
The Caribbean Career of John Willis Menard

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Abstract

The emigrationist beliefs of his early political career led African American poet and journalist John Willis Menard to Belize and Jamaica in the mid-1860s, where he was caught up in the events surrounding the Morant Bay Rebellion of 1865 and deported back to the United States. Menard's long subsequent career as a writer, US federal employee, editor, and politician can only be properly understood by seeing his sojourns in Louisiana and, especially, in Florida as intimately connected to his Caribbean experiences. His poetry, family history, and his connections to African American and Cuban rebels are analysed in this Caribbean context.

Like many others in eastern Jamaica at the time of the Morant Bay uprising in 1865, John Willis Menard was swept up in the harsh state suppression that followed the days of revolt. As Clinton Hutton, Gad Heuman and others have shown, although the African American poet, writer, and teacher Menard was not involved in the planning or the events at the courthouse in Morant Bay in October 1865, his close association with vestryman and activist Samuel Clarke led the authorities to detain Menard at Up Park Camp in Kingston with other political prisoners and then deport him from the island to the United States.¹ The rebellion and its aftermath, then, cut short Menard's personal emigration to Jamaica, where he had settled in St David parish, married a Jamaican woman, Elizabeth, and begun a family. His life and career after 1865 appear to fit within African American, rather than Caribbean or African diaspora history. Most notably, he became the first African American elected to the US Congress (from New Orleans during Reconstruction in 1868, although he was never allowed to take his seat), a prominent state politician and newspaper editor in Florida in the 1880s, and one of the better known African American poets of the nineteenth

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