
The Morant Bay Rebellion and Cainhoy Riot

Racial Authenticity and Emancipation in Comparative Perspective

ADAM THOMAS

Abstract

This article compares the killing of Charles Price by black peasant-labourers during the Morant Bay Rebellion in Jamaica (1865) with an attack by black Republicans on Martin R. Delany during the Cainhoy riot in South Carolina (1876). Despite being recognized as physically black, Price and Delany were considered racially inauthentic by assailants because of perceived allegiance with white supremacists. The article shows that constructions of race in post-slavery societies often extended beyond biology to include conduct and association, and that a micro historical comparative approach focused on perceived endpoints of emancipation processes reveals overlooked similarities between Jamaica and the United States of America.

Racial identity was a matter of life and death during Jamaica's Morant Bay Rebellion. On 11 October 1865, hundreds of black peasant-labourers marched on the town's courthouse, where the parish vestry of St Thomas-in-the-East sat in session. This political body had become a symbol of oppression, a tool of the white plantocracy that maintained a stranglehold on the island's judiciary, franchise, and political office. A battle ensued between the protesters and a volunteer militia called to defend the vestry, the plantocracy and, in effect, the island society's status quo of racial oppression. In the aftermath, Charles Price was taken prisoner. A master carpenter and former member of the House of Assembly, he was recognized as black based on his physical appearance. But he had, in the words of the Jamaica Royal Commission report, "by his abilities raised himself to a position in life superior to that of most of his race". His captors attributed this elevation to a different cause. Despite his racial identity, Price had aligned himself with the white elite