

Markus, King of the Woods

...“In the 1830’s about thirty maroons led by “Markus, King of the Woods” roamed the forested highlands above the plantation lands of St. Kitts, some having been absent from their estates for as long as six years. They had firearms and occasionally raided lowland plantations...

On August 1, 1834, slavery became apprenticeship...On St. Kitts the newly apprenticed populace engaged in a massive work stoppage to resist a lack of complete freedom and ‘rioted’ for almost three weeks. The former slaves knew that total freedom had been granted on Antigua, two planters on St. Kitts had granted complete freedom, and the rumour spread on St. Kitts that although “the king” had actually declared freedom, it was being withheld by the local planters. A majority of the workers left their estates, many withdrawing into the hills. Potential islandwide revolt was imminent, a situation well beyond the control of the local military detachment at Brimstone Hill, which was separated from Basseterre by poor roads.

Governor MacGregor of the Leeward Island declared martial law on St. Kitts on August 6 and sent a naval force from Antigua. By this time most of the fieldworkers had departed to the hills. British Troops and the local militia retaliated by burning huts and, forming a long skirmish line, swept through the forested hills in order to “encourage” striking estate workers to return to the plantations below. Some of those fleeing the estates had apparently joined the maroon leader Markus, by now an accused murderer whose capture was considered vital to the restoration of order. The resistance was over by August 18, when martial law was terminated by on Kitts. Miraculously, no one was killed during the uprising or executed in reprisal, although several instigators were whipped and five were exiled to Bermuda. The period of apprenticeship then lasted until 1838 on both islands in an atmosphere of relative tranquillity.”

*[Extracted from Caribbean Migrants
by Bonham Richardson (1983)]*

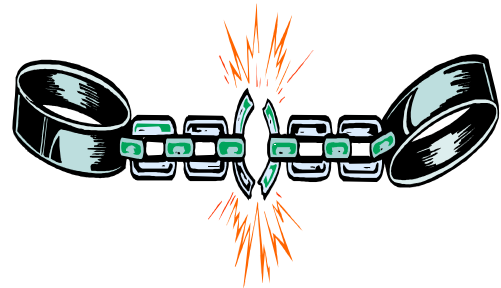


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BREAKING

THE

CHAINS



Slave

Resistance

And Revolt

On

St. Kitts

There is a persistent myth that African slaves docilely accepted their condition, and many of us believe that there were no attempts in St. Kitts by slaves to escape their forced servitude. The following recounts the earliest revolt, the first in the islands, when a band of sixty men escaped with women into the mountains of St. Kitts.

AFRICAN SLAVE REVOLT IN ST. CHRISTOPHER 1639



“While awaiting the return of M. Aubert, Governor de Poincy (*French Governor of St. Kitts between 1639 and 1660*) found plenty to occupy him in the island of St. Christopher. Towards the close of 1639 slave insurrections broke out in the Capesterre section. Negroes angered by the brutal treatment meted out to them by their masters, fled to the woods on the slopes of Mt. Misery with their women and children, where they established a sort of headquarters for raids on the planters. To put an end to these disorders, De Poincy raised a body of five hundred armed men and sent them out to suppress the uprising. It proved to be a not very difficult task, for the Negroes were poorly armed, and though they build a formidable camp high up on the mountainside, their numbers were not sufficiently large to permit them to offer serious resistance. It was not long before most of them were killed in skirmishes, while the rest were captured and hanged, drawn, and quartered to serve as a warning to those who might be tempted to rebel.

There was, however, one Negro, a gigantic fellow, who for three years had eluded capture, carrying on a one-man reign of terror by his murders and serving as a rallying point for the disaffected slaves. He played a lone hand in the forests of Mt. Misery, living apart from his fellow rebels through fear of betrayal by some fugitive who might wish to curry favour with the authorities. Like most leaders of his kind, he was well served by the men of his race who regarded him as the personification of freedom from slavery, and a living threat against their masters. Thus he was kept well informed of what was going on in the settlement. His success in evading all attempts to take him was so amazing the the rumour soon spread abroad that he was aided by supernatural powers.

Governor de Poincy, realising the disturbing influence wielded such a man, determined to kill him or capture him at any cost. For this purpose he detailed some half dozen soldiers and sent them out heavily armed to scour the slopes of Mt. Misery. They were not long in finding their quarry, for the plan of action had been worked out in secrecy to prevent the blacks from getting an inkling of what was going on and therefore they had no opportunity to send word to the rebel. When the Negro came in sight, the soldiers blazed away at him, but strange to say every musket missed fire, and the infuriated African charged on them with his sword, putting the entire band to flight. This amazing incident, as might be supposed, quickly gave rise to the rumour that he possessed certain magic charms against firearms - a superstition that gained popular credence, as this was not the first time he had escaped the bullets of his pursuers. It was necessary, therefore, to strike quickly. The following day De Poincy sent forth another squad, which soon surrounded the man and fired at point blank range without even wounding him. No doubt the marksmanship was deplorable, but the soldiers felt that they had to deal with diabolical powers, and this may have unnerved them when they took aim. At last they closed in on him, and by good fortune the sergeant managed to dispatch him with a bullet through the head - a lucky shot, for, as De poincy said, it is doubtful if a dozen men could have captured him.”

[extracted from “French Pioneers in the West Indies 1624-64 by Nellis Crouse (1940)]