



A division of the Institute of Jamaica

ACIJ/JMB FACT SHEET – THE 1865 MORANT BAY REBELLION

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THE MORANT BAY REBELLION OF 1865

THE PRELUDE TO THE REBELLION

With the British government's passage of the Emancipation Act in 1834, the enslaved population throughout the colonies was granted freedom from working on the sugar plantations, and the right to establish themselves as free persons. However, by the 1860s, there was the growing feeling among the emancipated population that the British government's interest in safeguarding their welfare in Jamaica was waning.

At the beginning of the 1860s, economic conditions in Jamaica were grim as the cost of living soared and unemployment increased. Wages paid to the ex-slaves were also on the decline, dropping from *2s 6d* a day in 1840 to less than a shilling, coupled with irregular payments and heavy taxation. Added to that, flour and salt fish, food that the peasantry relied on, imported from North America since the days of slavery, were scarce and expensive due to the American Civil War. Additionally, old problems persisted, such as the small planters' difficulty in getting land to cultivate. To compound matters further, the island was hit by a series of droughts which devastated most of the provision crops.

MOUNTING DISCONTENT

- Against this background, there was widespread, mounting discontent. The question of colour came into play and many of the ex-slaves began to feel that their plight was being neglected because of their race. They also held the view that the common man was excluded from any share in government because he was black. The electoral registers showed that from a population of almost 500,000, only 20,000 were qualified to vote, which included very few Blacks.
- In 1863, Dr. Edward Underhill, Secretary of the Baptist Missionary Society of Great Britain, paid a visit to the island to observe the conditions that prevailed.
- Based on his observations and first-hand knowledge of the developments in the island, Dr. Underhill wrote a letter to the Colonial Office in February 1865, outlining the depressing conditions of the masses and criticising the plantocracy. His letter was referred to Edward Eyre who was sent from England as acting Governor of Jamaica and became Governor in 1864. Eyre widely publicised the letter and contradicted its charges. This spurred Underhill to call protest meetings in various parts of the island, known as "Underhill Meetings".
- George William Gordon, a Native Baptist Minister, Justice of the Peace (and later National Hero), agreed with Underhill's position and was very interested in the plight of the poor. Gordon held a huge meeting in Kingston in May 1865 and encouraged the masses to make their grievances known.
- Meanwhile, a number of peasants in St. Ann drafted a petition to Queen Victoria which they sent to Eyre, complaining of their poverty (heightened by their unemployment, low wages, and the prevailing drought), and their desire to acquire some of the idle Crown lands to cultivate sugar, coffee and other crops for export. Eyre forwarded the petition, along with his unsympathetic comments, to the Colonial Office and received in reply the famous "Queen's

Advice” which read in part, ‘... the prosperity of the labouring classes ... depended ... upon their working steadily and continuously at times when their labour is wanted and for as long as it is wanted...add prudence to industry, ... lay by an ample provision for seasons of drought and dearth ... It [is] only from [your] own industry ... [that you] can look forward to an improvement in [your] condition. ’

- Eyre was pleased with this response. In this letter from the Queen, the labouring classes were encouraged to engage in hard work to overcome their difficulties, and look to themselves to improve their condition. Eyre had 50,000 copies of this advice printed and distributed throughout the island.
- The peasants were very hard hit and angered by the alleged Queen’s response to their situation. Some felt that she had deserted them; others feared that slavery would be re-introduced. George William Gordon urged the people to air their grievances as the truth would soon be told.
- With the widespread anger grew a spirit of unrest, especially in the parish of St. Thomas-in-the-East, where it centred around Paul Bogle of Stony Gut, a deacon in the local Native Baptist Church, a friend of Gordon, and later a National Hero. Bogle and other peasant leaders in Stony Gut protested against the Queen’s reply. They were further vexed by the administration of justice in the courts in Morant Bay and consequently abandoned the official law courts to set up their own parallel court, appointing justices and constables. Like the people of St. Ann, they were also worried about their economic future and livelihood.
- Gordon encouraged Bogle and his men to make a final report to Governor Eyre. According to oral tradition, they walked 45 miles from Stony Gut to Spanish Town to see him but to no avail; the Governor refused to meet with them.
- Bogle heard that the militia were preparing for a confrontation with the peasantry. Consequently, he too began preparation for a potential struggle. He also held secret meetings in Stony Gut, recruited and trained men and encouraged them to stick together as Blacks.



George William
Gordon

EVENTS LEADING TO THE REBELLION ON OCTOBER 11

- On October 7, Bogle arrived at the Morant Bay courthouse to watch the trial of one of his followers. A man interrupted the court proceedings and the police tried to arrest him but some of Bogle's men prevented the police from doing so and carried him away.
- Back in Stony Gut, Bogle learnt that warrants were issued for his arrest and 21 of his men for rioting and resisting and assaulting the police. Three days later, the police arrived to arrest Bogle but he protested and 250 persons came to his rescue. They tied up the police and threatened them with death. When released, the police went back to Morant Bay and reported what happened to the Custos who asked the Governor for military aid.
- On October 11, the Vestry held a meeting with all the local magistrates and planters to discuss the matter. The militia was also invited in case of further trouble. Word had spread that the people of Stony Gut were planning to air their grievances forcibly and the Bath Volunteers were called out for reinforcement.



Paul Bogle

THE REBELLION

- Around midday on October 11, Bogle and upwards of 200 of his men headed for Morant Bay, along with some followers from neighbouring districts. Armed with sticks and cutlasses, they raided the police station at Church Corner, took some muskets and bayonets and poured into the square before the courthouse at about 2:30 pm. Meanwhile, there was a terrible uproar, the blowing of horns, conch shells, fifes and the beating of drums.
- The Custos and other Vestrymen came out onto the porch of the building to placate the angry mob. The Custos cried for peace and the magistrates urged him to read the Riot Act as the crowds approached.
- Someone threw a stone at the Volunteer Captain which cut his head. As a result, an order was given and the Volunteers outside the courthouse opened fire. Seven rioters died in the gunfire, and in retaliation the mob killed and wounded many of the Volunteers, while others retreated.

- The crowds then attacked the courthouse and neighbouring buildings and set them on fire. The Custos and 15 other persons (including Vestrymen and Volunteers) lost their lives the attack.
- The situation escalated. Pandemonium broke loose and Morant Bay was overtaken by rioters and looters; the jail was broken open and the prisoners freed.
- Meanwhile, Bogle went back to Stony Gut and held a prayer meeting, giving thanks to God for his new-found victory, then began planning for the future.
- War was at hand as disorder spread to other areas of St. Thomas-in-the-East. On October 13, martial law was declared in the county of Surrey, except in Kingston. The Maroons assisted the government to counteract the situation and the rioters were either defeated or scattered.

THE SUPPRESSION OF THE REBELLION

- The Governor alleged that Gordon's agitation caused the riots and issued a warrant for his arrest. When Gordon heard about this he went to Headquarters House on Duke Street and handed himself over to the Governor. Governor Eyre decided that he should be tried in St. Thomas as martial law was in force there and turned Gordon over to Captain Ramsay, the Provost Marshal, to try him for treason, sedition and his affiliation with persons in the rebellion.
- On Saturday, October 21, Gordon was tried, found guilty and sentenced to hang. The following Monday, he was hanged outside the ruins of the courthouse.
- On the day of Gordon's hanging, Bogle was caught by a band of Maroons as he emerged from a canepiece near to Stony Gut. On October 23, Bogle was tried by court martial and hanged, also outside the burnt-out courthouse.
- The rebellion was quelled within a week; however, martial law was extended to the end of November, long after the revolt was suppressed. Meanwhile, Governor Eyre set about organising a reign of terror in Morant Bay, with atrocities unleashed against the peasantry. Prisoners arrested in connection with the uprising were hanged or flogged for the slightest reasons and without much evidence.
- By the end of the year, over 430 men and women were shot or executed by court martial, 600 men and women flogged, and over 1,000 cottages and houses destroyed.

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