

Activity 8. Sam Sharpe and the Jamaican Slave Rebellion (1831)

Source: Richard Hart (2002). *Slaves Who Abolished Slavery*, University of the West Indies Press (<http://www.brh.org.uk/articles/slaves.html>, accessed June 1, 2010).

Background: The 1831 slave rebellion in Jamaica shook the British Empire and led to the abolition of slavery there. Its principal leader was Samuel Sharpe, a literate man and Baptist lay preacher. The rebellion was largely suppressed within two weeks and there is no record of how Sharpe was captured. On April 19, 1832, Sharpe was put on trial, convicted, and sentenced to death. He was hung on May 23, 1832 in the town of Montego Bay, the last of the rebels executed for taking part in the rebellion. Before his death, Sam Sharpe was interviewed by Henry Bleby, an abolitionist and Protestant missionary. Bleby published an account of his interview with Sam Sharpe and Edward Hylton, one of Sharpe's co-conspirators.

Instructions: Read the accounts of Bleby's interviews and answer both sets of questions. As a follow-up activity, write a newspaper-style account of the execution of Sam Sharpe and his legacy.

A. Reverend Henry Bleby's Interview with Edward Hylton

"During the year 1831 (he could not tell the month) he received a message at Mountain Spring from Sam Sharpe, desiring him to meet him on the following Saturday night at the house of Johnson at Retrieve estate in St. James . . . At the time appointed Hylton went to Retrieve, where he met with Sharpe, Johnson, and others whom he named. After they had held a prayer meeting, most of the people went away, Sharpe, Johnson, Hylton and a few more, remained behind: and the party was afterwards enlarged by several others . . . After the lapse of some time, Sharpe rose to address the meeting, speaking in a low, soft tone, that his voice might not be heard beyond the walls of the building . . . He referred to the manifold evils and injustice of slavery; asserting the natural equality of man with regard to freedom; and referring to the holy Scriptures as his authority, denied that the white man had any more right to hold the blacks in bondage than the blacks had to enslave the whites. He concluded by observing, that because the king had made them free, or was resolved upon doing it, the whites . . . were holding secret meetings . . . and had determined . . . to kill all the black men, and save all the women and children, and keep them in slavery; and if the black men did not stand up for themselves, and take their freedom, the whites would put them out at the muzzles of their guns, and shoot them like pigeons. The whole party bound themselves by oath not to work after Christmas as slaves, but to assert their claim to freedom and to be faithful to each other. If 'Buckra [master], would pay them, they would work as before; but if any attempt was made to force them to work as slaves, then they would fight for their freedom.'"

Questions

1. According to this interview with Edward Hylton, how was the slave rebellion planned?
2. What was the original plan proposed by Sharpe?
3. Why did Samuel Sharpe and the others demand an end to slavery?

B. Henry Bleby Describes Meeting Sam Sharpe

"The insurrection . . . was planned by one person, and that individual himself a slave. Samuel Sharpe was the man whose active brain devised the project and he had sufficient authority with those around him to carry it into effect, having acquired an extraordinary

degree of influence amongst his fellow-slaves. I had much conversation with him whilst he was in confinement; and found him certainly the most intelligent and remarkable slave I have ever met with . . . Sharpe acknowledged to me that he had, as an individual, no reason to find fault with the treatment he had received as a slave. His master, Samuel Sharpe, Esq., and the family, were always kind to him, and he had never been flogged beyond the occasional and slight correction which he had received when a boy. But he thought, and learnt from his Bible, that the whites had no more right to hold back people in slavery, than the black people had to make the white people slaves and, for his own part, he would rather die than live in slavery . . . He did not wish to destroy the estates, nor did he desire that any person should be injured: his only object was to obtain freedom. But to his great disappointment he found that the spirit of revolt, once evoked, was not susceptible of control”.

Questions

1. Why was the Reverend Henry Bleby surprised by Sharpe’s role in the rebellion?
2. What was the Reverend Henry Bleby’s opinion of Samuel Sharpe?