

THE LIFE AND WORK OF THE RT. EXCELLENT SAMUEL SHARPE, NATIONAL HERO OF JAMAICA

Samuel Sharpe was born enslaved, but his owner, after whom he was named, took a special liking to him and allowed him to learn to read and write. However, despite his luck, he considered it degrading to be owned by another human being.

Sharpe grew up in the Montego Bay area when persons in Britain were trying to reveal the evils of enslavement and to pass the law in the British Parliament to protect enslaved persons from abuse and to make life easier for them. When Sharpe grew to manhood, the British support shifted to the gradual abolition of the system of enslavement.

Members of the non-conformist denominations, particularly the Baptists, were determined in this fight against enslavement. Sharpe became a Baptist and soon became Class Leader in the church, with his goal being the destruction of enslavement and the freedom of every man, woman, and child in Jamaica.



Samuel Sharpe

Sharpe's Fight Against Slavery

By 1830, the fight against enslavement by the British humanitarians, the Abolitionists, and the non-conformist churches had escalated. Sharpe conceived of a non-violent plan to bring about freedom among the enslaved population whereby the majority of enslaved persons would stop working on a certain day and refuse to return to work unless they were paid. He planned that when they started to receive pay, enslavement would end. Using his influence as a Class Leader, Sharpe spread his ideas after prayer meetings on various estates and managed to persuade many of the enslaved and some free persons to support his plan.

There was, however, an alarming turn of events. In 1831, the slave owners were resisting all attempts by the British Government to make conditions easier for the enslaved population and were threatening to hand over Jamaica to the United States, if the British Government tried to abolish enslavement. Sharpe, therefore, worked harder to get the enslaved people to accept his plan of passive resistance and set the date for it to begin after the 3-day Christmas holidays (December 25–27) in 1831. He planned that, on that day, they would all sit down quietly and refuse to work unless they were paid. Sharpe declared that he himself would rather die than continue in enslavement.

However, Sharpe's campaign for freedom attracted a number of militant persons who wanted to demonstrate their determination to end enslavement through violent action. On the night before the great 'sit-down' strike was to begin, some of them broke into a rum store on Kensington Estate, drank

liquor, and set fire to buildings and cane fields. This immediately ended Sharpe's plan for passive resistance. By midnight, 16 other estates in the west were burnt and rebellion broke out. Planters and their families fled, leaving 50,000 enslaved persons suddenly freed. Sharpe moved among the estates, counselling and praying, though he could do very little to control the situation. The rebellion was not subdued until early January by superior military force.

Sharpe gave himself up to the authorities, but he never lost his composure even while imprisoned; he continued praying and preaching to his fellow prisoners.

On May 23, 1832, Sharpe was hanged in the Montego Bay market place. He had admitted responsibility for the 'Christmas Rebellion' and was cleared of any blame. The white missionaries were accused of instigating the rebellion, which was called the 'Baptist War', due to the number of members of that church who were involved.

In a way, Sharpe's execution marked the end of enslavement. The spirit of freedom which his campaign released helped to convince the British Government that the enslaved population in Jamaica would no longer tolerate enslavement. On July 29, 1833, a Bill was passed which provided that enslavement was to cease on August 1, 1834.

Sharpe was conferred with the Order of National Hero in 1975, and a square in Montego Bay, St. James - Sam Sharpe Square - was dedicated in his honour in 1976.



Statue of Samuel Sharpe and his followers in Sam Sharpe Square, Montego Bay.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Jamaica Information Service, *Sam Sharpe* (1982).

Olive Senior, *Encyclopaedia of Jamaican heritage* (St Andrew, Jamaica: Twin Guinep Publishers, 2003), 432.

ACTIVITY

FILL-IN-THE-BLANKS COMPREHENSION TEST

Read the passage above and the sentences below, then unscramble the words and fill in the blanks with the correct answers.

neowr Sam Sharpe was named after his _____.

gotmnoe Sam Sharpe grew up in _____ Bay.

salcs Sam Sharpe was a Baptist and _____ Leader in the church.

aspvise Sharpe worked hard to get the enslaved to accept his plan of _____ resistance.

ghnade On May 23, 1832, Sharpe was _____ in the Montego Bay market place.

ohre Sharpe was conferred with the Order of National _____ in 1975.

reqasu Sam Sharpe _____ in Montego Bay was dedicated in Sharpe's honour in 1976.

Correct answers: owner, Montego, Class, passive, hanged, Hero, Square.

The Words of the Rt. Excellent Marcus Mosiah Garvey

"The Negro who lives on the patronage of philanthropists is the most dangerous member of our society, because he is willing to turn back on the clock of progress when his benefactors ask him to do so."

Source: *The Philosophy and Opinions of Marcus Garvey*. Compiled by Amy Jacques Garvey. Published by Frank Cass and Company Limited (1983), London, England.