

Background information:

Rebels and runaways

Slave-owners in the Caribbean feared and resented their workers' capacity for resistance. Physical resistance took many forms, including absenteeism, escape, murder and mass rebellion.

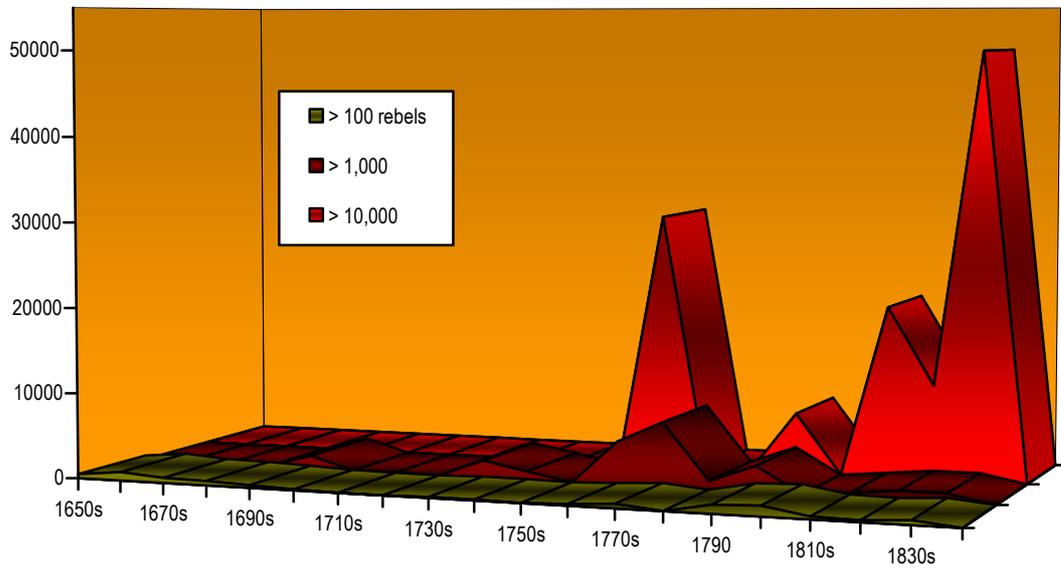
Absenteeism was rife. Newspaper advertisements for runaways show that people escaped from slavery every day. Some disappeared for a short time, to visit family and friends enslaved elsewhere. But others fled permanently, blending in with the free black and coloured communities of the towns, or heading for the hills to join self-governing communities of escaped slaves called Maroons.

Maroon communities existed wherever there were hilly tracts of jungle that could not be cleared for plantation crops. They were especially strong in Jamaica, St Vincent, Dominica and Guyana. Often the escaped slaves joined forces with surviving Amerindians to create self-sufficient communities that excelled in jungle survival and warfare.

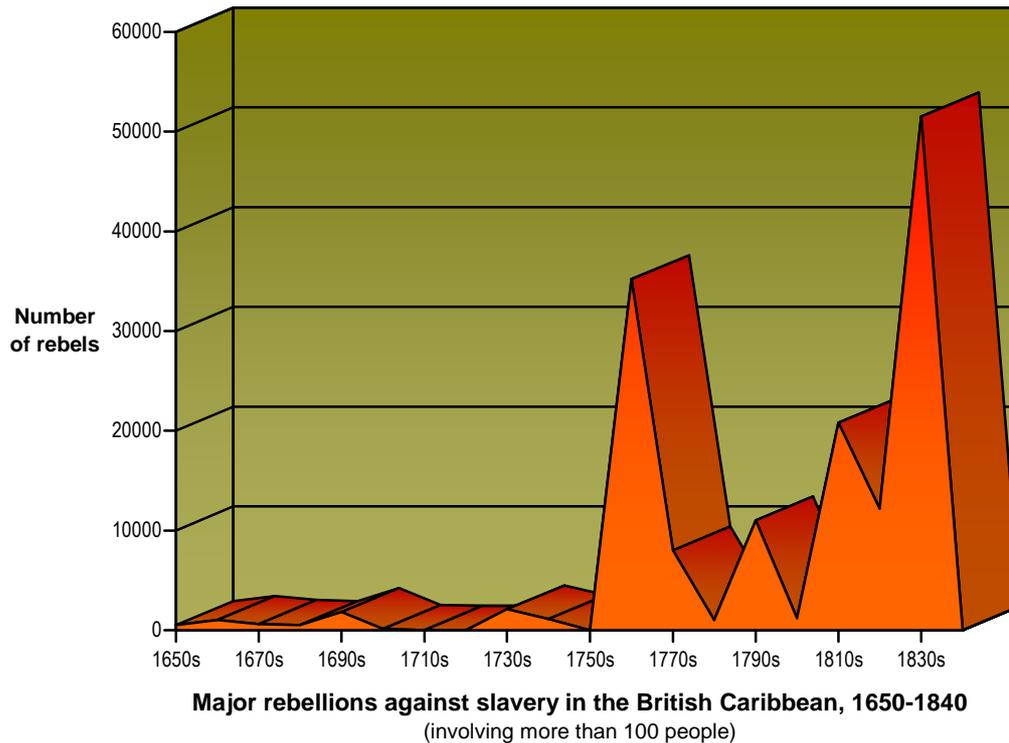
For decades Maroons raided plantations, carrying off weapons, provisions and new recruits. After years of damaging warfare, the British in Jamaica and St Vincent signed peace treaties with them, acknowledging their right to live independently. In return, however, the Maroons agreed to hunt down new runaways and return them to British authority. They had won their freedom, but could not defeat slavery itself.

Neutralizing the Maroons did not end the planters' fears. A few were poisoned or cut down by vengeful slaves, but it was the large uprisings that shook slavery to its foundations. There were massive rebellions in Barbados (1816), Guyana (1823) and Jamaica (1832).

Slave-owners crushed them brutally, but their savagery sickened onlookers and helped turned public opinion in Britain against slavery.



Rebellions per decade in the British Caribbean, 1650-1840
(shown according to size of rebellion, from hundreds to thousands of participants)



Fighting for freedom

People resisted slavery through subversion, escape and armed rebellion. African-born slaves led the early rebellions. They won most supporters from their own ethnic or linguistic community, such as Akan-speakers from Ghana. But from about 1750, people who had been born into slavery in the Caribbean fomented rebellion too. They could reach a wider audience than the African-born slaves and they rallied thousands to their secret cause.

The planters used the British army to crush the biggest rebellions. They also hired African soldiers and former runaway slaves to hunt down rebels. Their justice was unforgiving. Over 200 years, thousands of the most brave and resourceful people in the Caribbean were hanged, burnt, shot or tortured to death for daring to oppose slavery.

Maroons: This was a group of enslaved people who had broken free to live in remote places. They fought guerrilla style wars first against the Spanish and then the British rulers of Jamaica. After the British failed to overcome them, they established the first free black nation in the New World in 1739.

One important Maroon invention is the 'Gumbe' drum, a square skin drum that looks like a stool laying on its side. It was made at a time when drumming was banned on many plantations. When the Maroons were finally given the rights to return to Africa at the end of the 18th century, they took their drum with them. The gumbe went on to have a huge impact on West African popular music.

Slave Revolts: Music played an essential role in the slave revolts. Song was a way to spread secret messages amongst the enslaved, and music was an important way of maintaining self esteem and motivation in the face of oppression.

-What influences have there been on music as a result of the slave trade over the last two centuries?

-What music do you listen to today that has its influences from Africa or the Caribbean?

-Can you trace the roots of a popular style of music back over the last 200 years?