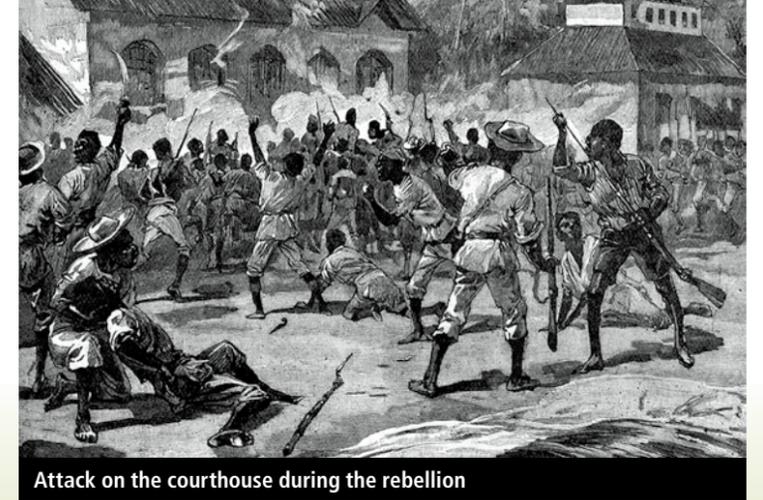


# The Morant Bay Rebellion in Jamaica

A visual exploration of the background to, and events of, this key rebellion by former slaves against a colonial authority



Attack on the courthouse during the rebellion

**Questions**

- What were the causes of the Morant Bay Rebellion?
- How was the rebellion suppressed?
- Was it a riot or a rebellion?
- What were the consequences of the Morant Bay Rebellion?

**The initial attack**

On 11 October 1865, several hundred black people marched into the town of Morant Bay, the capital of the mainly sugar-growing parish of St Thomas in the East, Jamaica. They pillaged the police station of its weapons and then confronted the volunteer militia which had been called up to protect the meeting of the vestry, the political body which administered the parish.

Fighting broke out between the militia and the crowd. By the end of the day, the crowd had killed 18 people and wounded 31 others. Seven members of the crowd died.

In the days which followed the outbreak, bands of people in different parts of the parish killed two planters and threatened the lives of many others. The disturbances spread across the parish of St Thomas in the East.

**Response from the Jamaican authorities**

The response of the Jamaican authorities was swift and brutal. Making use of the army, Jamaican forces and the Maroons (formerly a community of runaway slaves who were now an irregular but effective army of the colony), the government forcefully put down the rebellion. In the process, nearly 500 people were killed and hundreds of others seriously wounded.

**Response from the British authorities**

The nature of the suppression led to demands in England for an official inquiry, and a royal commission subsequently took evidence in Jamaica on the disturbances for nearly three months.

Its conclusions were critical of the governor, Edward John Eyre, and of the severe repression in the wake of the rebellion. As a result, the governor was dismissed. More importantly, the political constitution of the colony was transformed and its 200-year-old House of Assembly abolished.

**Planning the rebellion**

The rebellion was characterised by planning and organisation. At organised secret meetings, oaths were taken and volunteers enlisted in expectation of a violent confrontation at Morant Bay.

**Background to the rebellion**

Like many Jamaicans, both Bogle and Gordon were deeply disappointed about developments since the end of slavery. Although free, Jamaicans were bitter about the continued political, social and economic domination of the whites. There were also specific problems facing the people: the low wages on the plantations, the lack of access to land for the freed people and the lack of justice in the courts.

Faced with an unyielding government and ruling class, Bogle and his allies saw no solution to their grievances. They were supported by an African-oriented religion, they believed they had allies in Britain, and the atmosphere in Jamaica was rife with arguments about white oppression of the blacks. Fearful that they might even be re-enslaved, the people marched into Morant Bay.

**After the rebellion**

In the wake of the rebellion, George William Gordon was transferred from civil jurisdiction in Kingston to face a court martial in Morant Bay. Despite little evidence of his involvement in the rebellion, the court martial found Gordon guilty of treason. He was hanged, although not before Governor Eyre approved of the sentence.

Following the rebellion, the 200-year-old House of Assembly voted to change the constitution: it agreed to its own abolition and to the establishment of Crown Colony government. This meant direct rule from London and the end of representative government in the island until well into the twentieth century.

**Key figures**

**Paul Bogle**

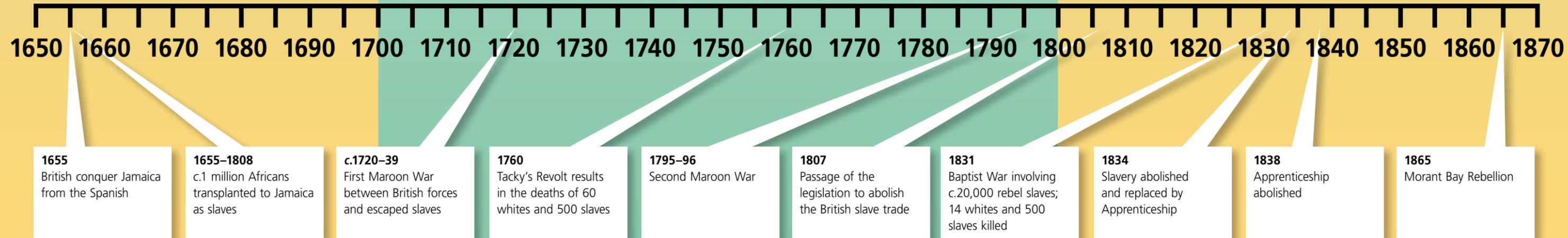
- Leader of the rebellion
- A native Baptist preacher
- Organised the secret meetings
- Election agent of Gordon

**George William Gordon**

- Of mixed race
- A representative of St Thomas in the East in the Jamaican House of Assembly
- A political and religious radical and an opponent of the governor

**Edward John Eyre**

- British-born, white governor of Jamaica
- Former Australian explorer
- Former governor in New Zealand and several Caribbean island colonies



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