnev to Earl Bathurst, 10 March 1818, C.O. 28/87, The National Archives, Kew, London, UK.

³⁸ Lord Combermere to Hon. Earl Bathurst concerning Samuel Hall Lord's petition, 28 June 1818, C.O. 28/87, The National Archives, Kew, London, UK.

family sometime between five and six o'clock the same day. As for Kitt, the details surrounding his whereabouts throughout the Easter uprising are absent from the archive.

Another issue raised by Samuel centered on the witnesses who testified against his slaves, Cuffy Ned (of Three Rivers Plantation) and Daniel (of River Plantation). According to Samuel, these men were "notorious offenders" who were hanged for their disgraceful conduct during the insurrection after Will and Kitt were sentenced.³⁹ Governor Combermere argued that John Thomas Lord's slaves were not convicted solely on the testimony of any individual slave because Frank was of "good character" and James Sejeant's testimony was never appealed. Shortly after Barbados was placed under martial law when the slave rebellion erupted, the Deputy Attorney General, W. Gill mandated that "all persons of every description to aid and assist in the discovery and apprehension of such offenders."⁴⁰ This may explain the varying reputations of the witnesses called to testify against Lord's slaves. However, one can understand Samuel's concerns over the validity of witness statements.⁴¹ The testimony of the slaves must be read, analyzed, and interpreted carefully as it could have easily been extracted under coercive circumstances. The enslaved men who spoke out against Will and Kit may have

³⁹ Lord Combermere to Hon. Earl Bathurst concerning Samuel Hall Lord's petition, 28 June 1818, C.O. 28/87, The National Archives, Kew, London, UK.

⁴⁰ W. Gill to President John Spooner, 16 April 1816, C.O. 28/85, The National Archives, Kew, London, UK.

⁴¹ David Barry Gaspar grapples with the difficulties of analyzing slave testimony in closed courts in his careful analysis on the 1736 plot in Antigua: *Bondmen & Rebels: A Study of Master-Slave Relations in Antigua* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985).

been offered reduced sentences for their own convictions, a free pardon, and other types of privileges for their service.

Aside from Will and Kitt's good conduct, and the reputation of the witnesses, Samuel's petition also addressed the legal rights and privileges of slaveholders. Specifically, the idea that masters must be notified when their slaves were to be tried in local courts. Samuel claimed that "in all cases where slaves were charged with offences, West India usages require that, their owners should receive due and timely notice of their trial and thus be enabled to do for the slaves what the law does not suffer him to do for himself."⁴² Thus, slaveholders must be given advance notice of court proceedings concerning their slaves to offer them counsel if necessary. Samuel also assumed that "proper and humane usage" was observed in every hearing following the revolt, except for Will and Kitt. Samuel believed that his slaves were hurried to trial without any opportunities for him to produce exculpatory evidence on their behalf.

Samuel's assumptions about the legal rights of slave owners were not baseless. As Elsa Goveia noted, "Under the English slave system in the West Indies, the slave was not regarded as a subject, but rather as property."⁴³ Once a slave was seized and then traded, he or she became chattel, a possession that could be used in any way the owner saw fit. Slaves held no legal rights and could not seek out civil or judicial officials for

⁴² Lord Combermere to Hon. Earl Bathurst concerning Samuel Hall Lord's petition, 28 June 1818, C.O. 28/87, The National Archives, Kew, London, UK.

⁴³ Elsa Goveia, *The West Indian slave laws of the 18th century* (Caribbean University Press, 1970), 20.

settling grievances.⁴⁴ Thus, in West Indian slave societies, a new regulatory system was created to support the concept of a slave as property. For example, some slaveholders were compensated when their slaves were faced with the death penalty.⁴⁵ Individuals who hired or employed the slaves of others without their permission were also subject to criminal charges. Since Will and Kitt were considered property in the eyes of the law, the Lords, as owners of these slaves assumed they would have been forewarned of their trials.

According to Lieutenant Colonel Conrad Adams Howell of the St. Michael Royal Regiment, no notice was given to any planters whose slaves were tried for participating in the revolt. Therefore, Mr. Lord was mistaken in his assertion that “proper and humane usage was adhered to in every case growing out of the revolt.”⁴⁶ Howell also mentioned that “no application of any kind or by any person was made to the court for either charges against Mr. Lord’s slaves, or for time to produce exculpatory evidence on their behalf or was notice of any information to do so...”⁴⁷ It is likely that the officials did not contact the owners of slaves charged with capital offences as they did not want them to get in the way of court proceedings.

⁴⁴ Jerome S. Handler, “Custom and law: The status of enslaved Africans in Seventeenth-century Barbados”, *Slavery & Abolition*, 37:2 (2016), 233-255.

⁴⁵ Goveia, *The West Indian slave laws of the 18th century*, 22.

⁴⁶ Lord Combermere to Hon. Earl Bathurst concerning Samuel Hall Lord’s petition, 28 June 1818, C.O. 28/87, The National Archives, Kew, London, UK.

⁴⁷ Lord Combermere to Hon. Earl Bathurst concerning Samuel Hall Lord’s petition, 28 June 1818, C.O. 28/87, The National Archives, Kew, London, UK.

It is unclear if Samuel Hall Lord's petition assuaged the minds of Barbados officials in charge of prosecuting enslaved men and women involved in the 1816 uprising. However, it does mention that Will and Kitt's sentences were commuted to transportation for life sometime between May 1816 and January 1818, but specific reasons for the amended sentences are not disclosed in the record. Perhaps, the court-martial found Will and Kitt guilty of lesser offenses and amended their punishment accordingly. Maybe the evidence produced by the prosecution was appealed by the court.

Though incomplete, these trials illustrate that the lives of the enslaved of Barbados were precarious at best during the age of abolition. Alleged good conduct, merit, and service were not enough to combat charges of conspiracy to incite or promote insurrection. From the moment that Will and Kitt were rounded up by local authorities, they were placed at the mercy of the local legal system — one that actively sought to punish them for any offenses that appeared to disrupt the delicate social order officials strove to maintain. It did not matter that few of the witnesses called on by the prosecution were "of bad character" or inconsistent in their accounts of the events. Since Will and Kitt were found at the wrong place at the wrong time during the Easter attack, the assumption was that they were colluding with rebel forces. These trials also reveal that in moments of social or political upheaval, planters were incapable of protecting their slaves from imperial legal forces because the interests of the empire superseded

their own.

Sowing the Seeds of Revolution

The 1816 slave uprising in Barbados was not the first incident in which Africans and their descendants had challenged slaveholders in that thriving British plantation colony. Since the seventeenth century, enslaved men and women had made numerous attempts at thwarting captivity by fleeing estates, tampering with plantation productivity, or by orchestrating large plots against their white masters. The most noteworthy attempts at insurrection took place in 1649, 1675, and 1692.⁴⁸ In the 1649 episode, a small group of slaves had organized a revolt in response to a food shortage on the island. The overall goal was not to destroy institutional slavery, but rather to improve the material conditions of enslavement. The scheme never came to fruition. Local authorities quickly discovered and suppressed it.

By the time of the second attempt in 1675, Barbados had experienced a series of transformations with regard to agriculture, labor, and law. In the early stages of settlement, indentured servants from Europe provided most of the colony's agricultural labor. In *Sweetness and Power*, Sidney Mintz identified these early laborers as, "debt servants, petty criminals, political and religious nonconformists, labor organizers, Irish

⁴⁸ Hilary McD. Beckles, *A History of Barbados From Amerindian Settlement to Caribbean Single Market* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 46.

revolutionaries-political prisoners of different sorts.”⁴⁹ These workers planted tobacco, sea-island cotton, and indigo—commodities typical of American cultivation during this period.⁵⁰ In time, however, the European market for these crops, particularly tobacco, became saturated and colonists looked to other forms of cultivated produce to be sold in European markets. Sugar cane became the dominant crop of choice by the 1640s.⁵¹ As a highly addictive food, sugar can be consumed in liquid or crystallized form and added to a variety of sweet and savory dishes. Sugar cane thrives in tropical climates and can be grown extensively on a large scale. The colonists were excited by the possibilities of sugar cane development and transitioned from small-scale farming to a new form of production: the plantation model. According to B. W. Higman, “The sugar plantation not only covered a relatively large area of agricultural land, it also required a large work force committed to labour exclusively for the plantation, a substantial factory complex, and a hierarchical system of management.”⁵² At first, planters experimented with different forms of labor by utilizing both indentured servants and enslaved Africans. This approach proved ineffective as white servants found plantation labor grueling, and they sought better work options elsewhere. Planters then turned to the continent of

⁴⁹ Sidney W. Mintz, *Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History* (New York: Penguin Group, 1985), 52.

⁵⁰ Edward B. Rugemer, “The Development of Mastery and Race in the Comprehensive Slave Codes of the Greater Caribbean during the Seventeenth Century.” *The William and Mary Quarterly* 70, no. 3 (2013): 433.

⁵¹ Many historians have argued that Barbados experienced a sugar revolution once English colonists were introduced to sugar cane. However, Russell Menard presents an alternative perspective on this issue. For more information see, Russell R. Menard, *Sweet negotiations: sugar, slavery, and plantation agriculture in early Barbados* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2006).

⁵² B.W. Higman, *A Concise History of the Caribbean*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 99.

Africa as the single source of labor for the island. Within a matter of years, Barbados transitioned from a community with a small number of African slaves to a society utterly dependent on African slave labor.⁵³

In 1661, the legislators of Barbados created a comprehensive slave act to “establish the guidelines of New World mastery and to create clear distinctions between the status of “Christian servants” and that of “Negro slaves.””⁵⁴ The racialization of slavery empowered masters to abuse and exploit Africans because they existed outside of Christian subjecthood. Still, laws were not enough to maintain control over a growing Black population. Masters and officials had to create an entire culture devoted to managing the actions and behaviors of the enslaved. Thus, systems of punishment and enforcement were utilized to dissuade intractable conduct both on and off the plantation. For example, members of the militia routinely searched the homes of slaves without prior notice or their consent.⁵⁵ In May 1675 soldiers discovered a slave conspiracy to overthrow the planter class. Local officials unearthed the plot a mere eight days before the scheduled date for its execution due to information provided by an enslaved woman named Anna (or Fortuna).⁵⁶ The slaves suspected of organizing the

⁵³ Historian Hillary Beckles estimates that by 1673, the white population fell from 23,000 to 21,309 while the Black community rose from 20,000 to 33,184 in the same period. See *A History of Barbados* p. 48 for more information.

⁵⁴ Rugemer, Edward B. "The Development of Mastery and Race in the Comprehensive Slave Codes of the Greater Caribbean during the Seventeenth Century." *The William and Mary Quarterly* 70, no. 3 (2013): 431.

⁵⁵ Beckles, *A History of Barbados*, 47.

⁵⁶ Beckles, *A History of Barbados*, 49.

uprising were rounded up by the authorities and placed on trial. The rebels found guilty of conspiracy were executed. Others convicted of lesser involvement were burned alive or beheaded. Many planters believed that the severe punishments would effectively discourage various forms of slave resistance in the future. But their hopes were futile. The slaves of Barbados continued to oppose their enslavement right down to emancipation in 1834, more than one hundred and fifty years later.⁵⁷

The last major insurrection attempt of the seventeenth century in 1692 also ended prematurely. A few months before the scheduled time of implementation, rebel slaves formed a military unit composed of four regiments (foot and horse) following English military practice.⁵⁸ The leaders of the rebels planned to destroy rural plantations located in the island's interior and then march on to Bridgetown, the capital of Barbados. At Bridgetown, the rebels expected to capture forts, acquire weapons, burn ships, and release prisoners from jail. In a confession extracted by one nameless rebel, the uprising was supposed to coincide with the departure of military forces bound for the Leeward Islands in May 1689.⁵⁹ However, the expedition did not leave as planned, and the rebel leaders delayed their attack. In 1690, more forces arrived in Barbados, strengthening local military presence. Sometime in the latter half of 1691, the rebels decided to coordinate their insurgency around the departure of French fleets destined for

⁵⁷ The emancipation act was passed by Parliament in May 1833. Barbados was the last island in the British West Indies to accept the decree which did not go into effect until August 1, 1834.

⁵⁸ Beckles, *A History of Barbados*, 50.

⁵⁹ Beckles, *A History of Barbados*, 50.

Martinique. However, the fleets did not leave as planned and the rebels were vulnerable to discovery.⁶⁰ Ultimately, the Barbados authorities uncovered the plot in January 1692.

Since the insurrection attempts of 1649, 1675, and 1692 failed to materialize, local officials were shocked by the 1816 slave uprising as Barbados experienced what appeared to be over one hundred years of peaceful relations between masters and the Black laboring masses. Bussa's insurrection revealed lingering tensions that went ignored by the plantocracy and reinvigorated Parliamentary efforts at abolishing slavery throughout the British Empire. Abolitionists in London used the 1816 event to not only condemn the totalizing power of slave owners but to contest the long-standing practices and traditions employed by masters and estate managers to subjugate enslaved men and women.

The Aftermath of Bussa's Rebellion of 1816

After peace was restored and martial law was lifted, some members of the Barbados House of Assembly were appointed to a committee tasked with investigating the foundations and causes of the 1816 slave uprising.⁶¹ These legislators interviewed many people including slaves, free people of color, militia officers, clergymen, overseers, and estate managers who claimed to know how and why the insurgency unfolded. In a

⁶⁰ Beckles, *A History of Barbados*, 51.

⁶¹ In 1639, the Barbados House of Assembly was established. It was governed by a small electorate that represented planters and their interests. From 1641, the Assembly began to craft legislation affecting indentured servants and the enslaved. See for more information: Handler, Jerome S. "Custom and Law: The Status of Enslaved Africans in Seventeenth-Century Barbados." *Slavery & Abolition* 37, no. 2 (2016): 233-255.

report of their findings published in 1818, members of the committee concluded that during the latter half of 1815, enslaved men and women were led to believe that the “benefits of freedom would probably be extended to them, through the interposition of the friends of the Blacks, in England” sometime around Christmas or New Year’s Day.⁶² The so-called friends in England were British abolitionist William Wilberforce and the Queen. The mere possibility of freedom was concretized when a cadre of slaves and free people of color allegedly read in English newspapers that manumissions had been awarded to the enslaved population by Members of Parliament, but planters were refusing to comply.⁶³ It is likely that rumors of manumission were mistaken for anti-slavery debates between British legislators and West Indian planters.

In 1815, British abolitionist William Wilberforce, along with James Stephen and Zachary Macaulay, presented a framework of legislation in the House of Commons that would require Caribbean planters to register their slaves officially.⁶⁴ The purpose of that bill was to discourage masters from illegally importing Africans to the West Indies following the British slave trade’s closure in 1807. Wilberforce and his allies wanted the name and description of each slave recorded in an official register kept by the colonial

⁶² W. Walker, by order of the Legislature, *The report from a select committee of the House of Assembly: appointed to inquire into the origin, causes and progress of the late insurrection* (Barbados: Printed, 1818), 6.

⁶³ Walker, *The report from a select committee of the House of Assembly*, 6.

⁶⁴ *Bermuda Gazette* (Hamilton, Bermuda), June 12, 1819: 4. *Readex: Caribbean Newspapers*. <https://infoweb-newsbank-com.proxy.lib.duke.edu/apps/readex/doc?p=EANACN&docref=image/v2%3A145EB3D71E47C675%40EANACN-14848D115FC4E770%402385598-14832BF30885ABD0%403-14832BF30885ABD0%40>.

governor, who would then have the means of identifying slaves who had disappeared.⁶⁵ Many West Indian planters vehemently opposed slave registration. Others opposed legislation that appeared to undermine their power over the enslaved. Some masters expressed their aversion to legal reform in local and foreign newspapers that were widely circulated throughout the British empire.⁶⁶ Rebel organizers like Bussa of Barbados got their hands on these papers or learned of the information contained in them and conflated discourses on the slave registration bill with an official decree of freedom. At least that is what abolitionists in Parliament believed. In *Remarks on the Insurrection in Barbados* published shortly after the Barbados insurrection in 1816 was suppressed, some anti-slavery advocates in British government arrived at the following conclusion:

The planters have at all times professed to fear that their gangs would be excited to insurrection by parliamentary discussions in this country. But their own conduct, throughout the whole of the abolition controversy, flatly contradicts that profession, and proves it insincere; for these discussions, of which the slaves could never hear without their help, have been regularly published by

⁶⁵ Claude Levy, *Emancipation, Sugar, and Federalism: Barbados and the West Indies, 1833-1876* (Gainesville: University Presses of Florida, 1980), 20.

⁶⁶ Barbados was the second Caribbean Island behind Jamaica to launch a printing office in the year of 1730. The first known printer on record was David Harry, a Philadelphian who had previously worked with Benjamin Franklin and Samuel Keimer. After their initial newspaper business flopped, Keimer gave up and set sail for the West Indies in 1729. In 1730, Harry followed suit and traveled to Barbados as a journeyman printer under the employ of his former master Keimer. After a few months passed, Harry failed to get his printing business off the ground. From 1731 onward, Keimer ran the printing office Bridgetown, the capital of Barbados. Early presses furthered the interests of planters and merchants' but by emancipation in the English Americas, liberal-leaning newspapers aimed at people of African descent were established and maintained an engaged audience well into the twentieth century. See Cave Roderick, "Notes towards the History of Printing and Related Trades in the West Indies" in *Miscellaneous Papers on West Indies Printing* (S.I. 1976), 6. American Antiquarian Society.

themselves, in the colonial newspapers,- or rather have been misrepresented by them, in the way most likely to infuse dangerous ideas into the minds of the slaves.⁶⁷

There is some evidence to support the idea that slaves in the colonies would not have been aware of parliamentary debates in London without the unintentional help of the planters. For example, Barbados officials accused an enslaved woman named Nanny Grig of spreading the news that “the negroes were all to be freed” on the Simmons estate in St. Philip’s parish.⁶⁸ She allegedly told another slave that “she had read it in the Newspapers, and that her Master was uneasy at it.”⁶⁹ The fragmentary nature of the archive makes it impossible to know whether Nanny Grig was completely literate. Still, her testimony is quite revealing. Enslaved people in Barbados recognized the importance of printed materials which carried valuable information that had a direct impact on their lives.⁷⁰ According to Julius Scott, “Of all the types of intelligence which arrived either on printed page or by word of mouth in Afro-American societies, none was more eagerly anticipated or potentially explosive than news which fueled hopes of

⁶⁷ *Remarks on the Insurrection and the Bill for the Registration of Slaves* (London: Ellerton and Henderson, 1816), 4.

⁶⁸ W. Walker, *The report from a select committee of the House of Assembly*, 29.

⁶⁹ W. Walker, *The report from a select committee of the House of Assembly*, 29.

⁷⁰ In *Empire, Enslavement, and Freedom*, historian Michael Craton claims that by the time of emancipation roughly one or two slaves in a hundred were literate enough to read books and that the most common method for spreading political news among the enslaved was by domestics. I think these numbers are rather conservative and require further exploration. Indeed, planters made concerted efforts to keep enslaved people from learning how to read and write, still many gained literacy skills through religious instruction and some were even employed at printing houses.

emancipation.”⁷¹ Disaffected slaves like Nanny Grig used printed news, rumors, or a combination of the two sources to incite conflict between slaves and their masters hoping that it would promote their own interests. But the planters failed to recognize rumor as a calculated tactic implemented by the enslaved population to facilitate emancipatory efforts. Instead, the masters of Barbados blamed abolitionists in Parliament and their ill-conceived policies for subversive slave behavior. From their perspective, abolitionists were nothing more than persistent irritants, talking heads who knew nothing about how to successfully operate a plantation, let alone manage slaves.

In the 1818 report on the origins and causes of the 1816 slave uprising, Major Oxley of the Royal Regiment noted that “the slaves in Saint Philip’s Parish were the richest and most comfortably situated of most the negroes in the Island; but that they had no idea of obtaining their freedom, until the knowledge of the Slave Registry Bill having been introduced into the British Parliament, was talked of and canvassed in this island.”⁷² Here, Major Oxley revealed a common delusion held by many slave owners and their sympathizers in Barbados and across the British Caribbean during this period. He was convinced that men and women in bondage were content with their status as chattel if their material conditions of food, shelter, water, and other necessities were met. The planters could not fathom the desire for enslaved people to want and actively seek

⁷¹ Julius S. Scott, *The Common Wind Afro-American Currents in the Age of the Haitian Revolution* (London: Verso, 2018), 78.

⁷² W. Walker, *The report from a select committee*, 32-33.

lives beyond the confines of the plantation.⁷³ The abolitionists weaponized such delusions to incite a rhetorical war over colonial authority.

By the 1820s, tensions between the Barbados planters and the London abolitionists came ahead. The antislavery advocates in Parliament could no longer sideline the fate of slavery in the colonies for future debate as they continued to receive news of slave resistance and reports of abuse committed by masters against their slaves in Barbados and across the Caribbean. Abolitionists and legislators grew more agitated with each passing year. Finally, in 1823, Parliamentarians decided to implement a series of reforms to ease some of the more horrific conditions of bondage until they could create an appropriate bill for general emancipation. The punishment inflicted on enslaved people, especially women, was at the forefront of ameliorative reforms. The following chapter examines the processes that led the British Parliament to end flogging as a punishment for women in Barbados. It also explores how amelioration exacerbated tensions between the masters and their slaves who were still dealing with the aftermath of Bussa's rebellion.

⁷³ For more information on the complexities of master-slave relations in the Americas see the following: Orland Patterson, *The Sociology of Slavery: An Analysis of the Origins, Development, and Structure of Negro Slave Society in Jamaica* (London: MacGibbon & Kee, 1967); Richard S. Dunn, *Sugar and Slaves: The Rise of the Planter Class in the English West Indies, 1624-1713* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1972); Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death* (Harvard University Press, 1982); David Barry Gaspar, *Bondmen and Rebels A Study of Master-Slave Relations in Antigua* (Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985); Trevor Burnard, *Mastery, Tyranny, and Desire: Thomas Thistlewood and His Slaves in the Anglo-Jamaican World* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004); Vincent Brown, *The Reaper's Garden: Death and Power in the World of Atlantic Slavery* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008).

Chapter 2 “Less of Care, and More of Comfort”: Legal Transformations in the Age of Amelioration

Resident planters of Barbados remained at odds with colonial officials long after Will and Kitt’s sentences were commuted sometime in 1816. By 1820, however, the planters’ concerns now extended beyond the fate of individual slaves. The future of British slavery hung in the balance. A small but powerful group of metropolitan reformers in Parliament attempted to diminish the power of West Indian planters.¹ Armed with deep evangelical ties and laissez faire economic principles, these legislators pushed the imperial government to adopt an official policy for the amelioration of slavery in 1823 which covered a range of legal and social reforms designed to improve the physical and “moral” conditions of slaves and free people of color in the colonies.² British legislators in London envisioned the reform process as a dual effort worked out between themselves and planters in laying the foundation for future general emancipation across the empire’s slaveholding territories. Planters in Barbados and other self-governing colonies in the Caribbean like Jamaica and the Leeward Islands opposed reforms, interpreting them as a last-ditch attempt by Parliamentarians to

¹ Anti-slavery advocates based in the British metropole emerged in waves. The first wave was led by figures like Anthony Benezet, Granville Sharp, and John Wesley. The second wave consisted of John Ady, Thomas Clarkson, John Newton, James Ramsey, and William Wilberforce. These individuals were among the first abolitionists to bring debates against the continuation of West Indian slavery to Parliament during the 1780s. By 1815, they were matched or even surpassed by a more radical group for anti-slavery reformers: Henry Brougham, Thomas Cooper, James Cropper, James Stephen, and Zachary Macaulay. See Michael Craton’s *Empire, Enslavement, and Freedom in the Caribbean*, 263-282.

² Melanie Newton, *The Children of Africa in the Colonies: Free People of Color in Barbados in the Age of Emancipation* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Press, 2008), 87.

reduce their economic and political power. In a letter dated November 15, 1825, to President of the Council of Barbados, John Braithwaite Skeete, members of the Barbados House of Assembly pleaded for the restoration of the colonies to the “prosperity they formerly enjoyed...chartered rights which we have possessed for nearly two centuries.”³ On the treatment of enslaved people, Barbados legislators and planters believed they experience “less of care, and more of comfort, than the peasantry of any country in the world, England herself not excepted.”⁴ Despite these expressions of hostility towards amelioration, the policymakers in England managed to legislate a few reforms during the 1820s that changed the systems of control over bonded people slavery was finally abolished in the 1830s.

This chapter does not seek to present a comprehensive history of the British amelioration of slavery. Nor does it answer the question of whether amelioration was a “successful” political project if all parties involved felt dissatisfied with the terms of the agreement that were officially drawn in 1825 and 1826. The chapter examines how some of the proposed reforms of amelioration altered the foundation on which the master/slave relationship was built during the colonial era. Masters of slaves were not

³ Letter from Members of Barbados House of Assembly to John Braithwaite Skeete, 15 November 1825, C.O. 28/97, Barbados Department of Archives, St. James, Barbados.

⁴ Letter from Members of Barbados House of Assembly to John Braithwaite Skeete, 15 November 1825, C.O. 28/97, Barbados Department of Archives, St. James, Barbados.

only forced to reevaluate their approaches to labor discipline under amelioration, but they were also liable to face criminal charges when found guilty of murdering enslaved people without just cause, a principle which was unheard of at the time. The reforms initiated by abolitionists in Parliament challenged the long-held belief that masters could wantonly abuse their slaves without being reprimanded by the Crown. This shift may have played a major role in the heightened sense of frustration among slaves who became more outspoken in their opposition to bondage in the 1820s and 1830s. The following discussion presents an overview of some of the influences that shaped the reform debates, as well as specific cases in which plantocratic authority was threatened due to the subversive actions of individual slaves or policies instituted by Members of Parliament.

The project to ameliorate or reduce some of the more brutal aspects of slavery emerged from several sources, chief among them which were Enlightenment philosophy, new ideas of piety, and burgeoning abolitionist movements in Britain.⁵ By the turn of the nineteenth century, Adam Smith's canonical work, *An Inquiry Into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, left a searing imprint on the minds of legislators and anti-slavery advocates. A champion of "free" wage labor, Smith was a fierce critic of chattel slavery. He viewed the system as a direct impediment to industrial

⁵ Robert Luster, *The Amelioration of the Slaves in the British Empire, 1790-1833* (Peter Lang Publishing: New York, 1995).

growth. Smith wrote, "A Person who can acquire no property, can have no other interest but to eat as much, and to labour as little as possible. Whatever work he does beyond that is sufficient to purchase his own maintenance, can be squeezed out of him by violence only, and not by any interest of his own."⁶ Colonial slavery was a punitive system, that used brute force and coercion to promote work discipline. As Trevor Burnard explains in his study of Jamaica, "Terror, or naked power, was at the core of the institution of slavery... Whites were encouraged to keep firm discipline and to punish slaves frequently and harshly."⁷ Instead of receiving positive incentives like wages, enslaved people were motivated to labor by the lash or whip. Smith and his disciples persuaded policymakers that this tactic was ineffective at generating productivity. Substantiated by bonded people's strained relationship to labor, they called into question the efficacy of punishment.

While Enlightenment principles appealed to the minds of legislators in the metropole, their hearts were won by Christians as Evangelicals were some of the

⁶ Adam Smith, *An inquiry into the nature and causes of the wealth of nations*. By Adam Smith, LL. D. and F. R. S. Formerly Professor of Moral Philosophy in the University of Glasgow. In *Two Volumes*. ..., 2nd ed. Vol. 1. London: printed for W. Strahan; and T. Cadell, in the Strand, MDCCLXXVIII. [1778]. *Eighteenth Century Collections Online* (accessed November 6, 2021), 99, 471. https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/CW0105481574/ECCO?u=duke_perkins&sid=bookmark-ECCO&xid=0a9ea88d&pg=106.

⁷ Trevor Burnard, *Mastery, Tyranny, and Desire Thomas Thistlewood and His Slaves in the Anglo-Jamaican World* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 2004), 149.

earliest and most vocal adversaries of British slavery.⁸ Nonconformists believed it was their duty to share their interpretations of faith with the masses which necessitated proselytizing efforts across the empire including the colonies.⁹ As early as the 1700s, several missionary societies, notably the Baptists, Moravians, and Wesleyans, were sent out to Africa and the Americas. When clergymen arrived at their designated sites, they were horrified by the scenes of abuse, ignorance, and depravity they witnessed on the plantations. In a letter to the Methodist Missionary Society dated March 18, 1820, a clergyman dispatched to Barbados wrote:

Swearing, drunkenness, fornication: and every altho species of immorality like an ever luring torent, overspreads the land. Those who move in the highest walks of life, and such as are placed in a middling state, are given up to vanity, gaiety, and (deception or dissipation): and yet their native pride inflates their mind with so high an opinion of their own excellences, that they consider themselves as wise as the wisest, and as good as the best of Christians.¹⁰

For missionaries, the abolition of slavery was strictly a moral issue. In the slave societies they visited, missionaries were shocked to discover that many white masters

⁸ Mary Turner, *Slaves and Missionaries The Disintegration of Jamaican Slave Society, 1787-1834*, (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1982); Melanie Newton, *The Children of Africa in the Colonies Free People of Color in Barbados in the Age of Emancipation* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Press, 2008)

⁹ Luster, *The Amelioration of the Slaves in the British Empire, 1790-1833*, 2; Turner, Mary. *Slaves and Missionaries The Disintegration of Jamaican Slave Society, 1787-1834*. (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1982), 102-131.

¹⁰ Letter from a Clergyman to Methodist Missionary Society in London, 28 March 1820, Class No. x10/6, Missionaries' Letters and Papers from Barbados, 1804-1823, Barbados Department of Archives, St. James, Barbados.

and overseers had illicit sexual relations with Black women.¹¹ White men routinely sexually assaulted Black women because there were no penalties for their actions, and as Trevor Bernard has shown in his exploration of master/slave relations in Jamaica, it was another way for them to instill fear and terror among enslaved men and women.¹² Missionaries were also appalled to find out that the enslaved men they interacted with had children with several women from different plantations.¹³ The intimate sexual lives of enslaved people were of particular concern to Members of Parliament in England. Sasha Turner writing on abolition noted that, “Abolitionists upheld Christian marriage as foundational for preparing future generations of free people.”¹⁴ If general emancipation was to be achieved, enslaved people should adopt Eurocentric approaches to family and marriage.

To save the souls of Black laborers, evangelists believed it was essential to put an end to the illicit behaviors fostered under British slavery. In a sermon preached before

¹¹ It should be mentioned that issues of consent are not always present in Missionary Records. Typically, clergymen would highlight sexual encounters that materialized between white men and Black women because they occurred outside of Christian marriage. But when evaluating systems of control under British slavery, consent matters. The fact that enslaved women had no choice but to submit to the sexual proclivities of white men is crucial and should be taken into consideration when analyzing these sources. See Marisa Fuentes’ *Dispossessed Lives* for greater discussion on how the archive erases the sexual violence Black women experienced under colonial slavery.

¹² Trevor Burnard, *Mastery, Tyranny, and Desire Thomas Thistlewood and His Slaves in the Anglo-Jamaican World* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 2004); Jennifer Morgan, *Laboring Women Reproduction and Gender in New World Slavery* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004).

¹³ Luster, *The Amelioration of the Slaves in the British Empire, 1790-1833*, 2.

¹⁴ Turner, *Contested Bodies*, 38-39.

the Wesleyan Missionary Society in London on April 28, 1824, Richard Watson concluded:

Christianity must abolish slavery throughout the world, in the accomplishment of its own plans of benevolence and renovation. It is a blot which cannot remain amidst the glories of Messiah's reign. It is solely a punitive evil, not a corrective one, and is, therefore, inconsistent with the dominion of mercy; it implies, in its most mitigated form, an injustice, and is, therefore, contrary to the full dominion of righteousness. These are the principles on which we assuredly conclude that Christianity, largely and efficiently diffused, cannot consist with this state of society.¹⁵

Nonconformists like Watson used passionate sermons and speeches throughout Britain to alter public perceptions of slavery. They recounted grim stories of abuse and corruption which effectively painted masters as sinners who were thwarting the empire's movement towards a more progressive state. Their vivid firsthand accounts became the evidentiary bases for ameliorative reforms. In due time, abolitionists became well armed in their fight to end slavery in the colonies. Next in their plan was building a strong network of similarly minded politicians who were willing to push a reform agenda through the House of Commons.

William Wilberforce and his colleague Henry Brougham led the charge by establishing the Society for Mitigating and Gradually Abolishing the State of Slavery

¹⁵ Watson, Richard, and Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society. *The religious instruction of the slaves in the West India colonies advocated and defended: a sermon preached before the Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society, in the New Chapel, City-Road, London, April 28, 1824*. London: Sold by Butterworth and son, and Kershaw, 1824. *The Making of the Modern World* (accessed November 11, 2021), 17. https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/U0104579013/MOME?u=duke_perkins&sid=bookmark-MOME&xid=200e4452&pg=18.

throughout the British colonies in 1823.¹⁶ This organization drew much support from Quakers like Thomas Fowell Buxton, a brewer and Member of Parliament with deep evangelical connections.¹⁷ Wilberforce encouraged Buxton to lead the Society and establish a plan of action. The Society's goals were relatively modest and addressed several issues that had been raised in previous decades, such as easing manumission laws, promoting religious instruction among the enslaved population, and ending the labor of slaves on Sundays.¹⁸ However, the society later adopted a more radical approach and attempted to end slavery immediately because it was incompatible with their Christian values.¹⁹ Members of Parliament were largely in favor of general emancipation but in the words of Hilary Beckles, they opted to “make the lives of blacks less slave-like.”²⁰ Instead of abolishing slavery outright, British legislators decided to implement reforms that were designed to improve the overall conditions of bondage. The legal changes proposed by Parliament served a dual purpose: they curtailed masters’ rights and expanded those of enslaved people.²¹

¹⁶ Robin Blackburn, *The Overthrow of Colonial Slavery 1776-1848* (London: Verso, 1988), 421.

¹⁷ Blackburn, *The Overthrow of Colonial Slavery*, 421

¹⁸ Blackburn, *The Overthrow of Colonial Slavery*, 422.

¹⁹ Hilary Beckles, *A History of Barbados From Amerindian Settlement to Caribbean Single Market* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 117.

²⁰ Beckles, *A History of Barbados*, 117.

²¹ At the turn of the nineteenth century, Barbadian slaveholders did implement some reforms to counter increasing pressure from abolitionists to emancipate slaves. In 1805, for example, the Barbados Legislative Assembly made some provisions that whites could be charged with capital offences for murdering an enslaved person and, in 1817, ex-slaves and free people of color were given the right to give evidence in

Transforming Slave Law: Eradicating the Use of the Whip

No other symbol embodies the brutality of chattel slavery more effectively than the whip. Encased in cowskin, the whip had a firm handle that was woven tightly together in a braid or plait and tapered off to the end point, as shown in figure 1. The whip became the primary instrument used by drivers and overseers across Britain's Caribbean colonies to discipline slaves when African slave labor replaced the indentured servitude of Europeans in the seventeenth century. The number of lashes administered with the whip varied anywhere from one to thirty-nine based on the transgressions committed by workers.²² In 1823, Earl Bathurst, Secretary of State for the Colonies, demanded that planters outlaw the use of the whip, especially in the case of enslaved women while the debate to impose initial reforms in the Caribbean colonies was in progress.²³ Images of enslaved women bruised and battered had been widely circulated among abolitionist groups in the metropole. They not only helped to affirm lingering

courts against whites. Also, in the same year certain slaves were granted manumission for their good conduct during the 1816 insurrection. See *Public Acts 1800-1829*, Barbados National Archives.

²² Turner, Mary. "Modernizing Slavery: Investigating the Legal Dimension." *New West Indian Guide* 73, no. 3/4 (1999): 9.

²³ Outlawing the whip was just one of many reforms proposed by Lord Bathurst. He also wanted colonies to record all punishment administered to bonded people, abolish manumission fees, grant the enslaved to own property, grant the enslaved the opportunity to purchase their freedom, and nullify the slave owner's right to separate slave families through sale. See Beckles, *A History of Barbados*, 117; Mary Turner (1999) *The 11 o'clock flog: Women, Work and labour law in the British Caribbean*, *Slavery & Abolition*, 20:1, 38-58, DOI: 10.1080/01440399908575268; Newton, Melanie. "'New Ideas of Correctness': Gender, Amelioration and Emancipation in Barbados, 1810s-50s." *Slavery & Abolition* 21, no. 3 (2000): 94-124.

suspensions of planter brutality, but they also concretized the idea that chattel slavery promoted immoral conduct.²⁴

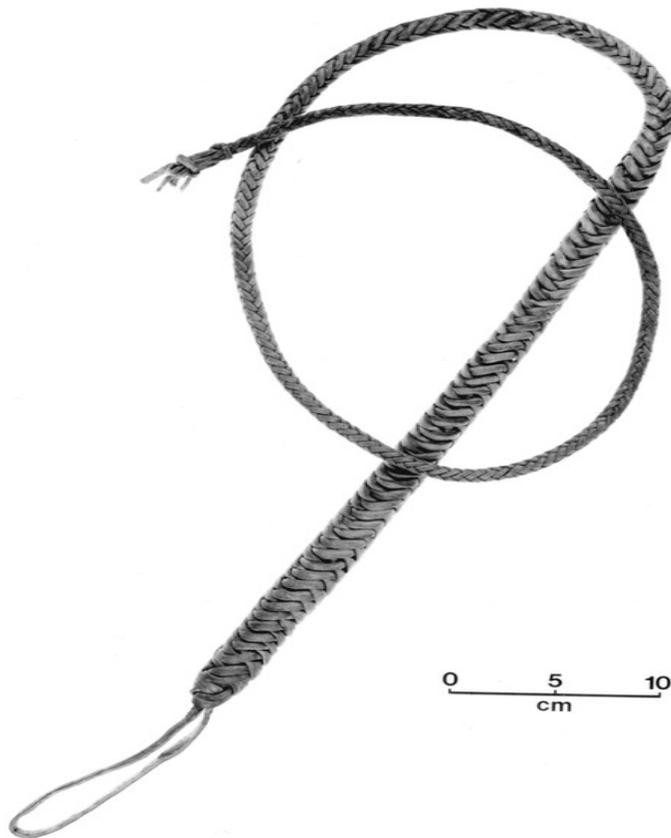


Figure 3: Whip used for punishment of slaves in Barbados

Planters in Barbados and elsewhere in the British Caribbean were outraged by Bathurst's demand. How else were they to manage the enslaved, a population that

²⁴ See Randy M. Browne's discussion of amelioration in Berbice during the 1820s: Randy M. Browne, *Surviving Slavery in the British Caribbean* (Philadelphia: University of Penn Press, 2017), 51.

greatly outnumbered their own?²⁵ Still, reformers were adamant especially in the case of Barbados. Colonial legislators thought Barbados slave holders were particularly overzealous in their use of force against enslaved people. In *The Slavery of the British West India Colonies Delineated* published in 1824, prominent abolitionist James Stephen revealed, "Several most cruel and horrible murders of slaves had recently occurred in Barbados; and the impunity of the ruffian perpetrators had been a theme of reproach in the mother-country, and of expostulation by the Governor."²⁶

On January 11, 1823, just a few months before ameliorative reforms were circulated in the House of Commons, the Governor of Barbados Sir Henry Warde wrote to Lord Bathurst with news that an enslaved man named Cuffy had died due to severe flogging inflicted on him by order of his Master John Parry Best.²⁷ Local authorities became aware of the incident on December 16, 1822, when the Assistant Apothecary, Dr. R. Clarke informed Dr. Edward Whitehall, the lead Apothecary for Best's property, that

²⁵ Jerome Handler's *The Unappropriated People* contains demographic information of Barbados from 1748 to 1833-34. According to Handler's reading of archival sources there were 78,096 slaves, 4,524 freedmen, and 17,630 whites in 1825. In the book, Handler uses the term *freedman* to describe "any person in the slave (or apprenticeship) society, whether manumitted or freeborn, whose racial ancestry was mixed or solely Negroid; the term is applied to both sexual groups, but, where females are specifically discussed, the term *freedwoman* is employed." P. 5.

²⁶ Stephen, James. 1969. *The slavery of the British West India colonies delineated: as it exists both in law and practice, and compared with the slavery of other countries, antient and modern* (New York: Kraus Reprint Co. 38.) <http://www.heinonline.org/HOL/Index?index=beal/slbritwe&collection=beal>.

²⁷ Henry Warde to Earl Bathurst, 11 January 1823, C.O.28/92, The National Archives, Kew, London, UK.

Cuffy had been severely flogged and was thought to be ill as a result.²⁸ The following day, Dr. Whitehall traveled to Fairy Valley estate where Cuffy labored to attend to him until one o'clock on Thursday, December 19.²⁹ By 5:00pm of the same day, Dr. Whitehall was notified that Cuffy died due to the injuries sustained from the whipping.

Shortly after Cuffy passed away, the coroner of Christ Church Parish, Thomas Rous Howell, was summoned to the property to investigate the cause of his death. Howell examined Cuffy's body and concluded that he died "of a severe flogging inflicted by his master when in a state of insanity."³⁰ John Parry Best, Cuffy's master, was nowhere to be found at the time of the investigation, having fled the island on the Osborne packet bound for Jamaica on December 21.³¹ It is unclear what transgressions Cuffy may have committed to warrant such a gruesome beating. He may have been working slower than usual. Perhaps he stole something from the main house. Maybe Cuffy simply found himself near Best at the wrong time, and consequently became the target of his rage. In any case, Cuffy's death drew serious concerns among local authorities because the incident could have sparked an insurrection among the slave population. Officials of the colony acted quickly.

²⁸ "The Barbados Mercury and Bridgetown Gazette, 7 Jan 1823", British Library, EAP1086/1/22/1/1, <https://eap.bl.uk/archive-file/EAP1086-1-22-1-1>

²⁹ "The Barbados Mercury and Bridgetown Gazette, 7 Jan 1823", British Library, EAP1086/1/22/1/1, <https://eap.bl.uk/archive-file/EAP1086-1-22-1-1>

³⁰ Henry Warde to John Beckles, 28 December 1822, C.O. 28/92, The National Archives, Kew, London, UK.

³¹ Acting Private Secretary Delhorte, 27 December 1822, C.O. 28/92, The National Archives, Kew, London, UK.

On Monday morning December 23, 1822, a jury assembled in Christ Church to determine if Best was in a state of mental derangement at the time of Cuffy's punishment. Seven key witnesses were deposed including Dr. Clarke, Dr. Whitehall, and Coroner Howell. When questioned before the jury Dr. Clarke maintained that he found Cuffy lying in the sick house when he arrived on the scene.³² He then asked the attending nurse about the punishment that was inflicted on Cuffy before directing her to acquire some medicine from a nearby shop. When questioned as to whether Cuffy died from the flogging inflicted on him, Dr. Clarke responded, "Not seeing the deceased afterwards (Dr. Whitehall having attended him), it is impossible for one to tell."³³ Dr. Clarke was then asked if he knew of the person who ordered Cuffy's punishment, to which he replied that he did not.

Dr. Whitehall was then called to the stand, sworn in before the jury, and was to describe the condition in which he had found Cuffy:

I saw him on Tuesday morning in the Hospital, lying on a couch: he was suffering a great deal from a flogging, which, he told me, he had received on Friday and Saturday preceding, by order of his master. I ordered the nurse to attend to his wounds particularly, and send on to the shop for some physic. I again visited him the day after, and found him in the same state. –On Thursday morning, at five o'clock, Mr. Parry Best called on me and requested I would see him directly, as he was very ill, and had no rest all night and he was afraid he would die. I came on with them and found the man so ill that the chances were one hundred to one he would die. He begged me to pay every attention to him

³² "The Barbados Mercury and Bridgetown Gazette, 7 Jan 1823", British Library, EAP1086/1/22/1/1, <https://eap.bl.uk/archive-file/EAP1086-1-22-1-1>

³³ "The Barbados Mercury and Bridgetown Gazette, 7 Jan 1823", British Library, EAP1086/1/22/1/1, <https://eap.bl.uk/archive-file/EAP1086-1-22-1-1>

for if he was to die (putting his hand to his throat) and making a motion which led me to understand he would be hanged.³⁴

In previous decades, slave owners in the Caribbean were subjected to fines for murdering their slaves.³⁵ Sometimes they were even tried before a judge and jury. If a slave owner ended up in a courtroom among a company of his peers, those of whom were also planters, it was highly unlikely that he or she would face any criminal charges.³⁶ But the stakes were high in the age of amelioration as planters found guilty of murdering their slaves may have actually been liable to face criminal charges. Therefore, it is not surprising that Best, Cuffy's master, would implore Dr. Whitehall to try everything in his power to save Cuffy. Still, the lack of care or genuine concern for Cuffy's wellbeing is deeply troubling. It probably supported metropolitan beliefs that slaveowners utilized not only abusive, but inefficient tactics when correcting or disciplining their slaves.

³⁴ Deposition of Edward H. Whitehall, 23 December 1822, C.O. 28/92, The National Archives, Kew, London, UK.

³⁵ Great Britain. Board of Trade. *Report Of The Lords of the Committee of Council appointed for the Consideration of all Matters relating to Trade and Foreign Plantations; Submitting To His Majesty's Consideration The Evidence and Information they have collected in consequence of his Majesty's Order in Council, dated the 11th of February 1788, concerning the present State of the Trade to Africa, and particularly the Trade in Slaves; and concerning the Effects and Consequences of this Trade, as well in Africa and the West Indies, as to the general Commerce of this Kingdom.* [n.p.]: n.p., 1789. Proquest U.K. *Parliamentary papers* (accessed December 30, 2021). <https://parlipapers-proquest-com.proxy.lib.duke.edu/parlipapers/docview/t70.d75.hcsp-001563?accountid=10598>

³⁶ I use the pronouns "he" and "him" in this context because masters are referred to as "him" in the report that I am referencing.

The questions posed to Dr. Whitehall about Best's conduct at the time of the flogging are also quite illuminating. First, he claimed that Best did not have a manager at the time of the incident to handle the day-to-day operations of his estate. Perhaps Best could not afford to hire an intermediary between himself and the slaves on his property. Maybe he had difficulty retaining hired help due to his poor mental health. There was mention of two white brothers with the surname Kirton that may have resided on the estate briefly, but Dr. Whitehall said that Best discharged one brother and the other left shortly thereafter because of that decision.³⁷ Dr. Whitehall's deposition ended with commentary regarding Best's psychological state at the time of the assault. He claimed that in the eighteen months of having known Best, "intervals of his mind were not sound."³⁸ It is not clear how Best had behaved in front of Dr. Whitehall to lead him to make that conclusion. Dr. Whitehall also disclosed that Best had displayed similar conduct previously. The condition of Cuffy's body at the time punishment was inflicted is not clear. It is possible that he may have been recovering from injuries sustained during a previous beating.

Witnesses were requested to testify about the individual who inflicted Cuffy's punishment, and the circumstances for it. When asked about the particular man who flogged Cuffy, Daniel Humphrey, a short-term manager for Best's Coverly and Fairy

³⁷ "The Barbados Mercury and Bridgetown Gazette, 7 Jan 1823", British Library, EAP1086/1/22/1/1, <https://eap.bl.uk/archive-file/EAP1086-1-22-1-1>

³⁸ "The Barbados Mercury and Bridgetown Gazette, 7 Jan 1823", British Library, EAP1086/1/22/1/1, <https://eap.bl.uk/archive-file/EAP1086-1-22-1-1>

Valley estates when he first arrived at the island, claimed "Mingo Prince told me it was him," but he never mentioned if it was by his master's orders.³⁹ It is possible that Prince may have been ordered to flog Cuffy, but other witnesses made no reference to him in their testimony. At the end of Humphrey's deposition, he was questioned about Best's mental state. He replied, "I do think at intervals he is deranged in his mind" and "guilty of such acts no man in his senses would practice."⁴⁰ Again, the specificities of his behavior and conduct are absent from the record. Mary Hughes, a nurse to Best's children and a four-year resident of Fairy Valley plantation confirmed Humphrey's allegations by giving the following answer to the same question: "From what I have seen, I am convinced he is not in a sound of state mind."⁴¹ Mary did not disclose additional evidence of abusive behavior exhibited by Best. Maybe Cuffy was subjected to a cycle of violence at the hands of Best prior to his death. Sadly, the archive does not reveal more information about Cuffy's relationship to his master or of his life on the Fairy Valley estate.

³⁹ Humphrey acted as the manager of Best's estates for roughly four to five weeks. "The Barbados Mercury and Bridgetown Gazette, 7 Jan 1823", British Library, EAP1086/1/22/1/1, <https://eap.bl.uk/archive-file/EAP1086-1-22-1-1>

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⁴¹ Humphrey acted as the manager of Best's estates for roughly four to five weeks. "The Barbados Mercury and Bridgetown Gazette, 7 Jan 1823", British Library, EAP1086/1/22/1/1, <https://eap.bl.uk/archive-file/EAP1086-1-22-1-1>

After some deliberation the jury returned the verdict that Cuffy's death was caused by "a flogging inflicted on him by order of his Master, John Parry Best, with a Cowskin and Cat of the value of one Penny; and who, by the evidence produced, appears to have been labouring under temporary fit of mental derangement at the time punishment was so inflicted."⁴² Since Best was thought to be insane at the time of the incident, he was ultimately cleared of any fault. The rendered verdict raises important questions about the legal methods used to adjudicate cases dealing with an assault on slaves or murder of slaves in the colonies. What defines murder by flogging if the number of lashes administered varied across estates and territories? What legal recourse, if any, did enslaved people have at combating abusive behavior exhibited by masters or overseers? What metrics were used to classify a white person as being in a state of mental derangement at the time punishment was inflicted?⁴³

The correspondence between Sir Henry Warde, Governor of Barbados and Attorney General, John Beckles over Best's case also highlighted some of the procedural difficulties that emerged after Coroner Howell delivered his inquest of Cuffy's body to

⁴² "The Barbados Mercury and Bridgetown Gazette, 7 Jan 1823", British Library, EAP1086/1/22/1/1, <https://eap.bl.uk/archive-file/EAP1086-1-22-1-1>

⁴³ While several witnesses testified that Best suffered from some sort of mental derangement, they do not disclose specific information outlining what the psychosis entailed. It may have been fits of anger or rage that led to acts of brutality.

colonial authorities.⁴⁴ When Warde was informed through unofficial means of Cuffy's death, he wrote to Beckles on December 26, 1822, to ask,

Whether such extraordinary circumstances as there ought not always to be reported to the nearest magistrate, and whether he ought not always to report them forthwith to me and whether the perpetrator of this act ought not to be apprehended (if possible) immediately on such a verdict being given; and brought to trial, whether sane or insane according to the (existing) laws of Barbados.⁴⁵

In response to Warde, Beckles wrote on December 28, 1822: "Had the verdict found Mr. Best guilty of willful murder, no doubt every exertion ought to be made to bring him to justice, but the verdict not only has not found him guilty of murder, but by finding that he committed the act in a fit of insanity, has acquitted him of all criminality."⁴⁶ Best was extremely lucky to be living in a society that prioritized the desires and needs of the planter class above all else. Slaveholders often supported each other when their authority or power were threatened, and this case was no exception. Best's cousin, John Rycroft Best, a planter, and commanding militia officer who played a huge role in crushing the Barbados insurrection of 1816, came to John Parry's defense when the incident was made public. He took control of Fairy Valley and Moonshine

⁴⁴ Henry Warde to Attorney General John Beckles, 26 December 1822, C.O. 28/92, The National Archives, Kew, London, UK.

⁴⁵ Henry Warde to Attorney General John Beckles, 26 December 1822, C.O. 28/92, The National Archives, Kew, London, UK.

⁴⁶ Attorney General John Beckles to Henry Warde, 28 December 1822, C.O. 28/92, The National Archives, Kew, London, UK.

Hall, another estate that was in John Parry's possession after Cuffy died.⁴⁷ On January 6, 1823, he wrote to the editor of the *Barbados Mercury and Bridgetown Gazette* in response to Sir Henry Warde's proclamation published in local papers on January 4 of the same year. The proclamation accused John Parry of having caused the death of Cuffy and offered a reward of one hundred pounds to anyone who managed to apprehend him.⁴⁸ The proclamation failed to mention that John Parry was in a state of insanity at the time of Cuffy's punishment. John Rycroft Best, concerned for himself and his family about the negative ramifications of Warde's proclamation, published the court proceedings along with his letter to the editor hoping to demonstrate that his cousin, John Parry Best was mentally unstable at the time of the incident.

Ameliorative reforms altered an enduring legal tradition that placed unmitigated power into the hands of masters. The first comprehensive Barbados slave code of 1661 gave masters total control over their slaves. Planters could dictate how long their slaves were to labor and what kind of punishment was inflicted on them.⁴⁹ Masters could correct slaves, regardless of their sex, in any manner they deemed appropriate. So, if a

⁴⁷ For more information about John Rycroft Best see the following: David Lambert, *White Creole Culture, Politics and Identity during the Age of Abolition* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2005), pp. 122-3, 125-6; Kathleen Mary Butler, *The Economics of Emancipation: Jamaica and Barbados 1823-1843* (Chapel Hill and London, University of North Carolina Press, 1995), pp. 44, 86.

⁴⁸ The Barbadian, 4 Jan 1823, British Library, EAP1251/1/2/1/2, <https://eap.bl.uk/archive-file/EAP1251-1-2-1-2>

⁴⁹ Masters had less power over their servants as they had more legal rights than the enslaved. According to Richard S. Dunn, "By contrast, in legislating for servants, the colony government fixed minimum food allotments as well as clothing allotments and permitted servants to sue in court or appeal to the magistrates if mistreated." See Richard S. Dunn, *Sugar and Slaves The Rise of the Planter Class in the English West Indies, 1624-1713* (Chapel Hill, UNC Press, 1972), 239.

planter killed or maimed a slave during a whipping, they endured no penalty other than a fine of “three thousand pounds of sugar or about L25.”⁵⁰ The Barbados slave code also required that masters provide enslaved people with clothing, but the rules made no concessions regarding food allowances or labor conditions.⁵¹ Metropolitan reforms initiated in 1823 made the unprovoked murder of a slave a punishable offence. This may explain, in part, John Rycroft Best’s feeble attempt at controlling the public narrative of his cousin, John Parry Best’s case. Regardless, ameliorative reforms forced planters to not only think about the tactics they employed to discipline slaves, but also the consequences of those methods. This would not have happened without mounting pressure from the imperial government, as well as attempts on the part of slaves to flee plantations to claim freedom or to fight the systems of control that governed virtually every aspect of their lives.

Dispensing Fear in the Wake of Reform

The influence of the anti-slavery reformers was undeniable in the 1820s. They not only diminished the legal and symbolic power of slave masters, but they also exacerbated the anxieties and fears of white colonists who were still dealing with the aftershock of slave insurrection. While the Barbados uprising of 1816 failed to overthrow

⁵⁰ Dunn, *Sugar and Slaves*, 239.

⁵¹ Dunn, *Sugar and Slaves*, 239.

bondage in the colony, it did remind the guardians of slavery that they were not invincible or impervious to the resentments of enslaved people. By 1819, exaggerated reports of slave insurrection had made their way into Caribbean newspapers, prompting several questions from officials on both sides of the Atlantic. Governor Combermere of Barbados concluded that there was one incident that caused anxiety among white Barbadians. In January 1819 a medical professional visited a sick enslaved woman who belonged to his mother. He saw a flag displayed in the woman's home.⁵² The flag bore a motto, "Royal Sufferers," in reference to the rebels who were executed for their role in the insurrection.⁵³ According to Combermere, the flag portrayed, "Three bloody hands, three keys, and three lions rampant, disposed in something like heraldic order, which were interpreted to mean, revenge, secrecy, and courage. The supporters were justice, with her scales unequally poised, and blindfolded on one side, and a negress dressed as a huntress on the other."⁵⁴

Similar flags were used by rebel leaders during the 1816 uprising. This led officials to think another insurrection was brewing. As a result, Combermere directed three magistrates to carry out an investigation. The magistrates determined that "the

⁵² Letter from Governor Combermere to Earl Bathurst, 15 January 1819, C.O. 28/88, The National Archives, Kew, London, UK.

⁵³ Letter from Governor Combermere to Earl Bathurst, 15 January 1819, C.O. 28/88, The National Archives, Kew, London, UK.

⁵⁴ Letter from Governor Combermere to Earl Bathurst, 15 January 1819, C.O. 28/88, The National Archives, Kew, London, UK.

flag had no connection whatsoever with any present plots or plans for insurrection; but that it was an old flag indiscreetly preserved by an ignorant person.”⁵⁵ The enslaved woman who proudly displayed the flag at her home was not plausibly ignorant. She was likely paying homage to the rebels who died in the revolt. Her decision to display the flag was probably a conscious one. Maybe the woman wanted to mislead local authorities into thinking another insurrection was brewing. Perhaps she merely wanted to antagonize or taunt local officials. The flag did make officials uneasy. To detect any plots in the making, the magistrates and the Attorney General recommended that local militia officers should make routine unannounced visits to the homes of the slaves throughout Barbados.⁵⁶ The existing slave laws made no allowances for this action, so Combermere declined to authorize this approach because “the slaves behaved extremely well” during his government. He felt it was his “duty not to show any distrust in them, or give any unnecessary anxiety, which the examination of their houses by armed men would have caused.”⁵⁷ Instead, Combermere wrote a circular letter to the Members of Council and the magistrates in support of “a proper police law, and a revival of their militia act, so as to make that species of force, more efficient for the preservation of the

⁵⁵ Letter from Governor Combermere to Earl Bathurst, 15 January 1819, C.O. 28/88, The National Archives, Kew, London, UK.

⁵⁶ Letter from Governor Combermere to Earl Bathurst, 15 January 1819, C.O. 28/88, The National Archives, Kew, London, UK.

⁵⁷ Old provisions in the law did allow for the search of slave homes during the eighteenth century after plots for insurrection was unearthed, but the practice was not commonplace nor was it encouraged by officials. Letter from Governor Combermere to Earl Bathurst, 15 January 1819, C.O. 28/88, The National Archives, Kew, London, UK.

interior tranquility than it is at present.”⁵⁸ Evidently, Combermere believed that to amend existing laws and adopt others would ensure that “the security of the interior may be better guarded.”⁵⁹

Governor Combermere’s aims at consolidating slave laws and abolishing clauses that had long ceased to be enforced in Barbados were no match for the enslaved who maintained their subversive behavior throughout the 1820s. Local newspapers offer fragments of slave fugitivity. For example, the *Barbados Mercury and Bridgetown Gazette* highlights that on Saturday, May 18, 1822, John William, an enslaved man belonging to Francis Arthur, Esq. of Surinam, “absented” himself from his master while he was running an errand.⁶⁰ Perhaps William hid at the Cabbage-Tree Hall estate, a property belonging to Sir Reynold Alleyne, where his mother, Flora lived.⁶¹ Or William may have sought refuge at George Harper’s property where his wife lived. His master offered a reward of eight dollars to anyone able to apprehend William. Details surrounding the circumstances of William’s flight are absent from the record. The same reward amount was also offered for capturing George Cummins, a Black man who likely left his estate

⁵⁸ Letter from Governor Combermere to Earl Bathurst, 15 January 1819, C.O. 28/88, The National Archives, Kew, London, UK.

⁵⁹ Letter from Governor Combermere to Earl Bathurst, 15 January 1819, C.O. 28/88, The National Archives, Kew, London, UK.

⁶⁰ "The Barbados Mercury and Bridgetown Gazette, 29 Jun 1822", British Library, EAP1086/1/21/6/9, <https://eap.bl.uk/archive-file/EAP1086-1-21-6-9>

⁶¹ The Barbados Mercury and Bridgetown Gazette, 29 Jun 1822", British Library, EAP1086/1/21/6/9, <https://eap.bl.uk/archive-file/EAP1086-1-21-6-9>

on December 24, 1822.⁶² Cummins was well known in Bridgetown, the capital of Barbados as a boatman which likely shaped his plan of escape.⁶³ Cummins had a wife at Samuel Jackman's estate in Black Rock, where he was believed to be hiding. In these two cases, both men were thought to have sought refuge with their wives who lived on other estates.

During 1823, enslaved men and women in Barbados fled estates in great numbers, especially following the circulation of news regarding the amelioration of slavery.⁶⁴ On January 11, 1823, an enslaved man named Coobenah, whose mother lived near the Mangrove Pond Plantation located in St. Thomas parish, absconded from an estate formerly known as Cheltenham Cottage.⁶⁵ A "suitable" reward was offered in the published notice for his apprehension: "and, if proof can be obtained of his being laboured or employed, whatever may be recovered under the Detinue Act, will be given

⁶² The Barbadian, 25 Dec 1822, British Library, EAP1251/1/1/4, <https://eap.bl.uk/archive-file/EAP1251-1-1-4>

⁶³ The Barbadian, 25 Dec 1822, British Library, EAP1251/1/1/4, <https://eap.bl.uk/archive-file/EAP1251-1-1-4>

⁶⁴ Once the imperial government decided to adopt an official policy of slave amelioration throughout the empire, Buxton submitted resolutions to the House of Commons in Spring 1823. While the resolutions were withdrawn by Parliament, they were distributed throughout the Caribbean along with Canning's resolution, which did pass through the House. See Jerome Handler's *The Unappropriated People*, p. 82-109.

⁶⁵ "The Barbados Mercury and Bridgetown Gazette, 11 Jan 1823", British Library, EAP1086/1/22/1/2, <https://eap.bl.uk/archive-file/EAP1086-1-22-1-2>

to the informer."⁶⁶ The ads for fugitive slaves tend to be brief hence the details surrounding the circumstances of Coobenah's flight are unclear.

A week before the slave Coobenah escaped, an enslaved girl named Mary Jane ran away from John C. Thorne's estate. At the tender age of twelve or thirteen years old, Mary Jane, described as having a tawney complexion, bore a dark circular mark on her left cheek that could be detected at first sight.⁶⁷ What sparked Mary Jane's brave decision to leave Thorne's estate? Also, what structures of support did she pull from to create a plan for escape? Described merely as a runaway in a notice published in the Barbados Mercury and Bridgetown Gazette, the details of Mary Jane's flight are unavailable to readers, but one can imagine how much courage she had to muster to leave on her own. She may have traveled to her mother who lived on Wm. J. Franklin's estate or to her grandmother named Prudence who lived in on the beach in a home that adjoined one belonging to a Captain Merchant in Bridgetown.⁶⁸ Mary Jane also had family in Polgreen's Bottom, and "aback of Pinford-street, above the Place lately the property of Mr. Isaac Agard."⁶⁹ Despite all of the locations to which she may have run to, the Barbados authorities assumed that Mary Jane was hiding with her grandmother

⁶⁶ "The Barbados Mercury and Bridgetown Gazette, 11 Jan 1823", British Library, EAP1086/1/22/1/2, <https://eap.bl.uk/archive-file/EAP1086-1-22-1-2>

⁶⁷ "The Barbados Mercury and Bridgetown Gazette, 11 Jan 1823", British Library, EAP1086/1/22/1/2, <https://eap.bl.uk/archive-file/EAP1086-1-22-1-2>

⁶⁸ "The Barbados Mercury and Bridgetown Gazette, 11 Jan 1823", British Library, EAP1086/1/22/1/2, <https://eap.bl.uk/archive-file/EAP1086-1-22-1-2>

⁶⁹ "The Barbados Mercury and Bridgetown Gazette, 11 Jan 1823", British Library, EAP1086/1/22/1/2, <https://eap.bl.uk/archive-file/EAP1086-1-22-1-2>

Prudence.⁷⁰ A reward of six dollars was offered to the person who apprehends and delivered her back to her owner.⁷¹ Ship captains were also cautioned not to take her from the island, as “the Law will be rigidly enforced against any person offending in either case.”⁷²

Sometimes enslaved people of Barbados were presented with unique opportunities for escape when their masters traveled to another destination on or off the colony or died unexpectedly. That was the position in which a young Black woman named Harriet found herself. Harriet’s master Rebecca Niccolls died, and this may have motivated her to leave.⁷³ Slave owning women were just as cruel and vicious as their male counterparts in regard to their treatment of slaves. In her powerful monograph on the relationship between enslaved women and white mistresses in the U.S. South, Thavolia Glymph has revealed, “Not only was violence from the hands of mistresses often brutal and even sadistic, it was often disproportionate to the offense and, sometimes, manufactured in the absence of an offense.”⁷⁴ White mistresses were subjugated to a system of patriarchal rule that barred them from speaking up against the

⁷⁰ "The Barbados Mercury and Bridgetown Gazette, 11 Jan 1823", British Library, EAP1086/1/22/1/2, <https://eap.bl.uk/archive-file/EAP1086-1-22-1-2>

⁷¹ "The Barbados Mercury and Bridgetown Gazette, 11 Jan 1823", British Library, EAP1086/1/22/1/2, <https://eap.bl.uk/archive-file/EAP1086-1-22-1-2>

⁷² "The Barbados Mercury and Bridgetown Gazette, 11 Jan 1823", British Library, EAP1086/1/22/1/2, <https://eap.bl.uk/archive-file/EAP1086-1-22-1-2>

⁷³ "The Barbados Mercury and Bridgetown Gazette, 10 Jun 1823", British Library, EAP1086/1/22/6/2, <https://eap.bl.uk/archive-file/EAP1086-1-22-6-2>

⁷⁴ Thavolia Glymph, *Out of the House of Bondage The Transformation of The Plantation Household* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 44.

abuses committed by their fathers, husbands, and sons against enslaved women and girls. They often projected their feelings of anger and resentment towards their abusive husbands on the Black women and girls they encountered. Perhaps Harriet had a fraught relationship with her former owner. Maybe Harriet's relationship with her late mistress was tolerable, and she escaped because she did not want to be enslaved or did not want to perform the labor that was expected of her.

As planters debated the specificities of amelioration in private and public settings, the slaves listened intently. In time, they assumed that liberation was imminent. When days, weeks, and months passed with no news of emancipation, the slaves became more anxious and agitated. On June 10, 1823, Governor of Barbados Henry Warde issued a proclamation denouncing false rumors of emancipation that had spread among the enslaved in the colony. "I feel it my duty to assure them", Warde announced, "that no grounds exist for such false reports- had they been true, I must have been the first person to have been made acquainted with them by his majesty's Government... I now declare... that the rumour of a speedy emancipation is false; and that all persons who fill their minds with such falsehoods must be their enemies..."⁷⁵ Warde's proclamation fell on deaf ears. Hostilities among the plantations continued to mount throughout the island. In Bridgetown, tensions came to a head when William

⁷⁵ A Proclamation by Sir Henry Warde, 10 June 1823, C.O. 28/92, The National Archives, Kew, London, UK.

Shrewsbury, a Wesleyan Missionary, and his congregation composed largely of free Afro-Barbadians were attacked by an angry mob during an evening Sunday service in October 1823.⁷⁶ While the attack was initiated by many people, two men caught the attention of witnesses. They rode in on horseback wearing masks and fired pistols at Shrewsbury and his company.⁷⁷ Eventually, the missionary's home and chapel were completely destroyed. The local authorities claim the mob was comprised of white men who opposed Parliament's decision to promote the religious instruction of slaves.⁷⁸

At the same time planters that planters were fighting colonial officials, the colony's free people of color were engaged in a battle of their own that was years in the making. Like their counterparts in Jamaica and Saint Domingue, free non-white Barbadians fought within and against an existing legal framework to acquire civil and political rights equal to those of whites.⁷⁹ In December 1823, they presented an address to Governor Warde stating that "there were parts of the colonial code which deprived them of participating with their white brethren in certain privileges, to which as British

⁷⁶ A letter from Henry Warde to the President's Members and His Majesty's Council, 21 October 1823, C.O. 28/92, The National Archives, Kew, London, UK.

⁷⁷ A letter from Henry Warde to the President's Members and His Majesty's Council, 21 October 1823, C.O. 28/92, The National Archives, Kew, London, UK.

⁷⁸ Jerome Handler, *The Unappropriated People: Freedmen in the Slave Society of Barbados* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974), 91.

⁷⁹ Newton, *The Children of Africa in the Colonies*, 58.

subjects they humbly conceived they had a claim.”⁸⁰ The address carried over 350 signatures. Unlike their first petition presented a few years before, this one was sent to the governor instead of the legislature.⁸¹ The petitioners thus circumvented local officials and went straight to the Crown, an act members of the Barbados House of Assembly viewed as hostile.⁸²

Faced with opposition from multiple factions — the enslaved, free people of color, and abolitionists in Parliament — the Barbados planter class had no choice but to submit. They eventually came to an agreement with legislators in England. According to Hilary Beckles, the agreement “was intended to appease Parliament and, at the same time, to ensure that slave owners had effective control over their workers and other properties.”⁸³ An amelioration bill was first introduced to the Barbados House of Assembly in 1824. Its aims were to “consolidate and improve” existing slave laws.⁸⁴ Under the proposed bill, the enslaved would have the right to own property, provide testimony in all court cases (a right that had been given to free people of color in previous years), and lower fees to purchase their freedom.⁸⁵ But, allowances were also given to slaveholders who represented a majority of the Assembly’s membership such

⁸⁰ Robert H. Schomburgk, *The history of Barbados; comprising a geographical and statistical description of the island; a sketch of the historical events since the settlement; and an account of its geology and natural productions* (London: Longman, Brown, Green and Longmans, 1848), 417.

⁸¹ Newton, *The Children of Africa in the Colonies*, 80-81.

⁸² Newton, *The Children of Africa in the Colonies*, 80-81.

⁸³ Beckles, *A History of Barbados*, 118.

⁸⁴ Beckles, *A History of Barbados*, 118.

⁸⁵ Beckles, *A History of Barbados*, 118.

as immunity from prosecution if charged with murdering a slave during an insurrection.⁸⁶ The bill was approved in 1825 by the Barbados Council and became known as the Consolidated Slave Law. Since the bill did not include some provisions mandated by the Colonial Office in England, it was not accepted by Lord Bathurst and company.⁸⁷ In October 1826, the legislators of Barbados sent Parliament a revised bill which was accepted due in large part to a newly appointed pro-planter Secretary for the Colonies, William Huskisson.⁸⁸

For the enslaved people of Barbados, the reforms of the 1820s for the amelioration of slavery were a profound disappointment because planters failed to abide by the terms and conditions outlined by London policymakers. Their reluctance to alleviate the brutal elements of bondage proved that abuse and exploitation could not be severed from chattel slavery. It also solidified an enduring suspicion held by many enslaved people; that freedom would not be given to them willingly. They had to take it. Enslaved men and women like John William and Harriet could no longer rely on the sympathies of abolitionists who were unwilling to hold planters accountable for their misdeeds. In the years that follow, Barbados and several other islands across the British Caribbean saw an unprecedented number of slave-led disturbances and attacks that reinvigorated the abolitionist movement and strongarmed legislators into moving

⁸⁶ Beckles, *A History of Barbados*, 118.

⁸⁷ Handler, *The Unappropriated People*, 98.

⁸⁸ Beckles, *A History of Barbados*, 119.

forward with a plan of emancipation. The gendered dimensions of slave resistance in Barbados and its impact on Emancipation legislation is examined in the next chapter. Public forms of protest carried out by people of African descent, chiefly women, in Bridgetown and in other urban settings, influenced British policymakers to implement a period of conditional freedom known as 'Apprenticeship' with the official emancipation decree. Under this new scheme, masters were transformed into employers and their slaves became wage-earning laborers. Parliamentarians believed apprenticeship would give masters and their slaves the time needed to adjust to freedom.

Chapter 3 “The Most Violent Were the Women”: Gender, Politics, and Policing on the Eve of Emancipation

During the process to ameliorate slavery in the British colonies, several islands across the lesser Antilles in the Caribbean, including Barbados experienced a wave of criminal activity incited by people of African descent. These crimes, varying in scale and sophistication, included assault, petty theft, burglary, and the occasional riot. In Grenada, a few hundred miles south of Barbados, it was reported that “Vagabonds... without any visible means of living” broke into the Office of the Provost Marshal General on the night of October 25, 1826 or the morning of October 26 and stole “ninety-six Joes and four Doubloons” or £ 350.⁸⁹ On October 27th, J. Boucher, Post Master General (P.M.G.) along with other officials issued a proclamation offering a reward of one hundred pounds to “any Person or Persons” bearing information “that shall lead to the Apprehension and Conviction of the Perpetrators of the said Felony.”⁹⁰ After the proclamation was issued, local authorities apprehended two suspects. However, it is unclear if these individuals were the actual culprits as the record of this case ends rather

⁸⁹*St. George's Chronicle, and Grenada Gazette* (St. George's, Grenada), November 4, 1826: 1. *Readex: Caribbean Newspapers*. <https://infoweb-newsbank-com.proxy.lib.duke.edu/apps/readex/doc?p=EANACN&docref=image/v2%3A145FA0D749CCFE7A%40EANACN-14DA39756719CFB8%402388300-14D88E142B836F50%400>.

⁹⁰*St. George's Chronicle, and Grenada Gazette* (St. George's, Grenada), November 4, 1826: 1. *Readex: Caribbean Newspapers*. <https://infoweb-newsbank-com.proxy.lib.duke.edu/apps/readex/doc?p=EANACN&docref=image/v2%3A145FA0D749CCFE7A%40EANACN-14DA39756719CFB8%402388300-14D88E142B836F50%400>.

abruptly.⁹¹ What were the motivations behind this act of theft? Was the robbery a result of careful planning or sheer luck? While this event raises more questions than answers, it is evident that it was not an isolated incident.

In Trinidad, two hundred miles south of Barbados, residents witnessed “a robbery of grand scale” not once but twice by the same offender within the span of two weeks. On Saturday, November 7, 1826, the slave Jean Baptiste Zabette, a cooper and a “bit of a tailor,” belonging to Robert Brunton, Esq. of the Diamond estate in Diego Martin, a town just north-west of the Capital Port of Spain, stole a curry comb and brush from a store belonging to Mr. Lake.⁹² When Zabette’s crimes were brought to light, he received a punishment of 25 lashes.⁹³ After the whipping, Zabette was confined in the royal jail and then sent back to the Diamond estate to be held in the stocks until Tuesday, November 17. After his release the following day, Zabette boldly traveled back to Diego Martin and robbed stores belonging to several proprietors including, “Clark, Vaneschi, P. Vincent, Itier & Roux” of “hams, wine, capers and other pickles, glassware, printed cottons, hair, tooth, and nail brushes, an assortment of haberdashery, and other

⁹¹ There were no details about the alleged bandits provided in the local papers I have come across.

⁹² *St. George’s Chronicle, and Grenada Gazette* (St. George’s, Grenada), November 4, 1826: 3. *Readex: Caribbean Newspapers*. <https://infoweb-newsbank-com.proxy.lib.duke.edu/apps/readex/doc?p=EANACN&docref=image/v2%3A145FA0D749CCFE7A%40EANACN-14DA39756719CFB8%402388300-14D88E142CF6E128%402>.

⁹³ *St. George’s Chronicle, and Grenada Gazette* (St. George’s, Grenada), November 4, 1826: 3. *Readex: Caribbean Newspapers*. <https://infoweb-newsbank-com.proxy.lib.duke.edu/apps/readex/doc?p=EANACN&docref=image/v2%3A145FA0D749CCFE7A%40EANACN-14DA39756719CFB8%402388300-14D88E142CF6E128%402>.

articles.”⁹⁴ The assortment of stolen articles is intriguing. It is possible that the “hair” and “tooth” brushes were meant to be used in some type of African religious rite or spiritual ceremony, a practice that had been criminalized by colonial officials since the beginning of Caribbean slavery.⁹⁵

By possessing both protective and destructive characteristics, African spirituality, typically couched under the term ‘Obeah’ by authorities, could be wielded by the enslaved to promote insurrection, as witnessed in the 1757-58 Makandal conspiracy in Saint Domingue and Tacky’s Rebellion in Jamaica in 1760.⁹⁶ As Vincent Brown argues, “Obeah and myal were used both to mediate conflict and to instigate it... supernatural power emboldened slaves to resist the domination of their masters and allowed blacks

⁹⁴ *St. George’s Chronicle, and Grenada Gazette* (St. George’s, Grenada), November 4, 1826: 3. *Readex: Caribbean Newspapers*. <https://infoweb-newsbank-com.proxy.lib.duke.edu/apps/readex/doc?p=EANACN&docref=image/v2%3A145FA0D749CCFE7A%40EANACN-14DA39756719CFB8%402388300-14D88E142CF6E128%402>.

⁹⁵ In the British Atlantic world, African spirituality was often referred to as “obeah” in official correspondence. Vincent Brown defines “obeah” or “obia” as a “catchall term used to describe a complex of shamanistic practices derived from various parts of Africa and conducted by ritual specialists working largely outside formal institutions.” See Vincent Brown, *The Reaper’s Garden Death and Power in the World of Atlantic Slavery* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008), 145; Bilby, Kenneth M. and Jerome S. Handler. “Obeah: Healing and Protection in West Indian Slave Life1.” *The Journal of Caribbean History* 38, no. 2 (2004): 153-IX.; Browne, Randy M. “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 (2011): 451-480.; Paton, Diana. “Witchcraft, Poison, Law, and Atlantic Slavery.” *The William and Mary Quarterly* 69, no. 2 (2012): 235-264.; Diana Paton, *The Cultural Politics of Obeah: Religion, Colonialism and Modernity in the Caribbean World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

⁹⁶ For discussions on the Makandal conspiracy, see Carolyn E. Fick, *The making of Haiti: the Saint Domingue revolution from below* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1990); Laurent Dubois, *Avengers of the New World: The Story of the Haitian Revolution* (London: Harvard University Press, 2005); Karol Weaver, *Medical revolutionaries: the enslaved healers of eighteenth-century Saint Domingue* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2006). For discussions on Tacky’s Revolt: Trevor Burnard, *Jamaica in the Age of Revolution* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2020); Vincent Brown, *Tacky’s Revolt: The Story of an Atlantic Slave War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2020).

to believe more generally that they could challenge whites.”⁹⁷ Allegedly, Zabelle intended to ship the stolen goods back to his master’s residence in Diego Martin in preparation for a large fete or celebration. But his plan was foiled by a nameless man who saw him loading the goods onto a delivery cart. The man approached Zabelle to investigate. An altercation between these two men ensued. Local authorities rushed to the scene to stop the brawl. Zabelle was then arrested and paraded through the streets of Diego Martin on his way to the Police station, with some of the stolen articles suspended round his neck.⁹⁸ Lodged in jail, Zabelle awaited sentencing. The newspapers do not report his fate.⁹⁹

Events like those at Trinidad and Grenada, though distinct, occurred so frequently in the Lesser Antilles that Caribbean-based officials begged for a night watch or other forms of police to protect white residents and their property. The authorities in Barbados cited a particular incident to support their appeal. On the evening of October 6, 1826, “a considerable body of slaves, chiefly women” congregated on a cathedral in an undisclosed town during a funeral service.¹⁰⁰ According to an anonymous witness,

⁹⁷ Vince Brown, *The Reaper’s Garden Death and Power in the World of Atlantic Slavery* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008), 145.

⁹⁸ *St. George’s Chronicle, and Grenada Gazette* (St. George’s, Grenada), November 4, 1826: 3. *Readex: Caribbean Newspapers*. <https://infoweb-newsbank-com.proxy.lib.duke.edu/apps/readex/doc?p=EANACN&docref=image/v2%3A145FA0D749CCFE7A%40EANACN-14DA39756719CFB8%402388300-14D88E142CF6E128%402>.

⁹⁹ Perhaps more information about this incident exists in other sources.

¹⁰⁰ *Grenada Free Press; and Weekly Gazette* (St. George’s, Grenada), October 27, 1826: 2. *Readex: Caribbean Newspapers*. <https://infoweb-newsbank->

“their riotous behaviour rendered the solemn service a mere mockery of religion.”¹⁰¹ The reasons for this scene are unknown. It is also unclear if the rioters deliberately targeted the cathedral because they knew the deceased and/or held grievances against the Lord Bishop. However, this event was not the first case in which a mob of people of African descent disrupted a religious ceremony. The Lord Bishop recalled other episodes of similar conduct, although not as confrontational, and asked the vestry to raise the north wall of the Church-yard, and to place “Beedles... at the gates to prevent intrusion.”¹⁰²

While the destructive potential of the riot was a tremendous source of frustration for white residents in Barbados, it was the participation of Black women that drew the most criticism from local officials. According to a published newspaper report,

There is nothing that can more strongly mark the fallacy of that principle of *exemption* which a mistaken delicacy towards the sex would attempt to introduce respecting the punishment of female slaves, than the general conduct of the Negro women in the Town... they are the chief instigators of, and actors in almost every insubordination and riot among slaves.”¹⁰³

com.proxy.lib.duke.edu/apps/readex/doc?p=EANACN&doref=image/v2%3A145FA089AAAC15D4%40EANACN-14C3E4522522C660%402388292-14C3E2A8A8C90E28%401.

¹⁰¹ *Grenada Free Press; and Weekly Gazette* (St. George's, Grenada), October 27, 1826: 2. *Readex: Caribbean Newspapers*. [https://infoweb-newsbank-](https://infoweb-newsbank-com.proxy.lib.duke.edu/apps/readex/doc?p=EANACN&doref=image/v2%3A145FA089AAAC15D4%40EANACN-14C3E4522522C660%402388292-14C3E2A8A8C90E28%401)

com.proxy.lib.duke.edu/apps/readex/doc?p=EANACN&doref=image/v2%3A145FA089AAAC15D4%40EANACN-14C3E4522522C660%402388292-14C3E2A8A8C90E28%401.

¹⁰² *Grenada Free Press; and Weekly Gazette* (St. George's, Grenada), October 27, 1826: 2. *Readex: Caribbean Newspapers*. [https://infoweb-newsbank-](https://infoweb-newsbank-com.proxy.lib.duke.edu/apps/readex/doc?p=EANACN&doref=image/v2%3A145FA089AAAC15D4%40EANACN-14C3E4522522C660%402388292-14C3E2A8A8C90E28%401)

com.proxy.lib.duke.edu/apps/readex/doc?p=EANACN&doref=image/v2%3A145FA089AAAC15D4%40EANACN-14C3E4522522C660%402388292-14C3E2A8A8C90E28%401.

¹⁰³ *Grenada Free Press; and Weekly Gazette* (St. George's, Grenada), October 27, 1826: 2. *Readex: Caribbean Newspapers*. [https://infoweb-newsbank-](https://infoweb-newsbank-com.proxy.lib.duke.edu/apps/readex/doc?p=EANACN&doref=image/v2%3A145FA089AAAC15D4%40EANACN-14C3E4522522C660%402388292-14C3E2A8A8C90E28%401)

com.proxy.lib.duke.edu/apps/readex/doc?p=EANACN&doref=image/v2%3A145FA089AAAC15D4%40EANACN-14C3E4522522C660%402388292-14C3E2A8A8C90E28%401.

Though brief, this published statement about enslaved women draws attention to a range of critical issues that shaped emancipation discourses of the 1820s and 1830s. Issues such as policing, surveillance, and the creation of new legal regimes designed to punish wayward slaves and freed people dominated the attention of policymakers on both sides of the Atlantic. This chapter examines how enslaved people, particularly women, shaped the politics and policies of emancipation. It places debates about freedom in dialogue with the racialized and gendered depictions of Africans and their descendants to deepen understanding of how emancipation with apprenticeship was established in Barbados and beyond. There is some historical evidence to suggest that the decision by Britain to adopt an intermediate period between slavery and absolute freedom was driven, in large part, by the subversive actions of Black women.

A gendered reading of the processes that shaped the end of slavery encourages us to view emancipation beyond the strict confines of labor discipline.¹⁰⁴ As a category of historical analysis, gender invites a critical examination of the social relations that undergirded virtually every aspect of life for enslaved people which Patricia

¹⁰⁴ This chapter uses Joan Wallach Scott's definition of gender: "Gender is a constitutive element of social relationships based on perceived differences between the sexes." Joan Wallach Scott, "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis." *The American Historical Review* 91, no. 5 (1986): 1067.

Mohammed refers to as a “gender system”.¹⁰⁵ The prospect of freedom sparked new conversations about what it meant to be a parent, spouse, citizen, worker, and political actor. These identities were heavily influenced by African and imperial conceptions of gender. As Diana Paton and Pamela Scully have observed, “A central goal of British imperial emancipation was to transform colonial gender relations.”¹⁰⁶ By the time of emancipation, British metropolitan officials believed that bondage deprived Black men and women of the experiences and virtues that were appropriate for their sex. The political demonstrations of Black women in rural and urban settings before and after the Emancipation Act of 1833 was passed, threatened imperial visions of a post-slavery society brimming with obedient Black Christian subjects. The sections that follow, argues that constructions of gender and race transformed the productive and reproductive lives of Black women as well as their approaches to the politics of emancipation.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁵ According to Patricia Mohammed, “A gender system is best perceived as the rules governing the social, sexual and productive behaviour of both sexes in any given society. The components of a gender system include the social roles assigned to men and to women; the cultural definition of masculinity and femininity; the sexual division of labour; the rules regarding marriage and kinship behaviour between the sexes, as for example, whether monogamy or polygamy is an acceptable practice within a particular culture; the social significance of women’s identification with the family; and women’s position relative to men in political and economic life.” Patricia Mohammed, “Chapter 2 Writing Gender into History: The Negotiations of Gender Relations Among Indian Men and Women in Post-indenture Trinidad Society, 1917-47” in *Engendering History Caribbean Women in Historical Perspective*, Eds. Verene Shepherd, Bridget Brereton, Barbara Bailey (New York: Saint Martin’s Press, 1995), 21.

¹⁰⁶ Diana Paton, and Pamela Scully, *Gender and slave emancipation in the Atlantic world* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 12.

¹⁰⁷ Scholars of African American history have done excellent work at examining the conditions under which categories of race, gender, and class have been constructed and how they construct each other: Angela Y. Davis, *Women, Race, & Class* (New York: Vintage Books, 1983); Paula Giddings, *When and Where I Enter The*

Gender Formations in New World Plantation Agriculture

At the inception of Caribbean slavery, Europeans were fascinated yet disturbed by Africans and their descendants. Their appearance, attitudes, behaviors, and practices fueled gossip among elites especially as travel literature made its way through Europe.

Richard Ligon, who lived in Barbados in the mid-seventeenth century, made the following observations about the enslaved men he encountered:

...and for the men, they are very well timber'd, that is, broad between the shoulders, full breasted, well filleted, and clean leg'd and may hold good with *Albert Durers* rules, who allows twice the length of the head, to the breadth of the shoulders, and twice the length of the face, to the breadth of the hips, and according to this rule these men are shap'd.¹⁰⁸

The description of Black men here is clinical. They were not viewed as human beings, but mere objects of study to be dissected and reduced to a collection of parts like the flora and fauna European travelers wrote about during their voyages through the West Indies. Women of African descent were not spared from Ligon's scrutiny:

The young maids have ordinarily very large breasts, which stand strutting out so hard and firm, as no leaping, jumping, or stirring, will cause them to shake any more, than the brawns of their arms. But when they come to be old, and have

Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America (New York: Harpers Collins, 1984); Deborah G. White, *Ar'n't I a woman?: female slaves in the plantation South* (New York: Norton, 1985); Barbara Jeanne Fields, "Slavery, Race and Ideology in the United States of America." *New Left Review* 0, no. 181 (May 01, 1990): 95-118.; Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, "African-American Women's History and the Metalanguage of Race." *Signs* 17, no. 2 (Winter, 1992): 251-74.

¹⁰⁸ Richard Ligon, *A True & Exact History of the Island of Barbados* (London: 1673), 51.

had five or six Children, their breasts hang down below their Navels, so that when they stoop at their common work of weeding, they hang almost down to the ground, that at a distance, you would think they had six legs...¹⁰⁹

The valuation of bonded people was emblematic of slave trading in the Americas. When stolen Africans were brought to the auction block to be sold to white masters, they were poked, prodded, and stripped bare for potential buyers. Writing on slave auctions in the U.S., Daina Ramey Berry notes that, "Some appraisals and most sales involved a public or a private physical inspection, in which potential buyers asked enslaved people a series of questions, examined their bodies, and sometimes demanded physical exercise to assess strength and agility."¹¹⁰ Many were embarrassed if not humiliated by the excessive touching promoted in the inspection process. One can only imagine how slave men and women felt or reacted to being surveilled by people like Ligon. Perhaps they were enraged and found ways to circumvent prying eyes. Perhaps they felt self-conscious. Maybe they were indifferent having grown accustomed to the intense gaze of white viewers. Regardless, Ligon's observations and that of his contemporaries had very real consequences for bonded people, especially women. According to Jennifer Morgan, English writers like Ligon, "conveyed a sexual grotesquerie that ultimately made African women indispensable, because it showed the

¹⁰⁹ Richard Ligon, *A True & Exact History*, 51.

¹¹⁰ Daina Ramey Berry, *The Price For Their Pound Of Flesh The Value of the Enslaved, from Womb to Grave, in the Building of a Nation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2017), 42.

gendered ways of putting African women to productive use.”¹¹¹ Their racist and misogynistic observations gave birth to the idea that African women’s bodies harbored carnality and strength that ultimately justified their enslavement.¹¹² Colonial administrators affirmed their ideas when Amerindians and white indentured servants failed to provide the kind of labor needed to produce crops for European markets.

By the mid-seventh century, the assumed productive abilities of African women became normalized and led to their employment as field hands alongside enslaved men on sugar estates throughout the Americas.¹¹³ In Barbados, planters generally had roughly equal numbers of men and women working in the fields. But they sometimes employed more women than men. This led to a transformation in gender ideology that had traditionally relegated women’s work to the domestic sphere.¹¹⁴ Plantation managers typically divided field women into three gangs. Each gang was responsible for completing a set of tasks every day.¹¹⁵ The first gang performed physically demanding

¹¹¹ Jennifer L. Morgan, *Labouring Women: Reproduction and Gender in New World Slavery* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 26.

¹¹² According to Barbara Bush, travelers’ tales of Africa, “Though widely often inaccurate, these facilitated the development of enduring stereotypes which became consolidated during the eighteenth century and were incorporated into the arguments for and against the retention of slavery.” See Barbara Bush, *Slave Women in Caribbean Society, 1650-1838* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 13.

¹¹³ Of course, slave labor was not limited to sugar cultivation in the Caribbean during the early stages of colonization. Enslaved women also worked on estates that produced coffee and indigo. See Morgan, *Labouring Women*, 150.

¹¹⁴ Morgan, *Labouring Women*, 145-149; Barry Higman discusses the sex ratios of field hands on sugar estates in detail: Barry Higman, *Slave Populations of the British Caribbean, 1807-1834* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984), 117., Dunn, “Sugar Production and Slave Women in Jamaica,” 61.

¹¹⁵ For a discussion on field women in the French Caribbean see Bernard Moitt, “Chapter 9. Women, Work and Resistance in the French Caribbean during Slavery, 1700-1848” in *Engendering History: Caribbean Women*

work such as hoeing, digging drains, cutting and bundling cane as demonstrated in figure two.¹¹⁶



Figure 4: Digging holes for planting sugar cane, Antigua, West Indies, 1823

The second gang was composed of younger women who performed what was considered to be less strenuous forms of labor such as weeding, picking grass, and

in Historical Perspective, Eds. Verene Shepherd, Bridget Brereton, Barbara Bailey (New York: Saint Martin's Press, 1995), 158-162.

¹¹⁶ Hilary Beckles, *Natural Rebels A Social History of Enslaved Black Women in Barbados* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1989), 31.

minding the cattle.¹¹⁷ Female children were placed in the third gang. They worked at less strenuous tasks like carrying water to the fields or monitoring stocks.¹¹⁸ Enslaved women were rarely employed as drivers or in “skilled” occupations such as boilers, carpenters, coopers, and distillers.¹¹⁹ If women were unable to perform field labor due to physical ailments that stemmed from overwork or old age, they became domestics tending to children or maintaining the main house on the estate. They also served as nurses, midwives, cooks, washerwomen, and water carriers.¹²⁰ Enslaved women worked year-round even during the late stages of pregnancy. Many field women were required to toil the land immediately after giving birth, as observed by Richard Ligon, “In a fortnight, this woman is at worke with her Pickaninny at her back, as merry a soule as any is there: If the overseer be discreet, shee is suffer’d to rest her [feet] a little more then ordinary; but if not, shee is compelled to doe as others doe.”¹²¹

As the demand for sugar increased in Europe, field women were pushed to their physical limits. This drew concerns about their ability to reproduce naturally.¹²² Many British abolitionists blamed the declining rates of reproduction on brutal forms of punishment administered on enslaved women during various stages of pregnancy. In

¹¹⁷ Beckles, *Natural Rebels*, 31.

¹¹⁸ Beckles, *Natural Rebels*, 31.

¹¹⁹ Dunn, “Sugar Production and Slave Women in Jamaica,” 61.

¹²⁰ Dunn, “Sugar Production and Slave Women in Jamaica,” 61.; Barbara Bush, “Chapter 4: Plantation Labour Regimes: The Economic Role of Slave Women” in *Slave Women in Caribbean Society, 1650-1838* (Kingston: Heinemann, 1990).

¹²¹ Ligon, *A True & Exact History*, 48.

¹²² Richard Dunn explains that the manual labor enslaved women were expected to perform took place during the height of their childbearing years. Dunn, “Sugar Production and Slave Women in Jamaica,” 62.

the widely circulated *A Letter on the Abolition of the Slave Trade*, William Wilberforce wrote that , “a single inconsiderate lash of the driver’s whip, intended not as punishment, but as a quickener, or momento, may in its consequences, prevent the birth of a future infant.”¹²³ By eliminating whipping as punishment for poor work performance, abolitionists like Wilberforce, believed that enslaved women would not only reproduce but, in the words of Sasha Turner, “allow them to embody modesty befitting of their sex.”¹²⁴

Between the late 1770s and 1790s, planters of the British colonies, faced with mounting pressure from the imperial government to ameliorate the conditions of bondage, established pro-natal policies designed to boost fertility and procreation. These policies took a variety of forms and required estate managers to fundamentally shift their attitudes and conduct towards enslaved women.¹²⁵ Drivers and overseers now had to treat field women with greater degrees of decency and consideration if reproduction was to be promoted.¹²⁶ This process involved slightly decreasing their workload, improving their living conditions, and also the quality of their diet.¹²⁷ Barry Higman makes the case that a system of positive incentives in the form of cash and rewards was

¹²³ William Wilberforce, *A letter on the abolition of the slave trade: addressed to the freeholders and other inhabitants of Yorkshire* (London: Printed by Luke Hansard & Sons for T. Cadell and W. Davies ... and J. Hatchard, 1807), 143.

¹²⁴ Turner, *Contested Bodies*, 91.

¹²⁵ Beckles, *Natural Rebels*, 97.

¹²⁶ Beckles, *Natural Rebels*, 97.

¹²⁷ Beckles, *Natural Rebels*, 97.

also used to induce fertility among the enslaved women.¹²⁸ In 1786, officials encouraged Barbados planters to give 5 shillings to women at the time of the birth of their first child.¹²⁹ Efforts at boosting natural reproduction, however, did not go far enough for anti-slavery advocates who, during the same period, were calling on policymakers to abolish slavery in the colonies. This moment of conflict marks a turning point in the history of the abolition of slavery in the Anglophone Caribbean. It is one of many important catalysts that shaped the trajectory of the coming of freedom in the years that followed.

The second half of the eighteenth century was a tension filled time for the British Empire as it became entangled in numerous conflicts that affected the Americas from the Seven Years' War and the War of American Independence to the Revolutionary War.¹³⁰ The loss of the thirteen colonies prompted colonial officials to look inward for the first time, and critically examine "the moral character of the British overseas enterprise" as

¹²⁸ Barry Higman, *Slave Populations of the British Caribbean 1807-1834*, (Kingston: The Press University of the West Indies, 1995), 349

¹²⁹ Lascelles, *Instructions*, p.31; Barbados Agricultural Society Minutes, p. 132:14 November 1812 in Barry Higman, *Slave Populations of the British Caribbean 1807-1834*, (Kingston: The Press University of the West Indies, 1995), 349

¹³⁰ For more information about the foundations of British abolition see Michael Craton, "Chapter 5: Mounting Attack and Rearguard Action Outline of the Debate" in *Sinews of Empire: A Short History of British Slavery* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Press, 1974); Seymour Drescher, *Econocide: British Slavery in the Era of Abolition* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1977); David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution, 1770-1823* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1975); Robin Blackburn, *The Overthrow of Colonial Slavery, 1776-1848* (London: Verso, 1988).

described by Christopher Brown.¹³¹ Between 1772 and 1781, Granville Sharp led the initial campaign for the abolition of the slave trade by disseminating information on the perils of slavery, but his efforts failed to motivate Parliamentarians to act.¹³² In Spring 1787, Sharp established A Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade in collaboration with Evangelicals, Quakers, and others looking to implement social reform.¹³³ Sharp wanted the organization to adopt a stance of immediate emancipation. However, the other members opted for the abolition of the slave trade instead.¹³⁴ Robin Blackburn has made the case that eradicating the traffic of Africans to the Americas possessed symbolic importance for Quakers because many of them amassed considerable wealth through their involvement in the slave trade. Guilt-ridden, abolitionists looked for an opportunity to correct this moral failing.¹³⁵ If Anti-slavery advocates were to become true stewards of justice ushering the British empire into a progressive age, then they needed to make some sacrifices. Despite the group's best efforts, they failed to gain the political recognition needed to initiate reform.

When William Wilberforce and Thomas Clarkson joined the ranks of The Abolition Society, the group gained prominence among various political circles. As a

¹³¹ Christopher L. Brown, *Moral Capital: Foundations of British Abolitionism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 160.

¹³² Brown, "Chapter 3: Granville Sharp and Obligations of Empire" in *Moral Capital: Foundations of British Abolitionism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 155-206.

¹³³ Robin Blackburn, *The Overthrow of Colonial Slavery, 1776-1848* (London: Verso, 1988), 136-137.

¹³⁴ Blackburn, *The Overthrow of Colonial Slavery*, 137.

¹³⁵ Blackburn, *The Overthrow of Colonial Slavery*, 137.

Member of Parliament, Wilberforce had the access, platform, and power to influence legislators in adopting an antislavery agenda. By the turn of the nineteenth century, he managed to get Parliament to accept a tentative plan for gradual emancipation with the abolition of the slave trade as the first step. But what inspired Members of Parliament, a group largely composed of elite men who likely benefitted from slavery, to change their position? In 1788, a report concerning the effects and consequences of the Africa slave trade compiled by British legislators appointed to the Council for the Consideration of all Matters relating to Trade and Foreign Plantations was submitted to the House of Commons.¹³⁶ This massive report contained detailed reflections from planters, Governors, and Assembly members on the state of slavery across several colonies in the West Indies including Barbados. Members of the council asked these men numerous questions ranging from the amount of food given to each slave to the kind of punishment meted out for various crimes. When asked whether there were any causes that may negatively impact the natural increase of enslaved people, John Brathwaite, an agent for the Barbados House of Assembly replied, “I think there are many Causes which have that Effect; promiscuous Concubinage, occasional working the Negroes too

¹³⁶ Great Britain. Board of Trade. *Report Of The Lords of the Committee of Council appointed for the Consideration of all Matters relating to Trade and Foreign Plantations; Submitting To His Majesty's Consideration The Evidence and Information they have collected in consequence of his Majesty's Order in Council, dated the 11th of February 1788, concerning the present State of the Trade to Africa, and particularly the Trade in Slaves; and concerning the Effects and Consequences of this Trade, as well in Africa and the West Indies, as to the general Commerce of this Kingdom.* [n.p.]: n.p., 1789. Proquest U.K. *Parliamentary papers* (accessed December 30, 2021). <https://parlipapers-proquest-com.proxy.lib.duke.edu/parlipapers/docview/t70.d75.hcsp-001563?accountid=10598>

hard, to pay off a pressing Demand. A manager may sometimes too, unintentionally, make the Negroes work beyond their Strength, from a misconception of it."¹³⁷

It is striking that Brathwaite cited "promiscuous concubinage" as the first potential cause for declining birth rates among enslaved women in Barbados instead of mistreatment or overwork. Also misinterpreted as "polygamy"* by Europeans, "promiscuous concubinage" refers to a form of marriage that involves one man with multiple wives.¹³⁸ As Barbara Bush writes, "Marriage and morality amongst slaves, according to contemporary observers, either did not exist, or existed only in unstable, 'uncivilised' forms... slaves were not just immoral but amoral."¹³⁹ West African approaches to marriage and family planning frustrated masters and confused abolitionists. By choosing whom they wished to partner with, enslaved men and women were able to establish families and kinship bonds that existed outside of the masters' control despite their best efforts to dismantle them. Abolitionists, on the other hand, viewed the instability of slave partnerships as a direct consequence of bondage, and as an unwillingness by masters to promote Christian instruction among the enslaved.

¹³⁷ Great Britain. Board of Trade. *Report Of The Lords of the Committee of Council, 1789.*

¹³⁸ * "This term, which means marriage to more than one person at the same time, is loosely used. Polygyny-mating or marriage with more than one woman at a time- is more concise in the context of slavery." See Barbara Bush, *Slave women in Caribbean Society, 1650-1838* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 20.

¹³⁹ Bush, *Slave women in Caribbean Society, 1650-1838*, 84. Cases of polyandry or the marriage of one woman and multiple men was rare in the Caribbean, but it did occur in Berbice. For more information see Randy Browne, *Surviving Slavery in the British Caribbean* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017), 119.

Between the 1770s-1810s, planters and abolitionists of the British Empire waged a rhetorical war over enslaved women's agricultural duties and reproductive abilities. The planters thought optimal labor productivity required slaves to be punished when they failed to meet daily quotas, or when they behaved in a disobedient manner.¹⁴⁰ The abolitionists believed enslaved women should prioritize motherhood and building families if they were to eventually become proper English subjects. As Barbados inched closer towards emancipation, disputes over Black women's conduct heightened. Yet, the 1820s and 1830s marked an ideological shift; as less energy was devoted to debating issues related to reproduction, at least among planter circles. Instead, slave owners became preoccupied with managing the unruly behavior of enslaved and free Black women within and outside of the plantation's borders, as illustrated by the riot introduced at the beginning of this chapter. The planter elite used enslaved and free Black women's participation in collective mass action to justify new policing measures that were established around the time of emancipation. This indicates that the long journey to freedom encompassed gendered dimensions.

Dismantling Slavery in the British West Indies

By 1831, the subject of abolition could no longer be sidelined for future debate. Several islands across the Caribbean faced insurrections led by slaves demanding

¹⁴⁰ Turner, *Contested Bodies*, 91.

freedom and wages for their labor. In response to this wave of unrest, abolitionists called for immediate emancipation. They believed that amelioration had run its course. In May 1832, the House of Commons formed a Select Committee to consider how to abolish slavery successfully in the colonies.¹⁴¹ Policymakers cited the 1831 rebellion in Jamaica as an example of what would continue to happen should abolition be forsaken once more. Membership changes in the House of Commons also contributed to the decision to pursue abolition with full force as nearly all of its members with vested interests in maintaining Caribbean slavery were purged during an election in 1833.¹⁴² With a reformed Parliament, emancipation had become, according to William A. Green, “a legislative certainty, and if the Government wished to retain control over the process it was obliged to produce its own Bill.”¹⁴³ However, a plan for abolition could not be drawn without the consent of slave masters who remained steadfast in their opposition to unconditional freedom.

In March 1833, Edward Stanley, the Secretary of State for the Colonies introduced an Abolition Bill to the House of Commons, but the bill failed to satisfy both anti-slavery advocates and planters, so it was ultimately shelved. Still, the bill contained two provisions that were kept in a revised act that did pass on the House floor: a

¹⁴¹ Mary Turner, "Modernizing Slavery: Investigating the Legal Dimension." *New West Indian Guide* 73, no. 3/4 (1999): 16.

¹⁴² William A. Green, *British Slave Emancipation The Sugar Colonies and the Great Experiment 1830-1865* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976), 114.

¹⁴³ Green, *British Slave Emancipation*, 115.

temporary system of conditional freedom known as apprenticeship and monetary compensation for slave owners.¹⁴⁴ The new bill declared slaves to be legally free, but they were required to labor for their ex-masters without payment for 45 hours a week (i.e., 7.5 hours a day for six days a week), for up to twelve years.¹⁴⁵ During this so-called transitional period, the apprentices could receive customary wages through additional labor performed on their own time. With these wages, slaves could purchase their freedom before the twelve-year period came to an end.¹⁴⁶ As for planter compensation, Stanley recommended that the imperial government either give or loan planters £15 million.¹⁴⁷ The details of that transaction were left for Parliament to figure out. After assessing the economic losses that would result from emancipation, the colonial planters believed the amount offered to them was not enough, so it was necessary to draft another bill. With pressure mounting, Stanley delegated that task to James Stephen, whose father of the same name was a prominent figure among Evangelical abolitionists.¹⁴⁸ Though Stephen did not move in his father's circles per se, he was a big proponent of abolition on moral grounds.

¹⁴⁴ Green, *British Slave Emancipation*, 118.

¹⁴⁵ Green, *British Slave Emancipation*, 118; Turner, "Modernizing Slavery", 17.

¹⁴⁶ Green, *British Slave Emancipation*, 118.

¹⁴⁷ *Resolutions for Abolition of Colonial Slavery, proposed by Mr. Stanley*, May 14, 1833. House of Commons Papers, vol. 26. CH Microfiche Number, 26.201. UK Parliamentary Papers. <https://parlipapers-proquest-com.proxy.lib.duke.edu/parlipapers/docview/t70.d75.1833-014362?accountid=10598>

¹⁴⁸ Thomas C. Holt, *The Problem of Freedom: Race, Labor, and Politics in Jamaica and Britain, 1832-1938* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), 48.

Stanley presented Stephen's emancipation bill in the House of Commons on May 14, 1833. It was passed in August of the same year with several modifications in its details but not in its framing.¹⁴⁹ The new scheme declared that on August 1, 1834, "slavery shall be, and is, utterly abolished, and declared unlawful, throughout the British Colonies, plantations and possessions... that the Negro shall be liable to work for his master for a certain number of hours each week: but that, subject to this obligation only, HE SHALL BE FREE."¹⁵⁰ With one imperial decree, chattel slavery was out and apprenticeship was in. Ex-slaves now deemed apprentices were divided into three distinct classes: praedial (attached), praedial (unattached), and non-praedial. Praedial apprentices were "attached to the soil" and comprised "all persons who in their state of Slavery were usually employed in agriculture, or in manufacture of colonial produce or otherwise, upon lands belonging to their owners."¹⁵¹ The second class of apprentices were praedial laborers who were "not attached to the soil" and comprised "all persons who in their state of Slavery were usually employed in agriculture, or in the manufacture of colonial produce or otherwise, upon lands not belonging to their

¹⁴⁹ Holt, *The Problem of Freedom*, 48-49.

¹⁵⁰ William Bevan, *The Operation of the Apprenticeship System in the British Colonies: A Statement, the Substance of which was Presented and Adopted at the Meeting of the Liverpool Anti-Slavery Society* (Liverpool: D. Marples and Co., 1838).

¹⁵¹ *Debates in Parliament, Session 1833, on the Resolutions and Bills for the Abolition of Slavery in the British Colonies, with a Copy of the Act of Parliament*. (London: n.p., 1834), 930.

owners.”¹⁵² Non-*praedial* apprentices consisted of laborers who did not fit in the first two classes such as domestics and other household workers.¹⁵³

Described as a “half-way covenant” by Thomas C. Holt, apprenticeship required ex-slaves to work for their former masters in exchange for food, clothing, shelter, and medical care.¹⁵⁴ Apprentices could, however, reserve part of their “free time” during the week to labor for wages whether for their former master or another planter.¹⁵⁵ The apprenticeship period was also shortened from twelve to six years with an end date in 1840. Apprentices were permitted to purchase their freedom before the transitional period ended with the wages they acquired from extra labor. Children under the age of six were also freed, but the abolition act required mothers who faced destitution to indenture their free children until they reached the age of twenty-one. The abolition bill gave masters compensation in the form of a grant to the whopping total of £20 million sterling that was dispersed to each colony based on their total number of slaves. Ultimately, the money that was placed in the hands of estate owners was a lot less than they anticipated as Natasha Lightfoot concludes: “Claims would be processed and paid in London rather than in the colonies, allowing London-based creditors of heavily

¹⁵² *Debates in Parliament, Session 1833*, 930-931.

¹⁵³ *Debates in Parliament, Session 1833*, 931.

¹⁵⁴ Holt, *The Problem of Freedom*, 49, 56.

¹⁵⁵ Holt, *The Problem of Freedom*, 49.

indebted West Indian planters to extract their due before proprietors received any funds.”¹⁵⁶

Not all Caribbean colonies adopted the apprenticeship system.¹⁵⁷ Antigua, located 306 miles north of Barbados, was the only sugar producing island in the West Indies to proceed with immediate emancipation.¹⁵⁸ Some of the alleged reasons for this decision were incorporated into seven points in an excerpt published in the *Vermont Chronicle* in July 1838:

1. A desire to have the subject settled at once, and thus prevent future agitation.
2. An apprehension that the apprenticeship system would take away the authority of the master over the slave, without supplying in its place adequate means of controlling him.
3. Dislike to the system of stipendiary magistrates, who were to be introduced from abroad, and must, from the nature of the case, be unacquainted with the state of things in the colonies.
4. Objection to the distinction made by the abolition act between the praedial and unpraedial classes, as being founded in injustice and bad policy.
5. The peculiar preparation on the part of both planters and the slaves for immediate emancipation.
6. The comparatively high degree of intelligence and moral principle which existed among the slaves.
7. The circumstance that the lands on the island were nearly all cultivated and occupied; so that the negroes would be obliged to continue their present habits of labor, in order to procure a livelihood.¹⁵⁹

¹⁵⁶ Natasha Lightfoot, *Troubling Freedom: Antigua and the Aftermath of British Emancipation* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), 90.

¹⁵⁷ Bermuda and the Cayman Islands also rejected apprenticeship in favor of immediate emancipation as these tiny islands did not depend on sugar plantations for subsistence. See Natasha Lightfoot, *Troubling Freedom: Antigua and the Aftermath of British Emancipation* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), 8.

¹⁵⁸ For additional information about Antigua’s early settlement history see, David Barry Gaspar, “Sugar Cultivation and Slave Life in Antigua Before 1800” in *Cultivation and Culture: Labor and Shaping of Slave Life in the Americas*, eds. Ira Berlin and Philip D. Morgan, (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1993).

¹⁵⁹ Antigua.: [From *The Vermont Chronicle*.] *African Repository and Colonial Journal* (1825-1849); July 1838; 14,7; *American Periodicals* pg. 217.

Was Antigua better prepared for immediate emancipation than their counterparts across the Caribbean? Were master-slave relations so amicable that Antiguan authorities believed both parties were capable of coexisting peacefully under emancipation? The reasons for absolute freedom had nothing to do with so called “preparedness” or having an enlightened master-slave populace. Antigua faced serious economic instability in the years leading up to abolition. According to Lightfoot, “The choice against apprenticeship stemmed from a vision of master-servant relations in freedom that looked much like slavery, as well as policy makers’ anticipation of speedy financial compensation for lost property in slaves.”¹⁶⁰ The slave masters of Antigua opposed having an intermediate period between slavery and absolute freedom because of the financial burdens they were expected to shoulder, as well as the inability to compel apprentices to labor by means of corporal punishment or regular wages.¹⁶¹ During the summer of 1833 Antigua’s legislature assembled to create a plan for emancipation that would uphold the economic interests of proprietors. Lord Stanley approved Antigua’s pursuit of freedom, but he dismissed the fringe benefits the legislature tried to include in the plan.¹⁶² In response, the Antiguan masters attempted to recant their support for unconditional freedom. However, news of immediate emancipation had already spread across the island. A change in course could have

¹⁶⁰ Lightfoot, *Troubling Freedom*, 85.

¹⁶¹ Lightfoot, *Troubling Freedom*, 89.

¹⁶² Lightfoot, *Troubling Freedom*, 90.

sparked an uprising as the enslaved were expecting absolute freedom. In the end, Antiguan planters proceeded with immediate emancipation. They waited two years for colonial compensation. So too did the rest of proprietors of the British Caribbean. The amount of the compensation turned out to be much less than they anticipated.¹⁶³

Across the Caribbean, the planters, wary over the prospect of emancipation and turned to local newspapers to air their grievances and fears. In *The Bermudian* in February 1834, Barbados planters accused enslaved men and women of displaying “strong symptoms of a very bad spirit” in anticipation of their freedom.¹⁶⁴ A few months before, local authorities found a letter on a road leading to the Castle Grant plantation in the parish of St. Joseph postmarked December 22, 1833, containing details of “a mischievous tendency and threatening the peace and good order of this community.”¹⁶⁵ In response to news about this, Barbados Governor Lionel Smith issued a proclamation on December 28 offering a reward of fifty pounds and a Free Pardon to anyone possessing information about the author or the circumstances related to the letter.¹⁶⁶ As emancipation drew near, tensions between the white and Black inhabitants of Barbados intensified. “We have been rather disposed to prefer immediate emancipation to the

¹⁶³ Lightfoot, *Troubling Freedom*, 90-91.

¹⁶⁴ Anonymous, *Bermudian* (Hamilton, Bermuda), February 8, 1834: 5. *Readex: Caribbean Newspapers*.

[https://infoweb-newsbank-](https://infoweb-newsbank-com.proxy.lib.duke.edu/apps/readex/doc?p=EANACN&docref=image/v2%3A145EB3F91AF48AB7%40EANACN-146495ADF0D34868%402390953-14648B5BB92E5DE0%400)

[com.proxy.lib.duke.edu/apps/readex/doc?p=EANACN&docref=image/v2%3A145EB3F91AF48AB7%40EANACN-146495ADF0D34868%402390953-14648B5BB92E5DE0%400](https://infoweb-newsbank-com.proxy.lib.duke.edu/apps/readex/doc?p=EANACN&docref=image/v2%3A145EB3F91AF48AB7%40EANACN-146495ADF0D34868%402390953-14648B5BB92E5DE0%400).

¹⁶⁵ *A Proclamation by Governor Lionel Smith*, 28 December 1833, C.O. 28/113, The National Archives, Kew, London, UK.

¹⁶⁶ *A Proclamation by Governor Lionel Smith*, 28 December 1833, C.O. 28/113, The National Archives, Kew, London, UK.

apprenticeship system,” concluded an anonymous resident, but due to the “turbulent conduct of slaves in this town... it may therefore be, after all, the wisest, and ultimately the safest plan to have an intermediate stage for some years between absolute slavery and entire freedom.”¹⁶⁷ Masters believed that bonded people would launch an attack against them once liberated. They urged policymakers to implement a system of conditional freedom to facilitate a smooth transition from slave labor to free wage labor and provide local authorities with sufficient time to establish a centralized police force capable of suppressing any uprisings that might occur. The author of these observations also recounted a memorable incident that captured the latent anxieties of the Barbados planter elite.

One Saturday evening in December 1833, Captain James King struggled to take an insolent slave to jail in an undisclosed town in Barbados when he encountered “a number of vagabond fellows who parade the streets and disturb the inhabitants as much as they pleased.”¹⁶⁸ These fellows attempted to rescue the slave from Captain King, spurring a quarrel in which King was attacked. Many women joined the brawl, which increased in force and intensity. Onlookers speculated that “several thousand negroes”

¹⁶⁷ The resident does not disclose the town. It is likely that they are referring to Bridgetown, the capital of Barbados. *Bermudian* (Hamilton, Bermuda), February 8, 1834: 5. *Readex: Caribbean Newspapers*. <https://infoweb-newsbank-com.proxy.lib.duke.edu/apps/readex/doc?p=EANACN&docref=image/v2%3A145EB3F91AF48AB7%40EANACN-146495ADF0D34868%402390953-14648B5BC194DC88%404>.

¹⁶⁸ *Bermudian* (Hamilton, Bermuda), February 8, 1834: 5. *Readex: Caribbean Newspapers*. <https://infoweb-newsbank-com.proxy.lib.duke.edu/apps/readex/doc?p=EANACN&docref=image/v2%3A145EB3F91AF48AB7%40EANACN-146495ADF0D34868%402390953-14648B5BC194DC88%404>.

joined the commotion.¹⁶⁹ As King tried to fight off the mob, a bystander named Mr. O'Neale came to his defense, but he was thrown down and nearly strangled by a group of Black people. Several captains from the mail boat service who rushed over to rescue King and O'Neale found themselves "severely handled by the mob, amongst whom by far the most violent were the women."¹⁷⁰

In Barbados, and in slave societies of the Americas, Black women regularly resisted bondage and other colonial systems of oppression. Scholars have argued frequently that the modes of anti-slavery activity enslaved women engaged in was the same as their male counterparts. Masters made little concessions for women on the basis of their sex, with the exception of not flogging them during late stages of pregnancy.¹⁷¹ In recent years, some scholars like Jennifer Morgan, Mimi Sheller, and Natasha Lightfoot have argued that while Black women did participate in collective forms of action specifically rooted in their objections to plantation labor alongside men, they also resisted bondage on the basis of their roles as mothers, wives, and community leaders. Hence, resistance took on a range of forms: armed assault, non-violent protest such as

¹⁶⁹ *Bermudian* (Hamilton, Bermuda), February 8, 1834: 5. *Readex: Caribbean Newspapers*. <https://infoweb-newsbank-com.proxy.lib.duke.edu/apps/readex/doc?p=EANACN&docref=image/v2%3A145EB3F91AF48AB7%40EANACN-146495ADF0D34868%402390953-14648B5BC194DC88%404>.

¹⁷⁰ *Bermudian* (Hamilton, Bermuda), February 8, 1834: 5. *Readex: Caribbean Newspapers*. <https://infoweb-newsbank-com.proxy.lib.duke.edu/apps/readex/doc?p=EANACN&docref=image/v2%3A145EB3F91AF48AB7%40EANACN-146495ADF0D34868%402390953-14648B5BC194DC88%404>.

¹⁷¹ This concession emerged during amelioration in the 1820s. Hilary Beckles, *Afro-Caribbean Women & Resistance to Slavery in Barbados* (London: Karnak House, 1988), 153.

running away, marronage, controlling fertility or choosing intimate partners. Black women's roles in society and their proximity to plantation agriculture shaped their approaches to resistance during and after slavery. In urban towns, women of African descent participated in what Mimi Sheller describes as "public activities" such as "collective labour protest, petitioning, demonstration, and riot."¹⁷² When women engaged in public activities like riot, for example, they were just as hostile if not more so than their male fellows.

Witnesses of the attack on Captain King claimed that Black women "viragos" or "amiable persons of the black fair sex who huckster in the streets at night" were the most brutal agitators caught throwing "broken bottles, stones, and heavy pieces of cane."¹⁷³ The term "huckster" typically refers to women of African descent who hawked and peddled goods for a profit.¹⁷⁴ By the early nineteenth century, cities like Bridgetown, the capital of Barbados, were home to hucksters and other skilled and semi-skilled Black laborers due to rapid urbanization. Hucksters were part of a broad internal marketing

¹⁷² Mimi Sheller, "Quasheba, Mother, Queen: Black Women's Public Leadership and Political Protest in Post-Emancipation Jamaica, 1834-65." *Slavery & Abolition* 19, no. 3 (1998): 90-117.

¹⁷³ *Bermudian* (Hamilton, Bermuda), February 8, 1834: 5. *Readex: Caribbean Newspapers*. [https://infoweb-](https://infoweb-newsbank-)

[com.proxy.lib.duke.edu/apps/readex/doc?p=EANACN&docref=image/v2%3A145EB3F91AF48AB7%40EANACN-146495ADF0D34868%402390953-14648B5BC194DC88%404](https://infoweb-newsbank-com.proxy.lib.duke.edu/apps/readex/doc?p=EANACN&docref=image/v2%3A145EB3F91AF48AB7%40EANACN-146495ADF0D34868%402390953-14648B5BC194DC88%404).

¹⁷⁴ Scholars have done important work on the history of Black women's participation in urban markets across the Caribbean: Sydney Mintz and Douglass Hall, "The Origins of the Jamaican Internal Marketing System" in S. Mintz, ed., *Papers in Caribbean Anthropology* (New Haven: Yale University, 1960); Hilary Beckles, *Natural Rebels A Social History of Enslaved Black Women in Barbados* (London: Karnak House, 1988); Gina A. Ulysse *Downtown ladies: informal commercial importers, a Haitian anthropologist, and self-making in Jamaica* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007); Pedro Welch, *Slave Society in the City, Bridgetown Barbados, 1680-1834* (Kingston: Ian Randle, 2003).

system that often utilized migratory slave labor.¹⁷⁵ As marketeers, Black women not only improved the material conditions of their lives through the earnings they received, but, in the words of historian Hilary Beckles, they also managed to “own and possess property in a system, which also defined them as property.”¹⁷⁶ Hucksters traveled, socialized, and indulged in other practices that were often not allowed to slave women due to their legal status as chattel.¹⁷⁷ Given the degree of independence market women enjoyed at the time, it is not surprising that they would be on the frontlines of an attack against men who represented an order that actively sought to dehumanize and objectify them and their loved ones.

Eventually, the commotion around Captain King fizzled out. No police officers or magistrates were deployed to the scene. A bruised and battered King slowly dragged his slave to jail. Readers of the newspaper account are left with a desperate plea by the author: “How long shall this most disgraceful state of things continue? We have no doubt the Magistrates would do their duty if called upon... not one resides in the town- they are all at inconvenient distances.”¹⁷⁸ The author then notes that, “every street, we may almost say, requires powerful and active Magistrates, who know nothing of fees,

¹⁷⁵ Melanie J. Newton, *The Children of Africa in the Colonies Free People of Color in Barbados in the Age of Emancipation* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Press, 2008), 33.

¹⁷⁶ Beckles, *Afro-Caribbean Women & Resistance to Slavery in Barbados*, 48.

¹⁷⁷ Beckles, *Afro-Caribbean Women & Resistance to Slavery in Barbados*, 48.

¹⁷⁸ *Bermudian* (Hamilton, Bermuda), February 8, 1834: 5. *Readex: Caribbean Newspapers*. <https://infoweb-newsbank-com.proxy.lib.duke.edu/apps/readex/doc?p=EANACN&docref=image/v2%3A145EB3F91AF48AB7%40EANACN-146495ADF0D34868%402390953-14648B5BC194DC88%404>.

with a strong posse of special constables to assist him.”¹⁷⁹ Later, on January 20, 1834, merchants and other residents of Bridgetown presented Governor Smith and the House of Assembly with a petition detailing the necessity for more efficient police and “their willingness to the extent of their means, to pay an additional Sum to that already levied, provided a satisfactory and well digested plan be adopted, which would ensure to them the security of their property, the safety of the town, and the quiet of the country at large.”¹⁸⁰ Governor Smith accepted the appeal and outlined a plan for establishing a network of stipendiary or special magistrates and constables to suppress unruly activity in Bridgetown.

The stipendiary magistrates of Bridgetown were to be appointed by the Governor with a salary of £500 per annum, including incidental expenses.¹⁸¹ Stipendiary magistrates were to hear the complaints of residents during daily sessions held from 10:00am to 3:00pm except on Sundays.¹⁸² They were also required to report to the Governor on the condition of the town and were given the power to remove all nuisances and to apprehend people in the possession of firearms or other weapons

¹⁷⁹ *Bermudian* (Hamilton, Bermuda), February 8, 1834: 5. *Readex: Caribbean Newspapers*. <https://infoweb-newsbank-com.proxy.lib.duke.edu/apps/readex/doc?p=EANACN&docref=image/v2%3A145EB3F91AF48AB7%40EANACN-146495ADF0D34868%402390953-14648B5BC194DC88%404>.

¹⁸⁰ *Legislative proceedings From Governor Lionel Smith* 23 January 1834, C.O.28/113, The National Archives, Kew, London, UK.

¹⁸¹ *Legislative proceedings From Governor Lionel Smith* 23 January 1834, C.O.28/113, The National Archives, Kew, London, UK.

¹⁸² *Legislative proceedings From Governor Lionel Smith* 23 January 1834, C.O.28/113, The National Archives, Kew, London, UK.

unlawfully obtained.¹⁸³ Stipendiary magistrates relied on a team of constables composed of White, Black and Free Colored “active, sober young men” appointed by Commissioners.¹⁸⁴ Once a week, stipendiary magistrates were to patrol the streets of Bridgetown at night to ensure that the constables were “alert and attentive to their duties.”¹⁸⁵ Constables were expected to be “firm and determined in the execution of their duties, but refrain from violence, and conduct themselves with civility to all.”¹⁸⁶

Bridgetown residents envisioned a network of magistrates and police that could deal with the issues that were endemic to the town. Residents located within the interior of Barbados possessed different needs. Thus, the duties of stipendiary magistrates in those regions diverged slightly. In towns where some estates were situated, special magistrates, “took over the functions of the slave courts and of direct punishment by the master.”¹⁸⁷ They traveled to each estate every few weeks to hear the complaints of apprentices. As officers of the Crown, these magistrates could not be planters. They were paid roughly £300 by the British government and were required to enforce the

¹⁸³ *Legislative proceedings From Governor Lionel Smith 23 January 1834, C.O. 28/113, The National Archives, Kew, London, UK.*

¹⁸⁴ *Legislative proceedings From Governor Lionel Smith 23 January 1834, C.O. 28/113, The National Archives, Kew, London, UK.*

¹⁸⁵ *Legislative proceedings From Governor Lionel Smith 23 January 1834, C.O. 28/113, The National Archives, Kew, London, UK.*

¹⁸⁶ *Legislative proceedings From Governor Lionel Smith 23 January 1834, C.O. 28/113, The National Archives, Kew, London, UK.*

¹⁸⁷ Diana Paton, *No Bond But the Law Punishment, Race, and Gender in Jamaican State Formation, 1780-1870* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 59.

terms outlined in the Abolition Act.¹⁸⁸ Stipendiary magistrates were also accompanied by a team of constables who were selected from the apprenticed population.¹⁸⁹

Constables administered punishments that were ordered by special magistrates including flogging or escorting an apprentice to the houses of correction.¹⁹⁰

Thus, emancipation signaled more than a shift from slave labor to free labor. It transferred corporal punishment from the hands of masters and enslaved drivers into the hands of the state. As Barbados residents began to prepare for Emancipation Day, Governor Smith asked members of the local assembly to pass a short bill in April 1834, “abrogating the power of inflicting punishment on slaves by owners, employers, or any other individual... and transferring that power to Magistrates of Towns and Parishes.”¹⁹¹

In response to the Governor’s request, the House of Assembly argued that:

...as the Slave Act empowers owners to prefer complaints to Magistrates against their slaves for misconduct, instead of exercising their own authority, the House have reason to hope that recourse will be had to such authority in all flagrant cases; but as a general measure the House conceive that it would not be practicable unless the Magistrates of this island were placed on different footing, by being renumerated with salaries instead of fees; a change much to be desired, but which the advanced state of the Session prevents entering upon.¹⁹²

¹⁸⁸ Paton, *No Bond But the Law*, 59.

¹⁸⁹ Paton, *No Bond But the Law*, 59.

¹⁹⁰ Paton, *No Bond But the Law*, 60.

¹⁹¹ *Copy of a Message from Governor Lionel Smith to the House of Assembly*, 9 April 1834, C.O. 28/113, The National Archives, Kew, London, UK.

¹⁹² *N. Forte Speaker of the House of Assembly in response to Governor Smith*, 29 April 1834, C.O. 28/113, The National Archives, Kew, London, UK.

Governors of British Caribbean colonies like stipendiary magistrates were expected to enforce the policies initiated by the emancipation act. The British government believed that for apprenticeship to succeed, the planter elite must cooperate with authorities to ensure a peaceful transition. This task was particularly challenging in Barbados as members of the House of Assembly, largely composed of planters, opposed Sir Lionel Smith's approach to governance. According to William A. Green, Smith "demanded the subordination of men who had grown accustomed to subordinating their governors, and consequently his relations with both branches of the legislature, were marked by open conflict."¹⁹³ The planters of Barbados refused to bend obediently to Smith's will and to and his cadre of stipendiary magistrates that were under his charge.

After Emancipation Day arrived, Governor Smith and members of the planter elite continued to bicker over authority and power. On August 23, 1834, Governor Smith wrote a message to both branches of the Barbados legislature asking proprietors to provide for the children of apprentices under the age of six who had been declared free by the 13th clause of the emancipation act.¹⁹⁴ Smith believed these children were likely to be "reduced to a state of destitution, that must risk their existence at such tender ages" because parents refused to apprentice their children, until they reached 21 years of age

¹⁹³ Green, *British Slave Emancipation*, 146.

¹⁹⁴ *Copy of a message from the Governor to both branches of the Legislature of Barbados*, 23 August 1834, C.O. 28/113, The National Archives, Kew, London, UK.

and because of “the unwillingness of their former owners to be encumbered with such children.”¹⁹⁵ Smith claimed that while there were many “humane proprietors” who continued to provide for these children despite being absolved from this duty under the abolition act, as many as 14,000 children were left without the support of their former masters.¹⁹⁶ As a result, Smith asked the legislature to introduce some law “that may operate generally for their safe presentation, until they are of sufficient age, to contribute to their own livelihood.”¹⁹⁷

As Governor Smith and members of the legislature debated specific provisions outlined in the emancipation act, apprentices were left alone to make sense of their new status as “free laborers”. The transition proved difficult if not disappointing because ex-slaves failed to get the autonomy they had been seeking for well over a century. Under apprenticeship, former slaves were subjugated to many of the abuses they experienced during bondage. For example, cruel employers flogged apprentices or separated entire families to induce agricultural labor. Some ex-masters cheated apprentices of the wages that they were owed for additional work. Thus, apprentices continued to fight within and against imperial systems to use the words of David Roediger, make freedom, and

¹⁹⁵ *Copy of a message from the Governor to both branches of the Legislature of Barbados, 23 August 1834, C.O. 28/113, The National Archives, Kew, London, UK.*

¹⁹⁶ *Copy of a message from the Governor to both branches of the Legislature of Barbados, 23 August 1834, C.O. 28/113, The National Archives, Kew, London, UK.*

¹⁹⁷ *Copy of a message from the Governor to both branches of the Legislature of Barbados, 23 August 1834, C.O. 28/113, The National Archives, Kew, London, UK.*

make meaning out of freedom.¹⁹⁸ The relationship between apprentices and state power is the subject of the final chapter of this dissertation. It highlights not only the specific objections of the apprentices with the terms of their labor, but it also shows how they worked individually and collectively to advocate for themselves, their children, partners, and communities with the goal of creating full lives on their own terms under conditional freedom.

¹⁹⁸ David Roediger, *Seizing Freedom Slave Emancipation and Liberty for All* (London: Verso, 2014), 17.

Chapter 4 “Indulgent Relaxation From His Usual Toil”: Scenes from the Afterlives of Slavery

In March 1836, the Governor of British Guiana Sir James Carmichael-Smyth wrote a letter to Lord Glenelg, Secretary of State for the Colonies, regarding papers in his possession containing the particulars of a meeting held at Birmingham in England to rally legislators to abolish the apprenticeship system in favor of absolute freedom. The governor deemed it necessary to voice his opinion on the matter because he was certain the subject would be brought before Parliament. “I assure your Lordship,” he wrote, “that I should much regret and lament the doing away of apprenticeship.”¹⁹⁹ In British Guiana, he claimed, “neither the planters nor the labourers are prepared for immediate alteration.”²⁰⁰ He believed that terminating the intermediate period between slavery and unconditional freedom was unnecessary as “no act of tyranny, of cruelty or of oppression can take place without speedy detection, exposure and punishment of the person so offending.”²⁰¹ The governor’s efforts to minimize unlawfulness in British Guiana apparently yielded positive results. Laborers of the colony were thought to be

¹⁹⁹ *Copy of a dispatch from Sir James Carmichael Smyth to Lord Glenelg, Camp-House, Demerara March 19, 1836, The Liberal* (Bridgetown, Barbados), Saturday September 23, 1837, Vol. 1 No. 26., Barbados Department of Archives, St. James, Barbados.

²⁰⁰ *Copy of a dispatch from Sir James Carmichael Smyth to Lord Glenelg, Camp-House, Demerara March 19, 1836, The Liberal* (Bridgetown, Barbados), Saturday September 23, 1837, Vol. 1 No. 26., Barbados Department of Archives, St. James, Barbados.

²⁰¹ *Copy of a dispatch from Sir James Carmichael Smyth to Lord Glenelg, Camp-House, Demerara March 19, 1836, The Liberal* (Bridgetown, Barbados), Saturday September 23, 1837, Vol. 1 No. 26., Barbados Department of Archives, St. James, Barbados.

happy and tranquil, and the output of agricultural produce was quite immense. Sir Smyth's firm support for the continuation of apprenticeship raises some important questions. First, was the scheme actually advantageous for both the planters and the apprentices? Were laborers content with working the land as they had done under slavery? Was state-sanctioned punishment the key to maintaining good relations between planters and laborers?

A contemporary observer, writing on the condition of apprenticeship in the British colony of Grenada for *The Liberal*, a radical Barbados newspaper edited by Samuel J. Prescod, a free man of color and correspondent for British abolitionists, disagreed with Governor Smith. "From our own personal observation in this island" said the anonymous writer, "and the information we have been enabled to glean from others, we are decidedly of an opposite opinion viz., that the apprenticeship does not work well, either for the employer or the employed."²⁰² The observer believed that under apprenticeship as a new system of relations nearly all of the planters' authority had been placed into the hands of stipendiary magistrates, "who exercise their own discretion, under the law."²⁰³ As Diana Paton explains, when compared to other emancipation processes in the Americas, only planters in the British colonies were stripped of their "legal right to punish without the substitution of any market mechanism to persuade or

²⁰² *Extract from Grenada, November 4, 1837, The Liberal* (Bridgetown, Barbados), Saturday November 22, 1837, Vol. 1 No. 43., Barbados Department of Archives, St. James, Barbados.

²⁰³ *Extract from Grenada, November 4, 1837, The Liberal* (Bridgetown, Barbados), Saturday November 22, 1837, Vol. 1 No. 43., Barbados Department of Archives, St. James, Barbados.

coerce former slaves into plantation work.”²⁰⁴ The proprietors of Grenada accused the special magistrates of being far too lenient in their approach to work discipline.

According to the observer, when confined for months at a time “the labourer views it in no other light than that of an indulgent relaxation from his usual toil.”²⁰⁵ For planters, lax punishment threatened labor efficiency which ultimately endangered production. If laborers were not properly induced to work through brute force or punishment, then the economy of the island was doomed to fail. As state actors working for the British government, the stipendiary magistrates or special justices were expected to mediate all conflicts between masters and apprentices. When workers fell short in their duties, these magistrates could order them to compensate employers for their loss of labor “by forfeiting an equal portion of his own time.”²⁰⁶ But according to the author writing from Grenada, “in very many instances it neither has been or can be enforced.”²⁰⁷

In Grenada and elsewhere among British plantation colonies where apprenticeship existed, planters and laborers struggled to define the terms of apprenticeship because Members of Parliament had left the details of implementation for the colonial legislators to figure out. As Thomas C. Holt explains, “The larger

²⁰⁴ Paton, *No Bond But the Law*, 54.

²⁰⁵ *Extract from Grenada, November 4, 1837, The Liberal (Bridgetown, Barbados), Saturday November 22, 1837, Vol. 1 No. 43.*, Barbados Department of Archives, St. James, Barbados.

²⁰⁶ *Extract from Grenada, November 4, 1837, The Liberal (Bridgetown, Barbados), Saturday November 22, 1837, Vol. 1 No. 43.*, Barbados Department of Archives, St. James, Barbados.

²⁰⁷ *Extract from Grenada, November 4, 1837, The Liberal (Bridgetown, Barbados), Saturday November 22, 1837, Vol. 1 No. 43.*, Barbados Department of Archives, St. James, Barbados.

question of whether or not planters were culturally equipped to reorganize slave societies in the British West Indies along the lines envisioned by British policymakers to reform themselves had not been seriously addressed.”²⁰⁸ The apprenticeship system, as an experiment of sorts compelled ex-slaves and ex-masters to reimagine and reconstitute the very crux of their relationship that had been historically rooted in abuse, coercion, and exploitation. The abolition act required planters to relinquish much of their accustomed power after nearly two hundred years of slavery. As the transition under apprenticeship unfolded, former masters were reluctant to transfer their authority into the hands of stipendiary magistrates whom they considered quite incompetent. For people of African descent, however, apprenticeship embodied possibility. It presented the chance to reconstruct their lives economically, politically, and socially, outside of a rigid master-slave dynamic.

There is historical evidence to illustrate that ex-slaves in Barbados, particularly women, made use of special magistrates to intercede in a range of conflicts including disputes with planters over the limits of their employment, domestic disturbances, protection and care for newborns and infants, and to admonish employers for withholding wages or attempting to apprentice children without the consent of their parents. When stipendiary magistrates failed to resolve such issues, the apprentices

²⁰⁸ Holt, *The Problem of Freedom*, 79.

bypassed them altogether and headed straight for Bridgetown hoping to meet the governor. A close reading of these exchanges is thus essential to obtain even a glimpse of the political lives of Black people in the age of emancipation. By centering the issues and conflicts with which apprentices grappled, our conceptions of freedom are broadened. They then encompass more than a desire for ex-slaves to seek work beyond the sugarcane fields as some scholars have shown.²⁰⁹ Freedom also implied having control over familial and intimate spheres of life, as well as the authority to control the terms of labor agreements.²¹⁰

Asserting Parental Authority

²⁰⁹ There is some scholarship dealing with the withdrawal of field labor under apprenticeship as well as its economic impacts on West Indian colonies. For more information: Douglas Hall, *Free Jamaica, 1838-1865: An Economic History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959); W.K. Marshall, "Apprenticeship and Labour Relations in Four Windward Islands," in *Abolition and Its Aftermath: The Historical Context*, ed. David Richardson (London: Cass, 1985); Edward Cox, "From Slavery to Freedom: Emancipation and Apprenticeship in Grenada and St. Vincent, 1834-1838," in *Crossing Boundaries: Comparative History of Black People in Diaspora*, ed. Darlene Clark Hine and Jacqueline McLeod (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999); Bridget Brereton, "Family Strategies, Gender, and the Shift to Wage Labour in the British Caribbean" in *The Colonial Caribbean in Transition: Essays on Postemancipation Social and Cultural History*, ed. Bridget Brereton and Kevin A. Yelvington (Mona, Jamaica: University of the West Indies Press, 1999).

²¹⁰ Scholars of the U.S. South after slavery have thoroughly examined the issues of gender and family relations and their impact on freedwomen. See, Tera W. Hunter, *To 'Joy My Freedom: Southern Black Women's Lives and Labor after the Civil War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997); Leslie Schwalm, *A Hard Fight for We: Women's Transition from Slavery to Freedom in South Carolina* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997); Noralee Frankel, *Freedom's Women: Black Women and Families in Civil War Era Mississippi* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press: 1999); Elizabeth Regosin, *Freedom's Promise: Ex-Slave Families and Citizenship in the Age of Emancipation* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2002); Thavolia Glymph, *Out of the House of Bondage The Transformation of The Plantation Household* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008); Hannah Rosen, *Terror in the Heart of Freedom: Citizenship, Sexual Violence, and the Meaning of Race in the Postemancipation South* (Chapel Hill: University of Carolina Press, 2009); Tera Hunter, *Bound in Wedlock: Slave and Free Black Marriage in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2017).

Enter Sabrina, a female apprentice hailing from the Husband's estate in rural St. James Parish. In December 1836, Barbados Governor E.J. Murray MacGregor, Sir Lionel Smith's successor, received word that Sabrina was separated from her infant child when she was incarcerated.²¹¹ It is unclear what offense Sabrina may have committed to land her in jail.²¹² Perhaps she refused to work to attend to her infant. Maybe she had a history of insubordination or misconduct on the estate where she was employed. In any case, prisons were harrowing places for women in Barbados. Under slavery, abolitionists managed to criminalize the flogging of women through their ameliorative reform efforts. When apprenticeship went into effect, the magistrates, as the new administrators of punishment and work-discipline, could not order women or children, for that matter, to be flogged. As a result, many women were sent to jail as punishment for their transgressions.

Gaols (as jails were commonly referred to in the nineteenth century), contained a "cage" where the treadmill was kept, as well as a few cells designated for solitary confinement.²¹³ The configuration of jails varied from place to place depending on the size of the structure in which it was located. Treadmills were invented in 1818. They

²¹¹ Letter from J.H. Ponsonby, Private Secretary to Joseph Garraway Esq. 2 December 1836, Special Justices October 1836-August 1838, Barbados Department of Archives, St. James, Barbados.

²¹² In Barbados, the common goal for "all descriptions of prisoners" was located at Bridgetown. For additional information see, *Goals and Prisoners: Questions and Answers*, Barbados 1837 (Volume 2), C.O. 28/120, The National Archives, Kew, London, UK.

²¹³ Sheena Boa, "Experiences of Women Estate Workers during the Apprenticeship Period in St Vincent, 1834-38: The Transition from Slavery to Freedom." *Women's History Review* 10, no. 3 (2001): 384-385.

became a standard feature among houses of correction across the British West Indies during the 1820s.²¹⁴ According to Sheena Boa, when women were sentenced to the treadmill, “their arms were strapped to bars above their heads and they were forced to tread on the revolving steps of a mill or have their legs hit by the steps.” (Figure 3).²¹⁵ While the Bridgetown jail did have a treadmill that was imported from England, it was prohibited as punishment for women because of amelioration policy.²¹⁶ Instead, women prisoners were sentenced to confinement, or to hard labor which involved two gangs employed out of jail. One gang of sturdy women worked on roads and other public works, while the other gang of “aged and young persons, worked at breaking stones in

²¹⁴ Paton, *No Bond But the Law*, 88; Also see Mary Turner, “11 O’Clock Flog” for discussions on treadmills in Barbice and Trinidad. Turner, Mary. “The 11 O’Clock Flog: Women, Work and Labour Law in the British Caribbean.” *Slavery & Abolition* 20, no. 1 (1999): 52.

²¹⁵ Sheena Boa, “Experiences of Women Estate Workers during the Apprenticeship Period in St Vincent, 1834-38: The Transition from Slavery to Freedom.” *Women’s History Review* 10, no. 3 (2001): 385.

²¹⁶ *Gaols and Prisoners: Questions and Answers*, Barbados 1837 (Volume 2), C.O. 28/120, The National Archives, Kew, London, UK.

the goal-yard."²¹⁷

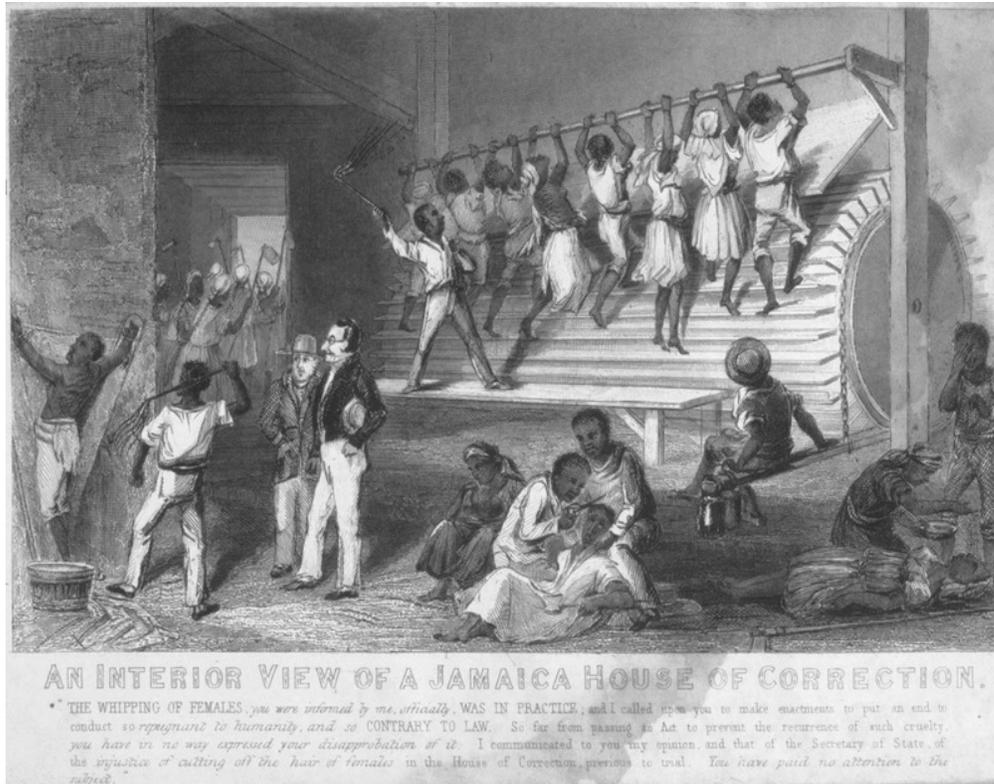


Figure 5: Treadmill, Jamaica, 1837

It is very likely that Sabrina experienced abuse and degradation while imprisoned. When women were sentenced, they typically had their heads shaved as a so-called protective measure to support sanitation.²¹⁸ But, by drastically altering women's physical appearances without their consent, jail officials inflicted serious

²¹⁷ *Gaols and Prisoners: Questions and Answers*, Barbados 1837 (Volume 2), C.O. 28/120, The National Archives, Kew, London, UK.

²¹⁸ Boa, Sheena. "Experiences of Women Estate Workers during the Apprenticeship Period in St Vincent, 1834-38: The Transition from Slavery to Freedom." *Women's History Review* 10, no. 3 (2001): 385.

psychological harm. Sabrina may have been further traumatized in battling her employer, Mr. Hollingsworth, to ensure that her child was cared for while she was confined in jail. The peculiarities of her case led Governor MacGregor to intervene. He launched an investigation and found that Mr. Hollingsworth's conduct was appropriate because he informed the authorities that he *could not* care for Sabrina's infant, not that he *would not* provide for the child.²¹⁹ It is unclear why Mr. Hollingsworth was incapable of supporting the infant. Perhaps he lacked the means. Maybe he was spiteful and did not want to provide material allowances for the child to punish Sabrina for her alleged crimes. Still, Sabrina was just one of many female laborers with infants who found themselves at odds with their employers over the lack of subsistence they were willing to provide during the post-slavery era.

Before apprenticeship was adopted, masters were expected to support pregnant and nursing women as well as their infants. The kind of assistance provided depended on the means and the generosity of planters. Some women during the late stages of pregnancy were allowed to withdraw from field labor altogether until they gave birth. Others were given additional food allowances. After giving birth took place, some women were permitted additional time away from the fields to nurse their newborns. However, these "indulgences" (as they are often referred to by writers of the period)

²¹⁹ Letter from J.H. Ponsonby, Private Secretary to Joseph Garraway Esq. 10 December 1836, Special Justices October 1836-August 1838, Barbados Department of Archives, St. James, Barbados.

were effectively withdrawn by planters after emancipation. As Bridget Brereton puts it in her analysis of post-slavery Jamaica, “apprentices in the late stage of pregnancy were sometimes forced to work in the fields, mothers of many children were sent back into the cane pieces, the services of infant nurses might be withdrawn, and nursing mothers were denied special breaks during the working day.”²²⁰ In spring 1837, Lieutenant Kennedy, a Special Justice of the Peace for Barbados observed several cases of “children being out of doors... and in no case, the children of his district allowed molasses or other sustenance.”²²¹ Mothers and children were left in a particularly vulnerable state during apprenticeship. This troubled the governor who was liable to be reproached by Lord Glenelg and other members of the colonial office. In official correspondence done by his private secretary, J.H. Ponsonby, the governor asked Lieutenant Kennedy if there were cases in which infants were pushed “out of their (houses)”, and whether “the molasses on which they are partially sustained” was held back... “as an effort to force parents to apprentice their children.”²²² Lieutenant Kennedy was hesitant to voice his opinion on the matter. He questioned whether he had the authority to interfere in such cases, “where proprietors or managers have harmed the free children of apprenticed labourers

²²⁰ Bridget Brereton, “Family Strategies, Gender, and the Shift to Wage Labor in the British Caribbean” in *Gender and Slave Emancipation in the Atlantic World*, Eds. Pamela Scully & Diana Paton, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 144.

²²¹ *Letter from J.H. Ponsonby, Private Secretary to Lieutenant Kennedy*, 11 May 1837, Special Justices October 1836-August 1838, Barbados Department of Archives, St. James, Barbados.

²²² *Letter from J.H. Ponsonby, Private Secretary to Lieutenant Kennedy*, 11 May 1837, Special Justices October 1836-August 1838, Barbados Department of Archives, St. James, Barbados.

out of doors, or do not allow nurses to look after them” while the parents were at work in the fields.²²³

The governor encouraged Lieutenant Kennedy to exercise discretion when evaluating cases of mothers separated from their infants and children. If the circumstances behind the claims appeared suspicious, Lieutenant Kennedy was required to report the particulars for the governor who would then determine if further investigation was needed. Sometimes special justices sought guidance on challenging cases from colonial officials across the Atlantic. For example, Lord Glenelg intervened on the matter of separation between mothers and children after receiving an annual report on the state of apprenticeship in Lieutenant Kennedy’s district. Lord Glenelg advised Lieutenant Kennedy that, if a mother “cannot discharge her necessary maternal duties without being absent from her work, you will remind the special magistrates that the law has not left her without protection against such interference.”²²⁴ Lord Glenelg represented a growing body of legislators in parliament who had become disenchanted with planters and their conduct towards apprentices. As Hilary Beckles explains, “Glenelg, under the guidance of James Stephen, attempted to intimidate Barbadian planters by suggesting that the Apprenticeship was more about the enslaved slowly

²²³ Letter from J.H. Ponsonby, Private Secretary to Lieutenant Kennedy, 11 May 1837, Special Justices October 1836-August 1838, Barbados Department of Archives, St. James, Barbados.

²²⁴ Copy of a dispatch from Lord Glenelg to Governor Sir E.J. Murray MacGregor, No. 52, 15 August 1837, C.O. 28/119, The National Archives, Kew, London, UK.

becoming free men than slave owners adjusting to the wage labour system.”²²⁵ Lord Glenelg made it clear in his correspondence with Lieutenant Kennedy that “any part of the employers to remove children from the houses occupied by their parents is illegal.”²²⁶ Yet, planters were stubborn and unwilling to comply with Lord Glenelg’s warnings. Proprietors skirted the edge of the law when dealing with apprentices. But unlike years before, laborers in Barbados had opportunities for redress.

Redefining Relationships

Between 1837 and 1838, apprentices of Barbados, inundated special justices with complaints by apprentices and their issues spanned the gamut. Some ex-slaves petitioned authorities to keep them out of the employ of difficult planters. That was the case for Gracey, a female apprentice who applied to Governor MacGregor in July 1837 to express concerns that she and her children were about to be transferred to a demanding proprietor.²²⁷ Other apprentices complained about being forced to work in the fields when they were physically incapable of doing so. John Williams, an apprentice belonging to the Mount Wilton estate in St. Thomas’ parish located eight miles north of Bridgetown applied to the governor in July 1837 complaining that the manager of the property compelled him to use a hoe even though he had one hand. Williams claimed

²²⁵ Beckles, *A History of Barbados*, 131.

²²⁶ *Copy of a dispatch from Lord Glenelg to Governor Sir E.J. Murray MacGregor*, No. 52, 15 August 1837, C.O. 28/119, The National Archives, Kew, London, UK.

²²⁷ *Letter from J.H. Ponsonby, Private Secretary to Captain Hutchinson Special Justice of the Peace*, 15 July 1837, Special Justices October 1836-August 1838, Barbados Department of Archives, St. James, Barbados.

that he had only been employed attending cattle, but on one occasion “he was made to work with the hoe for a week, and it was found that he could not succeed in properly using that instrument.”²²⁸ In August 1837, Amelia, an elderly female apprentice “who can hardly drag out one limb after another” applied to the governor when charged with tending to cattle on the Guinea estate in St. John’s parish located eleven miles southwest of Bridgetown.²²⁹ Amelia requested that she should not be “subjected to any punishment for the non-performance of work with His Excellency.”²³⁰ Governor MacGregor recommended that a medical officer of the station house should evaluate her condition before a final decision could be made on the matter. Some apprentices got lucky. They managed to secure a meeting with the governor in person to discuss their complaints. In August 1837, Chloe, an apprentice on the Sandy Hill estate in St. Philip’s parish where the 1816 slave insurrection broke out, met with the governor to discuss why she was unable to labor for estate. The governor directed his private secretary to inform Captain Cuppage, a special justice of St. Philip that “in His Excellency’s opinion this female ought to not be compelled to work with a hoe, owing to injury of where she complains, in her left hand.”²³¹

²²⁸ *Letter from J.H. Ponsonby, Private Secretary to Captain Hough Special Justice of the Peace, 22 July 1837, Special Justices October 1836-August 1838, Barbados Department of Archives, St. James, Barbados.*

²²⁹ *Letter from J.H. Ponsonby, Private Secretary to Captain Cuppage Special Justice of the Peace, 14 August 1837, Special Justices October 1836-August 1838, Barbados Department of Archives, St. James, Barbados.*

²³⁰ *Letter from J.H. Ponsonby, Private Secretary to Captain Cuppage Special Justice of the Peace, 14 August 1837, Special Justices October 1836-August 1838, Barbados Department of Archives, St. James, Barbados.*

²³¹ *Letter from J.H. Ponsonby, Private Secretary to Captain Cuppage Special Justice of the Peace, 29 August 1837, Special Justices October 1836-August 1838, Barbados Department of Archives, St. James, Barbados.*

The apprentices of Barbados of all ages and classes were motivated to seek out local officials to address conflicts arising from abuse or assault that involved employers or managers of the estates where they lived and labored. For example, in May 1837 an apprenticed boy named George belonging to the Farm estate in St. Peter's Parish located thirteen miles north of Bridgetown reported that Richard Small, a watchman of the estate, beat him severely. George alleged that the manager Mr. Drakes allowed Small to beat him "as much as he pleased."²³² It is unclear if George was punished for a specific transgression or if Mr. Drakes harbored a sadistic pleasure in having him whipped. Mr. Drakes may have also targeted George in retaliation for offenses committed by his parents. Cruel employers tormented the children of apprentices to illicit labor. Sometimes cases of assault were so egregious that they necessitated legal action beyond the purview of special magistrates. Offenders could be placed on trial at the grand sessions, and if found guilty were liable to face jail time or a fine depending on the severity of the crime. Special justice Captain Hutchinson thought it best that an estate manager named Samuel Gideon stand trial at the court of grand sessions for assault, but the governor objected to this course of action. He stated that the victim of assault, Nanny Christian, should be awarded freedom as compensation for the cruelty she experienced

²³² Letter from J.H. Ponsonby, Private Secretary to Major Colthurst Special Justice of the Peace, 18 May 1837, Special Justices October 1836-August 1838, Barbados Department of Archives, St. James, Barbados.

at the hands of Gibion.²³³ It is possible that Gibion was Nanny's employer. The 86th clause of the emancipation act declared that "if Employers shall be convicted of cruelty towards, or of twice inflicting corporal punishments, upon Apprenticed laborers, then such laborers shall be discharged from apprenticeship, by order of the court, before which conviction shall be heard."²³⁴

Cases of domestic violence also reached the governor's desk, but they occurred infrequently. That is not to suggest that apprentices did not face domestic violence, but rather that they felt uncomfortable detailing their intimate lives to stipendiary magistrates.²³⁵ In August 1837, Jenny Scott, a female apprentice of St. John's parish complained to the governor after she had been violently assaulted and wounded by Sam Isaac, a laborer who lived on the same estate.²³⁶ It is not clear if Jenny experienced physical trauma, sexual trauma or both. The nature of Jenny's relationship to Sam Isaac is also unclear. Perhaps Sam possessed some affection for Jenny that was not reciprocated. Maybe the two laborers were paramours and Jenny decided to end their relationship because she desired to be with someone else or was no longer fulfilled by the affair. The assault could have been an act of jealousy, rage, or mania. Still, it must

²³³ Letter from J.H. Ponsonby, Private Secretary to Captain Hutchinson Special Justice of the Peace, 18 August 1837, Special Justices October 1836-August 1838, Barbados Department of Archives, St. James, Barbados.

²³⁴ Message from His Excellency the Governor E.J. Murray MacGregor to the House of Assembly, *The Liberal*, No. 12, 5 August 1837, Barbados Department of Archives.

²³⁵ Diana Paton has a thoughtful discussion on sexual violence under apprenticeship. See chapter three: "The Treadmill and The Whip" in *No Bond But The Law*, 100-104.

²³⁶ Letter from J.H. Ponsonby, Private Secretary to Sam Hutchins Esq., 18 August 1837, Special Justices October 1836-August 1838, Barbados Department of Archives, St. James, Barbados.

have taken immense courage for Jenny to report her assault to men in positions of power who had historically failed to acknowledge the range of her humanity.

After emancipation, ex-slaves across the British colonies attempted to forge autonomous relationships. When intimate partnerships reached a violent conclusion, some laborers applied to special justices or the governor for intervention. Apprentices also called on the authorities to keep employers from forcefully separating them from their loved ones. In March 1838 Margret Green and Elizabeth Willis, two non-apprenticed female laborers trespassed on the Walkers plantation in the northeast parish of St. Andrew to visit their husbands who were employed on the estate.²³⁷ It is possible that Margret and Elizabeth did not have permission from their employers or the manager of the Walkers estate to visit. Consequently, Margaret was imprisoned for 14 days, while Elizabeth was jailed for the same duration and forced to perform hard labor.²³⁸ Eventually, the governor requested that Margaret and Elizabeth be released. The reasons for this decision are unknown. Betty, Sally Ann, and Daphne, three female apprentices from another estate, also complained to the authorities that their services

²³⁷ *Letter from Felix Bedingfeld, Private Secretary to Captain Hamilton Special Justice of the Peace, 3 March 1838, Special Justices October 1836-August 1838, Barbados Department of Archives, St. James, Barbados.*

²³⁸ *Letter from Felix Bedingfeld, Private Secretary to Captain Hamilton Special Justice of the Peace, 3 March 1838, Special Justices October 1836-August 1838, Barbados Department of Archives, St. James, Barbados.*

were transferred by Mr. Ralph Waith to a proprietor living in another district, thereby detaching them from their spouses, children, and next of kin.²³⁹

Apprenticeship destabilized Black families in Barbados in profound ways as laborers like Margaret, Elizabeth, Betty, Sally Ann, and Daphne all had varying degrees of freedom based on their class distinctions (i.e., praedial, praedial unattached, non-praedial). Laborers could be therefore separated at a moment's notice to suit the interests of their employer. The liberation of children under the age of six by the thousands also posed a serious issue by creating a deficit in labor which often worried, if not infuriated, planters. In the British colony of St. Vincent, members of the local assembly attempted to mitigate the emancipation of children by including a provision in their emancipation act that stated that in the event parents could not take care of offspring, children were to be apprenticed until they reached twenty-one years of age.²⁴⁰ The Colonial Office rejected their bill, forcing St. Vincent legislators to amend the clause.²⁴¹ Labor distinctions also fostered an environment of competition. According to Laurence Brown and Tara Inniss, "The creation of families which contained both freed and enslaved members occurred in atmosphere of conflict and hostility, rather than one

²³⁹ *Letter from Felix Bedingfeld, Private Secretary to Captain Hutchison Special Justice of the Peace, 28 March 1838, Special Justices October 1836-August 1838, Barbados Department of Archives, St. James, Barbados.*

²⁴⁰ Boa, Sheena. "Experiences of Women Estate Workers during the Apprenticeship Period in St Vincent, 1834-38: The Transition from Slavery to Freedom." *Women's History Review* 10, no. 3 (2001): 389-390.

²⁴¹ Boa, Sheena. "Experiences of Women Estate Workers during the Apprenticeship", 390.

of peaceful transition to a new free society.”²⁴² When apprenticed and non-apprenticed laborers were not battling employers to prevent them from apprenticing children, they were fighting to keep their families together either on the same plantation or in the same parish.

The Challenges of New Labor Classifications

There is no question that apprenticeship failed to provide the smooth transition from slavery to freedom that colonial legislators had hoped for. Many employers across the British Caribbean believed that the divisions of labor were responsible for much of the conflict between them and the apprentices. As one observer noted in *The Liberal*, “the practical division of our labourers into the three classes was a work of some difficulty to the majority of employers, owing, perhaps, to want of a proper attention to the strict meaning of the word Praedial.”²⁴³ Allegedly, employers failed to adhere to class distinctions due to their misunderstanding of the term praedial. “It is no wonder” argued the observer, “that occasional mistakes were made.”²⁴⁴ Still, many employers took advantage of the so-called confusion surrounding labor designations and placed apprentices in classes which were considered most beneficial to their interests. John Roberts traveled to Government House in Bridgetown, Barbados, to report that he was

²⁴² Brown, Laurence and Tara Inniss. “The Slave Family in the Transition to Freedom: Barbados, 1834-1841.” *Slavery & Abolition* 26, no. 2 (2005): 259.

²⁴³ Extract: “*Truth and Justice*”, July 5, 1837, *The Liberal* (Bridgetown, Barbados), Saturday July 8, 1837, Vol. 1 No. 2-54., Barbados Department of Archives, St. James, Barbados.

²⁴⁴ Extract: “*Truth and Justice*”, July 5, 1837, *The Liberal* (Bridgetown, Barbados), Saturday July 8, 1837, Vol. 1 No. 2-54., Barbados Department of Archives, St. James, Barbados.

“improperly compelled to labor in the field.”²⁴⁵ In response, the governor’s private secretary wrote to the special justice residing in John Roberts’ district, stating that, “If therefore this apprenticed labour’s statement be correct... the Governor considers that he ought properly be classed as a non-*praedial*.”²⁴⁶ Dolly, had been performing the work associated with *praedial* apprentices since before the abolition of slavery, was employed in non-*praedial* occupations during 1833-1837.²⁴⁷ Dolly complained that her wages were withheld for extra hours she had spent laboring outdoors. Apparently, Dolly’s case was difficult to mediate because the authorities had to determine whether her “employer’s proceedings were calculated to produce the effect of cruelty” as outlined in the 88th clause of the emancipation act.²⁴⁸ When probed by the authorities on the particulars of Dolly’s accusations, her employer claimed that he was “justified in requesting her as a *praedial* and for withholding remuneration for the Saturday’s and Sunday’s work on account of her alleged misconduct while employed when washing and in town as a domestic.”²⁴⁹

²⁴⁵ *Letter from J.H. Ponsonby, Private Secretary to Captain Hamilton Special Justice of the Peace*, 8 September 1837, Special Justices October 1836-August 1838, Barbados Department of Archives, St. James, Barbados.

²⁴⁶ *Letter from J.H. Ponsonby, Private Secretary to Captain Hamilton Special Justice of the Peace*, 28 September 1837, Special Justices October 1836-August 1838, Barbados Department of Archives, St. James, Barbados.

²⁴⁷ *Letter from J.H. Ponsonby, Private Secretary to Captain Hamilton Special Justice of the Peace*, 5 September 1837, Special Justices October 1836-August 1838, Barbados Department of Archives, St. James, Barbados.

²⁴⁸ *Letter from J.H. Ponsonby, Private Secretary to Captain Hamilton Special Justice of the Peace*, 5 September 1837, Special Justices October 1836-August 1838, Barbados Department of Archives, St. James, Barbados.

²⁴⁹ *Letter from J.H. Ponsonby, Private Secretary to Captain Hamilton Special Justice of the Peace*, 22 September 1837, Special Justices October 1836-August 1838, Barbados Department of Archives, St. James, Barbados.

During apprenticeship, it was a challenge to establish when the customary rights of planters ended, and the privileges of laborers began. What made labor relations especially tricky to navigate were its the grey areas: verbal agreements made between an employer and employee pertaining to additional labor that may have fallen outside of the apprentice's class distinction, as well as the compensation awarded for such work. Many planters took advantage of laborers by withholding wages promised and in more extreme cases, by threatening to apprentice free children. The female apprentice Betty Bella applied to the governor when her employer Mr. McLean threatened to "harm her free children out of doors" as result of an offense she committed on May 25, 1837.²⁵⁰ While the details of the offense are not disclosed, it is worth considering that she may have entered into an extended labor arrangement with her employer in exchange for payment. Perhaps Mr. McLean retained Betty Bella's wages prompting her to withhold additional labor. In an act of retaliation, Mr. McLean could have threatened to force Betty Bella's children to work in the fields. While apprentices of Barbados like Dolly and Betty Bella fought within and against existing legal channels to enforce the terms of verbal contracts, planters were busy broadcasting their frustrations with the laboring classes in local newspapers.

²⁵⁰ *Letter from J.H. Ponsonby, Private Secretary to Lieutenant Kennedy Special Justice of the Peace, 5 July 1837, Special Justices October 1836-August 1838, Barbados Department of Archives, St. James, Barbados.*

In a July 1837 issue of *The Liberal*, a Bridgetown resident observed that the non-*praedial* part of the population (mostly comprised of female domestic servants) were “desultory... of their duties, that it is impossible for any very rigid system of discipline to be established with them even during a state of slavery, and that omissions of duty were liable to be easily overlooked.”²⁵¹ Like field hands, domestics also refused to acquiesce to white authority despite having a workload that was arguably less demanding than that of their peers who worked in the countryside.²⁵² Under slavery, domestics often used subtle, yet clever acts of defiance to irritate their employers. Theft of household items like food and clothing occurred frequently.²⁵³ Some domestics went so far as to poison their employers or other members of the household when they felt slighted or threatened.²⁵⁴ After slavery ended, however, non-*praedial* apprentices felt emboldened to disregard their duties. For example, domestics were often accused of committing offenses like “linen badly washed, and impertinence; doing only half as

²⁵¹ Extract: “*Truth and Justice*”, July 8, 1837, *The Liberal* (Bridgetown, Barbados), Saturday July 8, 1837, Vol. 1 No. 2-54., Barbados Department of Archives, St. James, Barbados.

²⁵² Under apprenticeship, domestics were at the beck and call of employers at all hours and at all seasons whereas *praedial* laborers could not work more than 49 hours a week. *Extracts of a letter*. No.1, October 5, 1837, Circulars 1836-1837, Barbados Department of Archives, St. James, Barbados.

²⁵³ Bush, *Slave Women in Caribbean Society*, 61.

²⁵⁴ Scholar Bernard Moitt details a case in the French Caribbean involving a 55-year-old female head cook named Magdeleine who poisoned a Frenchman after receiving news that he was to replace her son as a manager of the plantation they dwelled on, a position he held for many years. Bernard Moitt, “Women, Work and Resistance in the French Caribbean during Slavery, 1700-1848” in *Engendering History Caribbean Women in Historical Perspective*, Eds. Verene Shepherd, Bridget Brereton, & Barbara Bailey, (New York, St. Martin’s Press: 1995), 168.

much in potato-hoeing one day as they did the day before.”²⁵⁵ In the minds of domestic laborers, they were free and entitled to do as they pleased. This attitude led to an “ill feeling” between them and their employers.²⁵⁶ According to the Bridgetown observer writing in *The Liberal*, “The Emancipation Act as bringing liberty, they could not conceive to be merely theoretical, and under the circumstances of their situation, the enjoyment of more actual liberty was incompatible with the constant degree of attention, which their employers require.”²⁵⁷ Theoretical freedom was an abstraction to apprentices of all classes and distinctions. Indulgences or privileges of any kind could not supplant what they truly yearned for: unconditional freedom. As long as the laborers were subjected to a system that was eerily similar to slavery, conflicts were bound to continue. And they did.

Sometimes the laborers of Barbados banded together as a collective to express their grievances with the apprenticeship system. For example, a riot of “serious and somewhat alarming nature” took place at Speightstown, the second largest city in

²⁵⁵ Sturge, Joseph, and Thomas Harvey. *The West Indies in 1837: being the journal of a visit to Antigua, Monsterrat, Dominica, St. Lucia, Barbadoes, and Jamaica: undertaken for the purpose of ascertaining the actual condition of the Negro population of those islands*, 2nd ed. (London, United Kingdom: Hamilton, Adams, and Co., 1838), 127. *Slavery and Anti-Slavery: A Transnational Archive* (accessed February 1, 2022). https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/DS0100262939/SAS?u=duke_perkins&sid=bookmark-SAS&xid=d017ce27&pg=141.

²⁵⁶ Extract: “*Truth and Justice*”, July 8, 1837, *The Liberal* (Bridgetown, Barbados), Saturday July 8, 1837, Vol. 1 No. 2-54., Barbados Department of Archives, St. James, Barbados.

²⁵⁷ Extract: “*Truth and Justice*”, July 8, 1837, *The Liberal* (Bridgetown, Barbados), Saturday July 8, 1837, Vol. 1 No. 2-54., Barbados Department of Archives, St. James, Barbados.

Barbados situated 12 miles north of Bridgetown.²⁵⁸ Observers of the incident marked it as the consequence of “ill feeling which lurks in the minds of the black populace towards their former masters and present employers.”²⁵⁹ One Saturday evening in August 1837, Mr. Cummins, a sergeant of the Speightstown police was making his rounds or strolling about when he heard noise coming from the distance. Confused and possibly curious, he began to walk towards the sound and came to some open land on the fringes of town belonging to Mr. Yearwood. Here, he witnessed several individuals dancing. He told the dancers to stop because it was after seven o’clock in the evening. When one of these people refused to comply, he took him into custody. Someone sent word to Mr. Yearwood, who went to the jail to seek the release of the detained. Mr. Cummins released the person from custody.

During the same evening, Mr. Cummins found himself embroiled in another incident. This time, however, he was involved with a much larger group of people. Allegedly, he had encountered some individuals who treated him poorly, so he complained about their conduct to the Speightstown Police Magistrate, Mr. Corbin. Mr. Cummins wanted to take the individuals into custody. Mr. Corbin agreed with Mr. Cummins and accompanied him, along with to one or two other officers, to the place where he first encountered these difficult fellows. When they reached their destination,

²⁵⁸ *Extract: “Truth and Justice”, July 8, 1837, The Liberal (Bridgetown, Barbados), Saturday July 8, 1837, Vol. 1 No. 2-54., Barbados Department of Archives, St. James, Barbados.*

²⁵⁹ *The Liberal (Bridgetown, Barbados), Wednesday Morning, August 16, 1837, Vol. 1 No. 15., Barbados Department of Archives, St. James, Barbados.*

Mr. Cummins spotted John Cozier, one of the persons whose ill-treatment he had complained of, now under the protection of the Sergeant of the Rural Police Force, Mr. Boyce. Apparently, the two men (Cozier and Boyce) were headed into town. Mr. Cummins immediately seized John Cozier as his prisoner. Cozier “submitted very quietly,” and proceeded with him down to Mr. Corbin’s office.²⁶⁰ When John Williams, a friend of Mr. Cozier, heard about the arrest, he went straight to Mr. Corbin’s office to bail Cozier out. Mr. Cummins refused to release Mr. Cozier because it was after office hours. Mr. Cummins and Mr. Cozier then found themselves by the door of what may have been the jail when they were met “by an immense mob” declaring that Mr. Cozier should not be locked up.²⁶¹ According to an observer, “The scene presented at this time, was very alarming.”²⁶² The small number of police officers who rushed to the scene could not suppress the mob, “who pressed forward with an evident intention of rescuing Mr. Cozier.”²⁶³ Soon “Blows began to be exchanged, and rocks and broken bottles to fly.”²⁶⁴ Constable Gittens intervened along with Mr. Corbin and other police

²⁶⁰ *The Liberal* (Bridgetown, Barbados), Wednesday Morning, August 16, 1837, Vol. 1 No. 15., Barbados Department of Archives, St. James, Barbados.

²⁶¹ *The Liberal* (Bridgetown, Barbados), Wednesday Morning, August 16, 1837, Vol. 1 No. 15., Barbados Department of Archives, St. James, Barbados.

²⁶² *The Liberal* (Bridgetown, Barbados), Wednesday Morning, August 16, 1837, Vol. 1 No. 15., Barbados Department of Archives, St. James, Barbados.

²⁶³ *The Liberal* (Bridgetown, Barbados), Wednesday Morning, August 16, 1837, Vol. 1 No. 15., Barbados Department of Archives, St. James, Barbados.

²⁶⁴ *The Liberal* (Bridgetown, Barbados), Wednesday Morning, August 16, 1837, Vol. 1 No. 15., Barbados Department of Archives, St. James, Barbados.

officers, and “one or two captures of the most forward assailants were made.”²⁶⁵

Members of the rural police came to the aid of Mr. Corbin and Constable Gittens and four or five prisoners were then sent to jail. Eventually, the riot ended, “the streets were patrolled, and things became quiet.”²⁶⁶ The captured individuals were placed in custody to await sentencing at the next court of grand sessions. As for the police officers who responded to the incident, observers said, “that the personal injury sustained by the police, &c. has been trifling.”²⁶⁷ Witnesses who detailed the particulars of the attack for *The Liberal* newspaper explained that “It is almost needless for us to remark, that the mob was composed chiefly of apprenticed laborers.”²⁶⁸ And like the riot that erupted a few months before emancipation in Bridgetown, the laborers turned to the streets and attacked police officers whom they likely viewed as an extension of the white planter elite bent on keeping them from exercising their full rights and privileges under the emancipation act.

²⁶⁵ *The Liberal* (Bridgetown, Barbados), Wednesday Morning, August 16, 1837, Vol. 1 No. 15., Barbados Department of Archives, St. James, Barbados.

²⁶⁶ *The Liberal* (Bridgetown, Barbados), Wednesday Morning, August 16, 1837, Vol. 1 No. 15., Barbados Department of Archives, St. James, Barbados.

²⁶⁷ *The Liberal* (Bridgetown, Barbados), Wednesday Morning, August 16, 1837, Vol. 1 No. 15., Barbados Department of Archives, St. James, Barbados.

²⁶⁸ *The Liberal* (Bridgetown, Barbados), Wednesday Morning, August 16, 1837, Vol. 1 No. 15., Barbados Department of Archives, St. James, Barbados.

The Fight for Absolute Freedom

By early 1838, news of strife between planters and apprentices had reached London. This prompted an emancipation campaign in Parliament spearheaded by the seasoned abolitionist Lord Brougham.²⁶⁹ Abolitionists used the poor treatment of laboring women to underscore apprenticeship's failure to transform both planters and ex-slaves into proper British subjects. As Mimi Sheller explains, British opposition to apprenticeship echoed the sentiments of early "anti-slavery literature and highlighted the treatment (and punishment) of female apprentices as important signifiers of the immorality of this 'experiment' in half-freedom."²⁷⁰ The methods deployed to restrain colonial assemblies were no different than the approaches used to develop amelioration policies of the 1790s and 1820s. Legislators in the British metropole instructed religious organizations and humanitarian groups to tour various islands to get a sense of the conflicts that emerged between laborers and their employees as part of a public campaign to abrogate apprenticeship throughout the empire.²⁷¹ Once these delegates collected enough data or accounts of abuse, exploitation, and violence committed against apprentices, specifically women and children, they published their findings for Members of Parliament to mount their defense.

²⁶⁹ Turner, "Modernizing Slavery", 23.

²⁷⁰ Sheller, "Quasheba, Mother, Queen" 93.

²⁷¹ For a hearty discussion on the transformation of British imperial identity across the empire including Jamaica in the mid-nineteenth century see, Catherine Hall, *Civilising Subjects: Colony and Metropole in the English Imagination, 1830-1867* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002).

Joseph Sturge and Thomas Harvey, prominent Quaker philanthropists and advocates of unconditional freedom, chronicled scenes of mistreatment and neglect across the British West Indies for readers in the metropole. During their 1837 tour of several colonies including Antigua, Montserrat, Dominica, Jamaica, St. Lucia, and Barbados, Sturge and Harvey visited estates and houses of correction to interview laborers about their experiences under apprenticeship. They prioritized documenting the conditions of women and children for their publications hoping to solicit sympathetic supporters in Britain. In their report titled, *The West Indies in 1837* published in 1838, Sturge and Harvey were quite critical of the apprenticeship system in Barbados. They stated that:

The Barbados legislature was the latest to pass an Act for the Abolition of Slavery, as required by the Imperial Government; and planters have since succeeded in moulding the apprenticeship into an almost perfect likeness of the system they so unwillingly relinquished. An equal, if not greater amount, of uncompensated labour, is now extorted from the negroes; while, as their owners have no longer the same interest in their health and lives, their condition, and particularly of mothers and young children, is in many respects worse than during slavery.²⁷²

Their remarks paint a grim picture. Barbados planters were not only reluctant to pass the decree of emancipation. They also refused to acknowledge that people of

²⁷² Sturge, Joseph, and Thomas Harvey. *The West Indies in 1837: being the journal of a visit to Antigua, Montserrat, Dominica, St. Lucia, Barbadoes, and Jamaica: undertaken for the purpose of ascertaining the actual condition of the Negro population of those islands*, 2nd ed. (London, United Kingdom: Hamilton, Adams, and Co., 1838), 140. *Slavery and Anti-Slavery: A Transnational Archive* (accessed February 1, 2022). https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/DS0100262939/SAS?u=duke_perkins&sid=bookmark-SAS&xid=d017ce27&pg=154

African descent were no longer slaves. In a feeble attempt to retain plantation labor, ex-masters deliberately ignored many of the principles outlined in the Act itself leaving the apprentices in a vulnerable state. Episodes of inhumane punishment for women and mothers appeared frequently in the text of *The West Indies in 1837*. When Sturge and Harvey traveled to Bridgetown to meet with Governor MacGregor, they shared a story of a woman who was sent to the treadmill in Barbados for punishment. The circumstances for her punishment were not disclosed. Much like Sabrina, the female apprentices of Barbados introduced at the beginning of this chapter, “She had an infant in her arms, which the jailer refused to receive, and which was therefore left on the road.”²⁷³ It is horrifying to know that jailers had so little regard for Black mothers that they would abandon infants on the road as if they were nothing more than garbage. Apparently, the case was reported to the governor who then ordered the immediate release of the woman followed by an order to stipendiary magistrates not to send pregnant women or women with young children to the treadmill. It is unclear if Governor MacGregor felt compelled to amend the punishment of women because of genuine concern for safety and well-being, or because of the added pressure he received from abolitionists like Sturge and Harvey. However, the governor’s efforts at mediating this issue were insufficient because opposition to the apprenticeship system reached a

²⁷³ Sturge, Joseph, and Thomas Harvey, *The West Indies in 1837*, 122-123.

zenith in Britain following the publication of the Sturge and Harvey report. As Woodville Marshall has shown in his essay on the termination of apprenticeship in Barbados and the Windward colonies, "The colonial legislatures were likely, therefore, to be exposed once again to buffeting from two quarters- vocal British public opinion, and the British Government attempting to defuse the domestic political situation, either by exercising full authority in the colonies or by surrendering the planters to Exeter Hall."²⁷⁴

When Governor MacGregor meeting with Sturge and Harvey he disclosed that he was "in favour of immediate Emancipation, as adopted by the legislature of Antigua; but with regard to the apprenticeship, he thought the time was now come for conciliation."²⁷⁵ By spring 1838, it was no secret that Barbados planters had a strong dislike for and distrust of Parliament. Therefore, Governor MacGregor believed he had to act with caution when dealing with planters because any attempts made by imperial authorities to intervene would lead to serious conflict. He told Sturge and Harvey that "He would rather endeavour to convince them, that it is their interest to be on good terms with their labourers, and to induce them, if possible, to anticipate the period of ultimate Emancipation."²⁷⁶ When Governor MacGregor first introduced the idea of terminating apprenticeship in January 1838, members of the Barbados assembly did not

²⁷⁴ Marshall, W. K. "The Termination of the Apprenticeship in Barbados and the Windward Islands: An Essay in Colonial Administration and Politics." *The Journal of Caribbean History* 2, (1971): 6.

²⁷⁵ Sturge, Joseph, and Thomas Harvey, *The West Indies in 1837*, 122.

²⁷⁶ Sturge, Joseph, and Thomas Harvey, *The West Indies in 1837*, 122.

provide a response until March 13th because they strongly opposed the plan for emancipation that was initiated by Lord Glenelg.²⁷⁷ It was not until the Assembly received notice that Glenelg's bill passed the Lords in Parliament and was on the verge of passing the House of Commons in May that they felt motivated to act.²⁷⁸ On May 15, 1838, the Barbados Assembly abolished apprenticeship from August 1, 1838, but Governor MacGregor was not pleased with the end result. According to Marshall, the Barbados act "gave ex-apprentices conditional tenure of 'house and ground' for only three months, and it made the ex-apprentices responsible for the upkeep of 'their yet more poor relations'."²⁷⁹

On June 2, 1838, Governor MacGregor issued a short proclamation to the laboring classes of Barbados informing them that apprenticeship will be terminated on Wednesday, August 1, 1838.²⁸⁰ When the monumentally significant day finally arrived, observers writing in *The Barbadian*, a local newspaper that often promoted planter interests, described the scene in Bridgetown: "We never witnessed a more quiet and noiseless scene than was presented this morning..."²⁸¹ The population was dense and bustling while joyful music filled the air. People of African descent were seen wearing their best apparel, "hastening to the Cathedral and Chapels, which all received

²⁷⁷ Marshall, "The Termination of the Apprenticeship in Barbados", 9.

²⁷⁸ Marshall, "The Termination of the Apprenticeship in Barbados", 19.

²⁷⁹ Marshall, "The Termination of the Apprenticeship in Barbados", 20.

²⁸⁰ Beckles, *A History of Barbados*, 134.

²⁸¹ *The Barbadian*, 1 Aug 1838, British Library, EAP1251/1/17/8/1, <https://eap.bl.uk/archive-file/EAP1251-1-17-8-1>.

overflowing congregations, composed of every class from the highest to the lowest...the whites being comparatively few."²⁸² In anticipation of unruly behavior on the part of the free population, the militia was deployed to the capital, "But no disturbance whatever occurred from this circumstance."²⁸³ Newly freed residents and their allies were optimistic about what lay in store for the future. As onlookers exclaimed, "Ardently we have wished, we scarcely expected to be permitted to see such change in our civil relations."²⁸⁴ Was it too good to be true? Were civil relations actually transformed for the better?

A few weeks after Emancipation Day, writers of *The Barbadian*, complained about the state the colony now that apprentices had been liberated. According to one nameless individual, "there are so many deplorable proofs of cane fields being choked with grass, a lamentable scarcity of food, idleness of many of our labourers, and even those who are working, many working under a wretched delusion."²⁸⁵ Apparently, freed men and women believed that they could, "work only on such days as they pleased."²⁸⁶ The author recalled an incident on the Fisher Pond estate in St. Thomas parish as an example

²⁸² *The Barbadian*, 1 Aug 1838, British Library, EAP1251/1/17/8/1, <https://eap.bl.uk/archive-file/EAP1251-1-17-8-1>.

²⁸³ *The Barbadian*, 1 Aug 1838, British Library, EAP1251/1/17/8/1, <https://eap.bl.uk/archive-file/EAP1251-1-17-8-1>.

²⁸⁴ *The Barbadian*, 1 Aug 1838, British Library, EAP1251/1/17/8/1, <https://eap.bl.uk/archive-file/EAP1251-1-17-8-1>.

²⁸⁵ *The Barbadian*, Wednesday August 22, 1838, General Magistrate and Assistant Court of Appeals, Barbados Department of Archives, St. James, Barbados.

²⁸⁶ *The Barbadian*, Wednesday August 22, 1838, General Magistrate and Assistant Court of Appeals, Barbados Department of Archives, St. James, Barbados.

of the difficulties that had emerged with a system of free labor. On a Monday prior, Mr. Sharp, the attorney of Mr. William Grazett, the owner of the Fisher Pond estate called Mr. Bascom and Mr. Carrington, two local magistrates, and an individual named Mr. Bailey to visit the estate and “exert their authority with the negroes... who had refused to enter into any contract to work.”²⁸⁷ Once the magistrates arrived on the estate, they called the workers up and explained the law to them and “reasoned with them about the impropriety of their conduct.”²⁸⁸ In response to the magistrates, the laborers claimed that they would only work when it suited them. Mr. Sharp then told the magistrates and the laborers that “he wished them to work five days a week, without interruption” as the estate could not thrive under “occasional or interrupted” labor.²⁸⁹ Once the estate was in “good condition” then Mr. Sharp would be willing to allow the laborers to seek out other forms of employment pending the manager’s approval. The workers were unmoved by Mr. Sharp’s proposal. The magistrates, frustrated by the recalcitrance of laboring men and women, decided to implement a new approach. They met with workers individually hoping to get them to change their minds. When that tactic proved futile the magistrates warned the laborers that if they failed to enter an agreement, “they would be ejected from the estate, and horse-carts would be ordered to take their effects

²⁸⁷ *The Barbadian*, Wednesday August 22, 1838, General Magistrate and Assistant Court of Appeals, Barbados Department of Archives, St. James, Barbados.

²⁸⁸ *The Barbadian*, Wednesday August 22, 1838, General Magistrate and Assistant Court of Appeals, Barbados Department of Archives, St. James, Barbados.

²⁸⁹ *The Barbadian*, Wednesday August 22, 1838, General Magistrate and Assistant Court of Appeals, Barbados Department of Archives, St. James, Barbados.

out of their houses and carry them into the high road.”²⁹⁰ Roughly 15-20 of the leading workers were reluctant to enter an agreement while others frightened by the prospect of ejection consented to continue to work for Mr. Grazett. Eventually, all of the laborers consented to work and entered agreements with the estate manager.

Work refusals were so common after emancipation that even the most so-called “kind and liberal” employers like Major Ellis were not immune to stoppages and were obliged to call on the magistrates to mediate tensions with the laborers on his estate.²⁹¹ Across Barbados freedpeople were instructed, often by senior laborers, to drop their hoes in objection to field labor. For example, on a Friday in August 1838, the laborers at The Chapel estate were deemed “so very riotous and refractory” that the magistrates, Mr. Bascom and Mr. Carrington, had to call on the rural police to accompany them.²⁹² When the rural police failed to calm the laborers, the militia stationed in their district was deployed to the estate. Allegedly, one of the laborers was so hostile towards Mr. Bascom, that “he desired the manager bring him a sword to defend himself, and if the Doctor had not unsheathed the sword, the man would have assaulted him.”²⁹³ At the

²⁹⁰ *The Barbadian*, Wednesday August 22, 1838, General Magistrate and Assistant Court of Appeals, Barbados Department of Archives, St. James, Barbados.

²⁹¹ *The Barbadian*, Wednesday August 22, 1838, General Magistrate and Assistant Court of Appeals, Barbados Department of Archives, St. James, Barbados.

²⁹² *The Barbadian*, Wednesday August 22, 1838, General Magistrate and Assistant Court of Appeals, Barbados Department of Archives, St. James, Barbados.

²⁹³ *The Barbadian*, Wednesday August 22, 1838, General Magistrate and Assistant Court of Appeals, Barbados Department of Archives, St. James, Barbados.

end of the tense exchange, roughly 15 of the most aggressive offenders were confined to the station house as punishment. Eventually, the governor had the men released.

After slavery was abolished on August 1, 1834, people of African descent in Barbados faced a series of unforeseen challenges due to imperial negligence and planter cruelty. The abolition decree was an imperfect document that contained many contradictory and poorly thought out clauses which made life exceedingly difficult for apprentices. While the decree freed thousands of enslaved children, it offered very little means of support to parents who were still expected to work the land for extreme hours. To make matters worse, ex-masters were unwilling to care for these children while their parents tilled the fields. As mothers, caretakers, and laborers, apprenticed women were placed in particularly dire circumstances. If they refused to acquiesce to planters, women were jailed and separated from their infants and children. If they labored as expected, they could not be certain that their children would be cared for in their absence. At times, state actors like stipendiary magistrates or the governor were able to alleviate some of their burdens, but depending on their alliances, political affiliations, relationships with planters or inherent biases towards people of African descent, they could not fully be trusted. Unfortunately, these issues did not abate once apprenticeship was finally abolished in 1838. Freedpeople were coerced into accepting questionable labor agreements with planters. If workers refused, they faced eviction from estates.

Conclusion

After legal emancipation was issued in Barbados, freedpeople looked forward to a new society filled with economic opportunities beyond that of agricultural labor. Instead, they met an unyielding determination on the part of planters to bind them to sugar estates. The Barbados legislature, largely composed of sugar planters, implemented policies to secure their control over the labor market while thwarting the socio-economic gains awarded to freedpeople by the imperial government. Though all types of laborers were affected by these policy changes, it was the plantation workers who were left in the most precarious position. In 1838 the legislators of Barbados passed the *Masters and Servant Act* which later became known as the *Contract Law*.²⁹⁴ This controversial legislation declared that any worker who provided planters with five days of continuous labor was understood to be attached to that estate for one year.²⁹⁵ The worker was allowed to reside in one of the cabins the planter provided. If the workers refused the agreement, they faced homelessness, fines, and in some cases jail time. Any worker who terminated a contract prematurely was required to vacate the plantation premises. In addition to outlining terms of labor, the Contract Law also addressed appropriate codes of conduct for the working classes. If workers were deemed

²⁹⁴ Hilary Beckles, *A History of Barbados From Amerindian Settlement to Caribbean Single Market* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 148.

²⁹⁵ Beckles, *A History of Barbados*, 148.

insubordinate or disorderly, they could be ejected from their home and the plantations without compensation and imprisoned.

The new laws confounded workers of African descent who were under the impression that once emancipated, they could work whenever and wherever they pleased. For example, after the workers Nelson, Austen, and Diana, among others, were evicted from the Windsor estate in St. George's parish, they appealed to Governor MacGregor for assistance. During their meeting, the governor realized that the workers did not fully understand the terms of their new contracts, so he explained the necessary details to them. The workers deliberated amongst each other and "expressed their desire to be permitted to remain on the estate to work for 5 days a week agreeably to the manager's proposal."²⁹⁶ According to the governor, the workers "have acted under erroneous impressions" and requested that their employer, Mr. Sharp, "have the goodness to allow them to return to their accustomed labour, it being desirable (until the working classes shall have obtained a clearer insight into the nature of their new position) to act towards them with a every possible degree of lenity."²⁹⁷ It is possible that the workers feared destitution and agreed to the labor agreement Mr. Sharp proposed. But the details of the case are unclear. It is evident, however, that the workers possessed

²⁹⁶ *Letter from Felix Bedingfeld, Private Secretary to William Sharp Esq., 21 August 1838, General Magistrate and Assistant Court of Appeals, Barbados Department of Archives, St. James, Barbados.*

²⁹⁷ *Letter from Felix Bedingfeld, Private Secretary to William Sharp Esq., 21 August 1838, General Magistrate and Assistant Court of Appeals, Barbados Department of Archives, St. James, Barbados.*

limited options as there were no guarantees that they could secure employment on another plantation or in urban towns like Bridgetown or Speightstown.

Workers of Barbados were at the mercy of the planters and estate managers in the post-emancipation era. They were entirely dependent on them for subsistence. Any infraction made workers liable to face eviction from the plantations on which they labored and lived. In June 1839, a worker named Nanny, of the Chancery Lane Plantation in Christ Church parish, was instructed to leave the estate after she tried to hold the manager accountable for promises made at the time a labor agreement was initially formed.²⁹⁸ In a feeble attempt to make labor contracts more attractive to workers, many planters promised to allocate a portion of estate land for them to cultivate on their own time. But several planters found ways to deny workers the assurances they were promised, and magistrates failed to hold them accountable. Verbal contracts between workers and employers were difficult to enforce: planters could easily lie to magistrates and other persons of authority regarding the terms of their agreements.

In addition to dealing with questionable labor contracts and threats of eviction, many workers were inadequately compensated for their labor or cheated of their payment altogether. In Spring 1839, the laborers of the Greenland estate in St. Andrews

²⁹⁸ Letter from Joseph Garraway, Acting Private Secretary to S.W. Waith Esq. Police Magistrate Christ Church, 8 July 1839, General Magistrate and Court of Appeals, Barbados Department of Archives, St. James, Barbados.

parish stopped working “in consequence of the non-payment of wages for services performed during the previous week.”²⁹⁹ News of this incident led the governor to instruct the police magistrate of St. Andrews to visit the Greenland estate to gather information so that he could properly assess the case. The matter does not appear to have been resolved. Twenty-five laborers of the Greenland property traveled to Bridgetown in June to complain about the non-payment of their wages.³⁰⁰ Sometimes workers would be able to leverage power by securing meetings with the governor as a group. It is much more difficult to ignore a group of disgruntled people than an individual. This was one of many tactics workers employed after apprenticeship to subvert planter authority.

Two years after the end of apprenticeship, conflicts over wages and labor terms were so pervasive in Barbados that legislators decided to modify the Contract Law. Now, labor contracts were shortened to one month instead of one year. In addition, workers were required to pay their employers rent to occupy their cabins which amounted to roughly one-sixth of their wages. In the words of Hilary Beckles, “This law, therefore, transformed the free wage worker into a ‘located’ plantation tenant.”³⁰¹ As a “tenant”, the workers had to labor exclusively for the estate where they lived. In return,

²⁹⁹ Letter from Joseph Garraway, Acting Private Secretary to Mr. Rocuch Esq. Police Magistrate, 3 May 1839, General Magistrate and Assistant Court of Appeals, Barbados Department of Archives, St. James, Barbados.

³⁰⁰ Letter from Joseph Garraway, Acting Private Secretary to Mr. Rocuch Esq. Police Magistrate, 14 June 1839, General Magistrate and Assistant Court of Appeals, Barbados Department of Archives, St. James, Barbados.

³⁰¹ Beckles, *A History of Barbados*, 149.

employers provided reduced rent on the cabins and allocated a section of land for provision grounds.³⁰² Workers tried their best to make a suitable living out of meager conditions. Some workers traveled from estate to estate in search of different forms of labor that promised higher wages or promoted an improved quality of life. But again, much depended on the means and the generosity of the planters. The workers were stuck between a rock and a hard place. Their options were limited. This tenancy system remained in effect in Barbados until the Contract Law was repealed in June 1937.

Life after the termination of apprenticeship was anything but easy and fair for freedpeople in Barbados. They faced an uphill battle trying to hold employers accountable for promises made on and off the plantation. At times, state actors like stipendiary magistrates or the governor were able to alleviate some of their burdens, but depending on their alliances, political affiliations, or inherent biases towards people of African descent, they could not be trusted fully. Thus, laboring men and women worked individually and collectively to combat the planter elite who maintained a stronghold over the island's economy and politics of Barbados well into the twentieth century.

³⁰² Beckles, *A History of Barbados*, 149.

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Biography

Kristina A. Williams was born in Brooklyn, New York on September 28, 1989. She received her bachelor's degree in Africana Studies in 2012 from the State University of New York at Binghamton and her master's degree in the social sciences from the University of Chicago in 2014. After joining the history department at Duke University in Fall 2015, Williams has received several fellowships and awards, including the Latin American and Caribbean Studies Fellowship, the Brown-Nagin Graduate Fellowship, and the International Dissertation Research Travel Award. She was also awarded the Richard S. Dunn Dissertation Fellowship at the McNeil Center for Early American Studies at the University of Pennsylvania.

Williams co-organized *In Freedom's Name: Rethinking Caribbean Emancipations Conference* with Dr. David Barry Gaspar and Dr. Michael Becker in April 2017. She was co-chair of the Hurston-James Society from 2018-2020, a graduate fellow of the MicroWorlds Lab from 2019-2020, and a co-founder for the Working Group on Slavery, War, & Gender at Duke University.