CAMBRIDGE
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ORIGINAL MANUSCRIPT

Fire in Jamaica, 1831–32

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Abstract

Fire is a material and social process that is different in different periods and places. This article examines the fires set during the largest, and last, uprising of the enslaved in Jamaica, which occurred in the island's western parishes after Christmas 1831. It argues that different sorts of fire were central to processes of production and everyday life under plantation slavery, and examines what the burnings of 1831–32 reveal about the fight against enslavement in the early nineteenth century. A close reading of the records of the trials that followed the uprising details the methods used to burn plantations; the decisions over what to burn and what to save; and the contested social and political relations involved in encouraging or extinguishing the flames. This demonstrates that fire was a material means of creative destruction for the rebels that turned the everyday practices of commodity production and coerced social reproduction against the plantation infrastructure; that destroying buildings by fire both denied and made claims on the land, and sought to remake the Jamaican landscape for other forms of inhabitation; and that the collectivities forged through fire were inevitably shaped by both shared endeavors and tensions within and between groups of plantation inhabitants facing an uncertain future. Overall, it seeks to understand the use of fire in the 1831–32 uprising to fight for freedom as part of a "politics of habitation."

> "Il est cuisine et apocalypse."
> Gaston Bachelard.[1]

When the plantation buildings were set on fire at Kensington, in St. James parish, on the evening of 27 December 1831 it signaled a remaking of the world of Jamaican slavery. The flames began the largest uprising of the enslaved in Britain's Atlantic empire, mobilizing tens of thousands of people in work stoppages, armed conflict with the militia and the military, and extensive incendiarism. Concentrated predominantly in the island's western parishes—the late eighteenth-century sugar frontier and the locus of Baptist missionary activity—the "Emancipation War" acted on the rumor that British politicians, pushed by the abolitionists, had declared an end to slavery, but that Jamaica's planters were preventing its realization. Sit-down strikes, taking up arms, and plantation burning aimed to force the issue, and bring freedom to the enslaved. After some initial success, the uprising was crushed by early 1832. Hundreds of enslaved people were killed in the fighting and by summary execution: 627 were put on trial, more than half of whom were

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[1] Gaston Bachelard, *La Psychanalyse du Feu* (Paris, 1938), 24.

executed.[2] However, their determination and the planters' bloody vengeance demonstrated to parliament and to the British public that slavery could only continue through increasing violence against enslaved people, often fellow Christians, who would never accept it. In this way, the events that started with a small flame at Kensington played their part in ending slavery. As Eric Williams put it, "the alternatives were clear: emancipation from above or emancipation from below. But EMANCIPATION."[3]

The 1831–32 uprising has been seen as the final chapter in a long history of collective resistance to slavery in the British Caribbean.[4] Yet this is not simply a matter of continuity. Mary Reckord's (later Turner) and Michael Craton's influential and longstanding analyses of these events emphasize their novelty. For Reckord, 1831–32 demonstrates a new "political maturity," an attempt by the enslaved "to establish their right to sell their labour for wages."[5] For Craton, Jamaica's uprising is to be grouped with those in Barbados (1816) and Demerara (1823) as "late slave revolts" that happened in the context of trans-Atlantic political debates over abolition, but, most importantly, signaled the "proto-peasant" aspirations of the enslaved: a search for economic, social, and cultural autonomy based on smallholder food production, for use and sale, and limited engagement in wage labor.[6] Both arguments emphasize the uprising's Baptist leadership—particularly that of Samuel Sharpe—and rest upon their calls for a strike to force the planters to accept emancipation and time-limited wage labor.[7] While both Craton and Reckord were concerned with the relationship between the non-violent and militarized tactics of the rebels, they pay little direct attention to what was the predominant feature of the uprising for the majority of its participants: fire.

The burning of slave-owners' property was a central component of the 1831–32 uprising. Fire-setting is a material practice that was in this historical context difficult to undertake and thus necessarily a collective act of resistance. By not taking fire for granted and instead asking who set the fires, how they were set, what was burned, what was saved, and how the fires spread between plantations, the specific meanings and implications of incendiarism can be discerned. Focusing on fire reveals the rootedness of the revolt in the everyday routines of plantation life and suggests that burning was an intervention in a broader politics of habitation. This particular challenge to the ways of living under slavery was a matter of denying white planters and their waged employees a place to live and a right of habitation. It was also a claim made on the island's land and landscape that was grounded in longstanding collective dwelling in specific places by those who attempted to use fire to free themselves from slavery. The fires of Jamaica in 1831–32 illuminate the relationships among individuals, collectivities, and place, and suggest the alternative futures enslaved people imagined for their island.

Fire and Slavery

In Jamaica there was no sugar without fire. After cutting and milling the cane, its juice had to be quickly transported to the boiling house. There, under the watchful eye and careful touch of experienced enslaved artisans, it was crystallized in a series of copper vessels set over fires of wood and cane trash (dry stalks and leaves). These were regulated by "[t]he

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[2] Michael Craton, *Testing the Chains: Resistance to Slavery in the British West Indies* (Ithaca, 1982), 291–321; Mary Turner, *Slaves and Missionaries: The Disintegration of Jamaican Slave Society, 1787-1834* (Kingston, 1982), 148–78.

[3] Eric Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery* (Chapel Hill, 1994), 208.

[4] Hilary McD Beckles, "The 200-Years' War: Slave Resistance in the British West Indies, an Overview of the Historiography," *Jamaican Historical Review* 13 (January 1982): 1–10.

[5] Mary Reckord, "The Jamaica Slave Rebellion of 1831," *Past & Present* 40 (July 1968): 108–25, at 123.

[6] Michael Craton, "Proto-Peasant Revolts? The Late Slave Rebellions in the British West Indies, 1816–1832," *Past & Present* 85 (November 1979): 99–125. On early nineteenth-century ideas of slaves as peasants, see Padraic X. Scanlan, "Slaves and Peasants in the Era of Emancipation," *Journal of British Studies* 59, no. 3 (July 2020): 495–520.

[7] This begins with Henry Bleby, *Death Struggles of Slavery* (London, 1853).

almost incessant cries of the boilerman for more fire, or up and down with the cooler, bawled in a stentorian voice through a long bamboo tube to the fireman."[8] By the early eighteenth century most large plantations used the "Jamaica train," a single imported iron furnace and flue used to heat multiple coppers.[9] A hundred years later there were also 132 Boulton and Watt steam engines in the sugar islands. Their fireboxes produced motive power for cane mills that had previously used draught animals.[10] Taken together, these contained and controlled fires burned at the heart of what Sidney Mintz called "factories in the field."[11]

After boiling, the sugar was transferred to conical clay pots in the curing house where a "gentle fiere" helped dry it.[12] The molasses that dripped from the pots was taken to the still house where enslaved distillers needed to "keep up an equal, and not too violent, fire" beneath the still to ensure the rum was clear of the "milky tinge" and "disagreeable flavour" that would condemn it as "still-burnt."[13] Elsewhere, enslaved coopers and other woodworkers used fire to smoke-dry wood for hoops, wattles, and laths, to bend staves or make wheels, and to render casks watertight.[14] Enslaved blacksmiths worked with fire, iron, copper, and water to keep the plantations running.[15] Fire was essential to plantation production. For the planter-historian Edward Long, a Jamaican plantation was "a tract of three hundred acres compleatly settled, and duly apportioned in canes, provision, pasture and grass, waste, and wood for fire and repairs."[16]

Fire was also essential to the everyday life of those enslaved in Jamaica, both in terms of the social reproduction of labor and the practicalities of just staying alive. It was necessary for cooking the starchy foods that dominated enslaved workers' diets: plantains, pigeon peas, and yams.[17] Periodic burning also kept the provision grounds of the enslaved productive.[18] Fire was necessary for making ceramics; for turning some plants into remedies; for smoking tobacco; for lighting with nut-oil lamps; for providing warmth on cold nights or high ground; and for warding off mosquitoes. Long suggested that "white persons" in Jamaica might learn from the "custom of the Negroes" to "keep up a constant fire in the center of their principal room or hall" at night for the sake of their health. While enslaved people had various ways of making fire, it was easiest to keep a home fire burning, or to share fire with others.[19]

Fire made violence and fear central to plantation slavery. Branding used specific materials, intense modulated heat, and applied pressure to inflict pain, commodify people, and mark recaptured fugitives.[20] Blacksmiths forged and closed shackles, leg-irons, and other instruments of restraint and torture. Those who resisted, particularly collectively and with force, might be burned to death with "slow fire" in a terrifying spectacle of suffering.[21]

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[8] *Marly: Or, A Planter's Life in Jamaica* (Glasgow, 1828), 39; Justin Roberts, *Slavery and the Enlightenment in the British Atlantic, 1750–1807* (Cambridge, 2013), 230–33; Louis P. Nelson, *Architecture and Empire in Jamaica* (New Haven, 2016), 119.

[9] J. H. Galloway, "Tradition and Innovation in the American Sugar Industry, *c.* 1500–1800," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 75, no. 3 (September 1985): 334–51.

[10] Maxine Berg and Pat Hudson, *Slavery, Capitalism and the Industrial Revolution* (Cambridge, 2023), 130.

[11] Sidney Mintz, *Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History* (New York, 1985), xxiii.

[12] David Buisseret, *Jamaica in 1687: The Taylor Manuscript at the National Library of Jamaica* (Kingston, 2008), 256.

[13] Edward Long, *The History of Jamaica [...]*, 3 vols. (London, 1774), 1:445, 2:565.

[14] Long, *History of Jamaica*, 3:704, 753–54.

[15] Jenny Bulstrode, "Black Metallurgists and the Making of the Industrial Revolution," *History and Technology* 39, no. 1 (2023): 1–41.

[16] Long, *History of Jamaica*, 2:228.

[17] Judith A. Carney and Richard Nicholas Rosomoff, *In the Shadow of Slavery: Africa's Botanical Legacy in the Atlantic World* (Berkeley, 2009).

[18] *An Act for the Subsistence, Clothing, and the Better Regulation and Government of Slaves*, Jamaica (1816) 57 Geo. III cap. 25, LXVI.

[19] Long, *History of Jamaica*, 2:510, 3:757–58, 712.

[20] Katrina H. B. Keefer, "Marked by Fire: Brands, Slavery, and Identity," *Slavery & Abolition* 40, no. 4 (2019): 659–81.

[21] Vincent Brown, *The Reaper's Garden: Death and Power in the World of Atlantic Slavery* (Cambridge, MA, 2008), 140.

Enslaved people also had their wood and thatch houses torched as punishment.[22] But fear and flame ran both ways, and Jamaican fires always cast the flickering shadow of arson. The island's first slave code made the "burning of houses or canes" a capital crime along with "murder, burglary and robbery on the high way."[23] This mirrored William Blackstone's equation of burglary and arson in English law, but added the racialized threat of "rebellious conspiracies" and "compassing or imagining the death of any white person."[24] Fire was, indeed, a chosen weapon of the weak in the continual war over slavery. There were overt burnings and arson disguised as accidents. Flames pervaded slaveholders' nightmares.[25] These Caribbean fires were part of a wider incendiarism that regularly destroyed cities in the early nineteenth-century American South and marked waves of agricultural protest in both southern Britain in the 1830s and 1840s and across the British empire.[26]

Yet these broad comparisons belie fire's particular histories and geographies. Accounts of wildfire, urban fire, and the Anthropocene's flaming earth show that fires burn differently. This is a matter of materiality and meaning—what fuels the flames and what fire signifies—and it recognizes that fire is not a thing but a process. Fire burns differently depending on what is burning, the conditions under which it burns, how far it is contained or allowed to spread, and how serial fires are distributed in space and time.[27] The fires of 1831–32 in Jamaica were, therefore, historically and geographically contingent. The intensity, extent, and targets of the fire-setting, and the ways in which fire was spread between plantations, signal differences between the events of 1831–32 and the uprisings of the mid-eighteenth century. The uses of fire and its meanings to those who deployed it as a form of resistance to slavery in early nineteenth-century Jamaica thus require explanations that are rooted firmly in this time and place.[28]

As with all such uprisings, the primary documentary evidence for the use of fire in Jamaica during 1831–32 comes from the enslavers' archives. There is a counter-archive of abolitionist and missionary accounts, but the main sources are the copies of the trial records that the imperial authorities requested from the Jamaican governor following concerns expressed in parliament that the hearings, particularly the courts martial, had not followed proper legal procedures.[29] These documents have not received as much attention as the often less extensive archives of other episodes of resistance or the prison cell "confessions"

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[22] As on the Rozelle plantation in the early nineteenth century; see Alex Renton, *Blood Legacy: Reckoning with a Family Story of Slavery* (Edinburgh, 2021), 196–98.

[23] The National Archives (hereafter TNA): CO139/1, *An Act for the Better Ordering & Governing of Negro Slaves* [Jamaica, 1664], fols. 66r–69v, at 68r.

[24] William Blackstone, *Commentaries on the Laws of England: Book IV* (Dublin, 1770), 220–23; *The New Act of the Assembly of the Island of Jamaica … Commonly Called, The New Consolidated Act* [1788] (London, 1789), 21.

[25] Catherine Hall, *Lucky Valley: Edward Long and the History of Racial Capitalism* (Cambridge, 2024), 30.

[26] Jason T. Sharples, *The World That Fear Made: Slave Revolts and Conspiracy Scares in Early America* (Philadelphia, 2020); Daniel Immerwahr, "Burning Down the House: Slavery and Arson in America," *Journal of American History* 110, no. 3 (December 2023): 449–73; Robert Kuhlken, "Settin' the Woods on Fire: Rural Incendiarism as Protest," *The Geographical Review* 89, no. 3 (July 1999): 343–63.

[27] For example, Stephen J. Pyne, *World Fire: The Culture of Fire on Earth* (Seattle, 1997); Nigel Clark, "Fiery Arts: Pyrotechnology and the Political Aesthetics of the Anthropocene," *GeoHumanities* 1, no. 2 (2015): 266–84; Mike Davis, "The Case for Letting Malibu Burn," *Environmental History Review* 19, no. 2 (Summer 1995): 1–36; Daniel Immerwahr, "All That is Solid Bursts Into Flame: Capitalism and Fire in the Nineteenth-Century United States," *Past & Present* (2024): 1–43, https://doi.org/10.1093/pastj/gtad019.

[28] For close readings of eighteenth-century revolts, see Vincent Brown, *Tacky's Revolt: The Story of an Atlantic Slave War* (Cambridge, MA, 2020), 138–39; Marjoleine Kars, *Blood on the River: A Chronicle of Mutiny and Freedom on the Wild Coast* (New York, 2020); and John D. Garrigus, *A Secret Among the Blacks: Slave Resistance Before the Haitian Revolution* (Cambridge, MA, 2023). For differences and similarities between revolts in 1831, see Vanessa M. Holden, *Surviving Southampton: African American Women and Resistance in Nat Turner's Community* (Champaign, 2021); and Adam Thomas, "'A Bargain with His Brother': Kinship in the U.S. and Jamaican Emancipation Wars of 1831," *Journal of Global Slavery* 6, no. 2 (June 2021): 218–47.

[29] TNA: CO137/185/1–4, Slave Rebellion Trials, 1832, fols. 1–926; see also TNA: CO137/183, Item 49, fols. 488r–490v. Martial law was declared from 28 December 1831 to 5 February 1832. For the importance of martial law in Jamaica,

of this revolt's leaders.[30] They have been mined either for statistics on prosecutions or deployed for particular cases.[31] The only book-length account of the revolt primarily uses the trial records to document Samuel Sharpe's prosecution.[32] This is largely because the trials were rapidly conducted, with minimal interrogation of witnesses and defendants. This does not make them unusual for a period where the law was a weapon wielded by the propertied and powerful against the propertyless, and where the proceedings of slave courts routinely demonstrate "white vengeance" rather than justice.[33] Using them thus requires an awareness of how the ever-present threat of execution affected what entered the public record. On the one hand, witnesses and defendants shaped their testimony accordingly, knowing what harm their words could do. On the other, testimony had to be believable, reflecting the expectations about life under slavery of those who heard it.[34]

If these sources are therefore not reliable evidence as to individual guilt, innocence, or intention, they do speak to questions of circumstance, materiality, and social relations. Significantly, the trial records focus on the fires and provide circumstantial evidence about them. Arson was explicitly included in many indictments, and many others took the setting of fires as the key evidence of rebellion. In part this is because the rebels burned the estates, and providing evidence that someone set a fire was easier than proving "rebellious conspiracy." Yet it is also because arson mattered deeply to the planters. For Blackstone it was worse than theft:

> ARSON ... is an offence of very great malignity, and much more pernicious to the public than simple theft: because, first, it is an offence against that right, of habitation, which is acquired by the law of nature as well as by the laws of society; next, because of the terror and confusion that necessarily attend it; and, lastly, because in simple theft the thing stolen only changes its master, but still remains *in esse* for the benefit of the public, whereas by burning the very substance is absolutely destroyed.[35]

Arson in Jamaica challenged the white planters' assumed rights of ownership and "habitation," turned the weapon of fear against them, and destroyed what mattered most to them: property. It is telling that the best-known depictions of the rebellion simply reworked celebratory images of planter property to show it burning.[36] Looking directly into these fires to understand what was burned, how it was burned, and what that burning meant reveals the relationship between fire and freedom for the enslaved in Jamaica in 1831–32.

What Burned?

Planters' claims for compensation provide an accounting of what was burned during the 1831–32 uprising. In his account of the revolt, published in 1835, the former army officer

see Lisa Ford, *The King's Peace: Law and Order in the British Empire* (Cambridge, MA, 2021), 100–36. For the counter-archive, see Gelien Matthews, *Caribbean Slave Revolts and the British Abolitionist Movement* (Baton Rouge, 2006).

[30] David Barry Gaspar, *Bondmen and Rebels: A Study of Master-Slave Relations in Antigua; with Implications for Colonial British America* (Baltimore, 1985); Verene Shepherd and Ahmed Reid, "Rebel Voices: Testimonies from the 1831–32 Emancipation War in Jamaica," *Jamaica Journal* 27, nos. 2–3 (December 2004): 54–63.

[31] Craton, *Testing the Chains*; Turner, *Slaves and Missionaries*; Edward B. Rugemer, *Slave Law and the Politics of Resistance in the Early Atlantic World* (Cambridge, MA, 2018), 291–94; Cedric B. Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (London, 1983), 161.

[32] Tom Zoellner, *Island on Fire: The Revolt That Ended Slavery in the British Empire* (Cambridge, MA, 2020), 157–59.

[33] Reckord, "The Jamaica Slave Rebellion," 120; Bleby, *Death Struggles of Slavery*, 36. On the cursory nature of contemporary British capital trials, see Vic Gattrell, *Conspiracy on Cato Street: A Tale of Liberty and Revolution in Regency London* (Cambridge, 2022). See also Diana Paton, "Punishment, Crime, and the Bodies of Slaves in Eighteenth-Century Jamaica," *Journal of Social History* 34, no. 4 (2001): 923–54.

[34] Sophie White, *Voices of the Enslaved: Love, Labor, and Longing in French Louisiana* (Chapel Hill, 2019). More generally, see Marisa J. Fuentes, *Dispossessed Lives: Enslaved Women, Violence, and the Archive* (Philadelphia, 2016).

[35] Blackstone, *Commentaries on the Laws of England*, 4:220.

[36] Elizabeth A. Bohls, "Adolphe Duperly's Rebellion Prints and the Historical Moment of Emancipation," *Atlantic Studies* 19, no. 1 (2022): 107–27.

Table 1. Buildings burned in St. James parish, Jamaica, 1831–32 (Source: Senior, *Jamaica*, 279–83)

Residence burned	Works burned	Trash houses burned	"Negro houses" burned	Number of properties	Average number of people enslaved on those properties
•	•		•	34	280.3
•	•			10	178.4
•			•	5	68.2
•				49	31.1
	•		•	1	339
		•		4	196
				103	**121.1**

and Jamaican plantation owner Bernard Martin Senior reproduced figures from the Jamaican Assembly for all losses incurred (totaling £1,111,628 8s 9d), and gave details of which sorts of buildings were burned for St. James parish (Table 1). St. James suffered the most damage. More than twice the number of properties were recorded as burned there than in either Hanover or Westmoreland, the next worst affected parishes. The damages claimed for St. James comprised 55 percent of the total.[37]

Of the 103 named properties recorded as burned in St. James, ninety-eight had the residences on them damaged or destroyed. In forty of these cases sugar-processing infrastructure, known as the "works," was burned as well. A suspiciously small number of cases (only four) record the burning of trash houses (fuel stores), suggesting they were accounted for as part of the works. In 80 percent of cases when the works were burned, the "negro houses" were too. Most of these fires would have been set in retaliation by the militia or the military, but the perpetrators are not recorded. Overall, therefore, on half the properties recorded as affected in St. James—49 out of 103—only the residence was burned. The figures recorded for the number of people enslaved on those properties gives an average of 31.1 people, against an average of 121.1 people on all 103 affected properties, and show only two properties holding more than a hundred enslaved people. In contrast, the average size for the forty-five properties where the works were burned was 218.2 people, around seven times greater. Of these only six held less than a hundred enslaved people.

These patterns are readily explained. Only the larger properties, the sugar estates, had works to burn.[38] The complexes of mills, boiling houses, and still houses were only present on these larger estates, and the rebels burned them when they could. There were only four large estates where the house was burned but the works were not, and only one estate where the works were burned and the house was not. On the smaller properties, many of which were livestock-raising pens or "mountain" properties, there were no works buildings to burn.[39] Overall, therefore, in most cases the rebels burned the buildings that were there to burn. In retaliation, the "negro houses" were burned on the larger estates.[40] Then, when the flames died down, the planters claimed as much compensation as they could.

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[37] Bernard Martin Senior, *Jamaica, As It Was, As It Is, And As It May Be* (London, 1835), 279–87. For Senior, see www.ucl.ac.uk/lbs/person/view/2146634888.

[38] Named "Estates" in Senior's list; see B. W. Higman, *Slave Population and Economy in Jamaica, 1807–1834* (Cambridge, 1979), 31.

[39] Those referred to as "Penns" (N=14) held an average of 63.8 enslaved people. Senior listed smaller properties as "Plantations." Verene A. Shepherd, *Livestock, Sugar and Slavery: Contested Terrain in Colonial Jamaica* (Kingston, 2009).

[40] The forty properties on which "negro houses" were burned held an average of 209.5 enslaved people. Only three held below fifty people.

However, where this pattern was not followed, and the properties also appear in the trial record, the contingencies of these burnings come into view. At Lima Estate, where only the trash house was burned, a witness said that this was the work of a boy named Cuffy, who had acted alone.[41] At Unity Hall, a property with 149 enslaved people where only the residence was recorded as having been burned, Thomas Bailey, Richard Stewart, and George Bucknor were said to have been convinced "not to burn the mill house and boiling house as it will be useful to them if the Country came good."[42] These examples, and fuller accounts of the uprising on particular plantations, are a reminder that the fires were a process.[43] What was burned, and how it was burned, in each case depended on what was there to set fire to, how the fire itself might be started, who was intent on setting the fire, what support they had from others, and what opposition they faced to keeping the flame alive. Burning buildings was a practical and meaningful act that required forms of individual and collective action that negotiated both particular material circumstances and specific social relations.

This is reinforced by comparison with other forms of incendiarism. In 1831–32 in Jamaica, 207 properties, especially residences, were recorded as having been burned in around four weeks across an area of about 700 square miles. In rural England's "Swing" protests, 235 fires have been identified across Hampshire, Kent, Surrey, and Sussex for the whole of 1830, with 88 fires in five months in Kent alone. While some of these fires were set in groups, with five farms burning near Canterbury on one night, for example, they were set over a much longer period and a much larger area.[44] The same is true of the wave of arson attacks that took place in East Anglia between October 1843 and December 1844, when there were over 250 fires across Suffolk and Norfolk in fifteen months, with between eight and sixteen fires a week at its peak. In these English cases the aim was to apply pressure on farmers to improve wages and conditions. As David Jones argues, the "targets were usually thatched barns and stacks, threshing machines and furze hedges at some distance from the farmhouse."[45] Even in pre-famine Ireland, fire was a weapon to "demand better treatment of cheap labour" rather than an attack on "landlordism." The burning of the Anglo-Irish gentry's great houses did not come until the early twentieth century.[46] In its concentrated intensity—more akin to warfare than rural protest—and its focus on destroying the residences of the planters and their white workers, along with the sugar estates' industrial infrastructure, fire in Jamaica in 1831–32 had distinctive characteristics.

The fires set during the uprising were a matter of practical material action, collective coordination, and political contestation. Examining how the fires were set, what was burned, and what was saved reveals that conflagration—the spreading of fire—was a social process. Those involved made difficult choices that illuminate the collectivities they understood themselves to be part of, how they imagined what the future could be, and whether they thought fire was the means to bring it about. The actions they took indicate social and political relationships and processes, and suggest both what they understood freedom to mean and what paths they envisaged to achieve it. To understand the meaning of this uprising thus requires emphasizing its rootedness in the materiality of plantation life, the processes

[41] TNA: CO137/185/1, fol. 114v. Properties are in St. James unless otherwise identified.

[42] TNA: CO137/185/2, fol. 246v. They did, however, burn the overseer's house and a trash house.

[43] Richard S. Dunn, *A Tale of Two Plantations: Slave Life and Labor in Jamaica and Virginia* (Cambridge, MA, 2014), 342–53, on Mesopotamia (Westmoreland); B. W. Higman, *Montpelier, Jamaica: A Plantation Community in Slavery and Freedom, 1739–1912* (Kingston, 1998), 264–83.

[44] Carl J. Griffin, "'The Mystery of the Fires': 'Captain Swing' as Incendiarist," *Southern History* 32 (2010): 21–40. Kent alone covers about twice the area affected by the Jamaican uprising.

[45] David Jones, "Thomas Campbell Foster and the Rural Labourer; Incendiarism in East Anglia in the 1840s," *Social History* 1, no. 1 (1976): 5–43, at 14; John E. Archer, *By a Flash and a Scare: Incendiarism, Animal Maiming, and Poaching in East Anglia, 1815–1870* (Oxford, 1990).

[46] Gemma Clark, "Arson in Modern Ireland: Fire and Protest Before the Famine," in *Crime, Violence and the Irish in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. Kyle Hughes and Donald MacRaild (Oxford, 2019), 211–26, at 219.

of place-claiming that burning involved, and the tensions between intensely local forms of collectivity based on the plantation and the wider connections that this form of resistance depended upon.

Firestarters

How were the fires set? How were flame and fuel combined to burn plantations? Since there was always a domestic fire burning somewhere, it was easiest to transport the flame with some sort of "firestick": a durable, flammable (but not too flammable) medium. Enslaved firestarters brought firesticks from their own houses, from the "negro houses" more generally, from the yaws house and the kitchen, or with them from other plantations.[47] In a few cases fires were started by carrying a "fire coal" or by using a candle,[48] or firestarters asked or forced other people to provide the fire.[49] Fire could also be carried between burning buildings. John Bowling on Friendship estate was seen to "take the fire from the Trash house, which already burnt down and put it to the Still house," and "after he set fire to the Still-House he carry fire stick to the Boiling house & put fire to the Boiling house—which was burnt down with the Still House & Mill-house."[50] Sometimes one burning building simply spread fire to others.[51]

However, burning a plantation building was not as straightforward as the testimony often suggests. The crucial point was when the fire "caught" and needed no further intervention. Achieving this required flammable material and attention to where the fire was set. The most common fuel was "trash" from cane, plantain, or corn. The waste materials that usually fueled plantation capitalism could be used against it. Trash houses burned most easily, and trash was also stored elsewhere, such as in the loft of the still house at Worcester where Nathaniel Brown took "a fire Stick and poke[d] it under the Corn Trash ... and it Blazed up, and the House was burnt down—it then caught the Boiling [House], Curing House, Mill House and all were burnt down."[52] Trash could also be used to start fires elsewhere.[53] Some trash was better than others for this purpose. At Anchovy, George Miller used the bookkeeper's "bed Trash" to burn his house down, and "the trash they packed Master's liquor" in, presumably finer than other sorts, to set fire to the great house.[54] William Stennett used "dry Grass" to burn Moor Park house.[55]

Firestarters used their knowledge of the materiality of the plantation to destroy what their labor, skills, and know-how had previously built. Roof shingles could be ignited using burning trash or a firestick in situ, in storage, or by moving them elsewhere.[56] They might be burned whole or split to make better kindling. At Leogan, William Appleton asked Thomas Hislop for the "Shavings" from the shingles he was chopping to get the fire going.[57] There was other knowledge of firestarting available, demonstrating African or Amerindian connections. Virgil, on Moor Park, "broke an Ant's Nest and set fire to it, and then he took it and set fire to the [Overseer's] House." Inside this "Duck Ant" (termite) nest was a ball of friable material ideal for burning.[58] More commonly, fire setting relied on domestic materials. Some used paper, either "Old Waste paper" or larger quantities

[47] TNA: CO137/185/1, fols. 114v, 119v, 176v; TNA: CO137/185/2, fols. 246r, 287v, 382r, 401v.
[48] TNA: CO137/185/2, fols. 356v, 406v–407r; TNA: CO137/185/3, fol. 536v.
[49] TNA: CO137/185/1, fols. 106r, 216r; TNA: CO137/185/2, fol. 409v.
[50] TNA: CO137/185/1, fol. 154r; see also TNA: CO137/185/2, fols. 266r, 381v.
[51] TNA: CO137/185/2, fol. 266r.
[52] TNA: CO137/185/2, fol. 394r.
[53] TNA: CO137/185/1, fol. 152v, see also fol. 106v.
[54] TNA: CO137/185/2, fol. 349r, see also fol. 320r.
[55] TNA: CO137/185/2, fol. 365r.
[56] TNA: CO137/185/2, fols. 203r–v, 250r, 383r, 401v.
[57] TNA: CO137/185/2, fol. 320v; see also TNA: CO137/185/1, fols. 156r, 203v.
[58] TNA: CO137/185/2, fol. 366r–v. For uses of termite nests in kilns, see Augustin F. C. Holl, "Early West African Metallurgies: New Data and Old Orthodoxy," *Journal of World Prehistory* 22, no. 4 (December 2009): 415–38.

from the offices where the plantations were managed.[59] Others employed the stuffing from an "Old Hair Mattress" or a "Pad," also called "Trash pads" (bedding stuffed with dried plant material).[60] At Anchovy, William Plummer cut up some osnaburgs (rough linen textiles for clothing the enslaved) and used them to burn down the overseer's house.[61] Furniture was also repurposed as firewood. This might mean setting fire to a press (a free-standing cupboard), a sideboard, a sofa, a mahogany bed, or a chopped-up "Old Bedstead."[62] At Vaughanfields Pen, it was the fire that Prince made "in the Corner of the Room by the Bed Head" that burned the house down.[63] In the storerooms and works, barrels burned well, particularly those containing rum or tar. Indeed, rum could be an accelerant.[64] At Unity Hall, "they drew some Rum out of the Puncheon in the Store and Wm Richards put fire to the Rum[,] the Rum blow up & catch fire & set the Overseer's House on fire."[65]

Everyday domestic and artisanal knowledge was used to turn fixtures and fittings into fuel. It was the distinctive features of the Jamaican "Creole house" that burned best: the shingled roofs; the wooden piazza, or veranda; the window shutters or blinds, known as jalousies; and the "Cooling Shade."[66] Like the sash windows at Moor Park, which William Sennett smashed with a hammer, all might be broken to help them burn.[67] Attention was also paid to where the fires were set. They were started in the "Counting House" or office—"the place Master Writes"—or in the dining room, the Master's bedroom, or the buttery.[68] Flames were deliberately set under wooden staircases to ignite the upper floors.[69] James Dodd at Anchovy set his fire "Close to the pillar in the Trash House," and George Miller put burning trash "between the new house & the corner of the [overseer's] Pantry where the houses joined & … both the Houses were burnt down."[70] At Stapleton, the shingles of the overseer's house were ignited by putting fire "on the Beam close to the Roof of the House."[71] At Cambridge, William Bowen "put the fire in the little Piazza between the Curing House and Boiling House and the whole were burnt down."[72]

Even with these elements in place, success often required further action. This might involve blowing on the fire stick or the nascent fire to coax a flame from the glowing materials. At Seven Rivers, Martin Williams from Hazelymph was said to have "stooped down & put the fire & blew the fire until it catch & he stop'd there till the House was half burnt down before he moved off."[73] It might require several attempts, and different materials, to get a fire going. For example, at Tulloch Castle:

> William take up papers and put upon the side board & throw Rum upon it & William put fire to it & it would not burn good … prisoner went down in the Buttery and take up a Calabash and take up some Rum and put upon the fire upstairs the fire did not catch good—he go down again in the Buttery & take out more Rum and throw upon the

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[59] TNA: CO137/185/2, fol. 273r; see also TNA: CO137/185/1, fol. 197v; TNA: CO137/185/2, fols. 274r, 365v.

[60] TNA: CO137/185/1, fol. 197v (Pad); TNA: CO137/185/2, fols. 273r (Trash pads), 365r, 370r (Old Hair Mattress), 553v; Samuel Johnson, *A Dictionary of the English Language*, 2 vols. (London, 1785), 2: PAD.

[61] TNA: CO137/185/2, fol. 410r–v.

[62] TNA: CO137/185/1, fols. 121v, 197v; TNA: CO137/185/2, fols. 277r, 370r (Old Bedstead).

[63] TNA: CO137/185/2, fol. 325v.

[64] TNA: CO137/185/1, fols. 124v, 149r; TNA: CO137/185/2, fols. 356v, 365v.

[65] TNA: CO137/185/1, fol. 206r.

[66] Nelson, *Architecture and Empire in Jamaica*, 187–217; TNA: CO137/185/1, fol. 123v; TNA: CO137/185/2, fols. 367v, 398r (Cooling Shade), 410r–v.

[67] TNA: CO137/185/2, fol. 365v, see also fols. 274r, 320v.

[68] TNA: CO137/185/1, fol. 202v (quoted); TNA: CO137/185/2, fols. 325r, 349v, 410r, 415r.

[69] TNA: CO137/185/1, fol. 197v; TNA: CO137/185/2, fols. 277r, 348r.

[70] TNA: CO137/185/2, fols. 292r, 348v, 404r.

[71] TNA: CO137/185/2, fols. 401v–402r, see also fols. 269r, 291r.

[72] TNA: CO137/185/2, fol. 377r.

[73] TNA: CO137/185/2, fol. 274r; see also TNA: CO137/185/1, fols. 149v, 216v; TNA: CO137/185/2, fols. 366v, 377r; TNA: CO137/185/3, fol. 620r.

paper in the Buttery to make it burn—when the fire catch he fall back and take up a rock stone and throw it at the Puncheon…—the House was burnt down.[74]

Setting fire to buildings took time, know-how, and the right elements: it took various forms and combinations of agency.[75] Prosecutors primarily sought to locate that agency with individuals, and defendants and witnesses were compelled to respond. For example, Nelson's evidence against David Gordon of Spring Park Estate denied his own involvement in a way he hoped the court might accept. He stated that "they gave me fire to burn Moy-hall house. I told them I did not know how to do it, they took Guns and Matchetts and struck me."[76] Such evidence, as well as recognizing fire-starting as a skill, chimed with the Jamaican authorities' ideas of leadership and influence based on workplace hierarchies.[77] While whole estates were declared to be in rebellion, only a handful of people on each were prosecuted. This was not justice or humanity but planter rationality. Such selectivity terrorized everyone without destroying the labor force. Those prosecuted were almost all men, among whom the "slave elite"—drivers and artisans—were disproportionately represented.[78] Despite their role in the revolt, only two women were convicted of arson in St. James. Jinny was executed for setting fire to the trash house at Kirkpatrick Hall. Kitty Scarlett did the same at Cambridge and threatened to burn the works. Her death sentence was commuted to transportation.[79] Women were either not seen as leaders of the uprising, or their reproductive labor was valued more highly than making an example of them on the scaffold.[80]

For some, in court the motivation was stated to be individual, even personal, denying the uprising's systemic attack on plantation slavery. Kitty Scarlett had been refused her Christmas allowance after an accusation of theft, and she had said she would not return to work.[81] At Spring Garden, William Jarrett burned the trash house and asked James Harris to help him burn the Hot House, saying "that is the place where Master and Busha [the overseer] punish me."[82] As this example suggests, however, in most cases fire-starting was a collective act.[83] The court heard, and solicited, evidence about who directed the burnings. Rebecca Waite, a free woman, testified that at Mr. Greenwood's, James Bernard "ordered two boys to put the fire here & put the fire there, pointing with his finger to the small house, prisoner & the Boys went into the large House and put fire to the house & it was burnt down."[84] Prosecutors were keen to identify those active on the plantations, the leaders of mobile groups of rebels, and to discover the role of enslaved Baptist preachers. For example, Richard Gillespie, who ordered the burning of Mr. Rickett's house, was identified as both "a Captain of Summer Hill people," armed with pistol and sword, and a Baptist "ruler."[85]

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[74] TNA: CO137/185/1, fol. 154v.

[75] On the problems of "agency" in studies of slavery, see Walter Johnson, "On Agency," *Journal of Social History* 37, no. 1 (Autumn 2003): 113–24. For "distributed" forms of agency, see Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (Oxford, 2007).

[76] TNA: CO137/185/1, fol. 119r.

[77] Randy M. Browne, *Surviving Slavery in the British Caribbean* (Philadelphia, 2017), 72–101.

[78] Craton, *Testing the Chains*, 318.

[79] TNA: CO137/185/1, fols. 220r–221r; TNA: CO137/185/2, fols. 238r, 255r; Verene Shepherd, "Women in Sam Sharpe's Army: Repression, Resistance, Reparation," eighth Sam Sharpe Lecture, London, 22 October 2019, www.youtube.com/watch?v=qU7la-zbhsM.

[80] Aisha Finch, "'What Looks Like a Revolution': Enslaved Women and the Gendered Terrain of Slave Insurgencies in Cuba, 1843–1844," *Journal of Women's History* 26, no. 1 (Spring 2014): 112–34; and Sasha Turner, *Contested Bodies: Pregnancy, Child-Rearing and Slavery in Jamaica* (Philadelphia, 2019).

[81] TNA: CO137/185/2, fol. 255r.

[82] TNA: CO137/185/2, fol. 382v.

[83] For example, TNA: CO137/185/1, fols. 156r, 162r; TNA: CO137/185/2, fol. 410r, where William Plummer (Anchovy) "said he wanted to burn [the overseer's house] down before but he had no one to help him…."

[84] TNA: CO137/185/1, fol. 208r, see also fols. 157v, 207v, 214r.

[85] TNA: CO137/185/1, fol. 174v.

Facing a murderous legal system, some prisoners as well as witnesses like Nelson swore that their involvement was coerced. September testified that he told Thomas Linton "that Capt[ain] Dehany had told him … that if he did not burn the Horse Guards he would take his life."[86] George Philip's defense was that "he was sleeping in his house when William Archibald came & wake him & told him to put fire to the Trash house—that if he did not that he would chop him."[87] Inevitably, the question of coercion was a matter of interpretation. Witnesses gave conflicting versions of whether they agreed with Success, an enslaved man, that he had been "forced" by Quamine, the head boilerman, to set fires at Sunderland.[88] Significantly, this case shows that these interpretive conflicts could matter to judicial decisions when planter "justice" might still be served. Success was given fifty lashes rather than being executed, probably because Quamine was in custody. Similarly, George Sawyer, who was found guilty of setting a fire at Hermitage, was discharged "considering that the prisoner did so under the impression of fear from Wm Bowen," who was executed.[89]

Overall, therefore, fire-starting in Jamaica in 1831–32 predominantly involved the deployment of everyday domestic, agricultural, or artisanal knowledges and practices—of the kitchen, the hearth, the great house, and the boiling house or smithy—rather than being part of Atlantic world military knowledge or practice.[90] It turned the creolized tools of production and the materials and skills of everyday life to the task of destroying plantation infrastructure. While the courts sought individual punishment, albeit to bring collective terror, the difficult act of fire-starting was almost always a collective one structured by the power-laden hierarchies and ways of living with others on the plantation. Burning buildings, giving evidence, and ascribing agency were all shaped by the social and political relations of the plantation and the lives enslaved people had made with each other in those places. What this meant for ideas of freedom can be glimpsed in the choices made over what was burned and what was saved from the flames.

Burnings

Burning was meaningful as an act of "creative destruction."[91] After William Dodd set fire to the Bogue Estate he "made a flourish and said he had done the Job."[92] It was also reported that when Martin Williams burned Seven Rivers "he seemed quite rejoiced to do it," and that William Dickson was "blowing Shell for joy" as Montpelier Farm went up in flames.[93] Others, and not just the planters and pen-keepers, saw things differently. Mary Birch, of Leogan, told the court that when her brother, Thomas Hislop, helped burn the great house, Thomas Smith had said "House him feel pain for and it day burn."[94] These differences meant there were decisions and conflicts over what to burn and what to do with what was saved from the flames.

The burning of buildings was particularly significant to both the rebels and their prosecutors. While cane field fires do appear in the trial record, they are incidental to accounts of plantation works and houses set aflame.[95] It is also clear that the intention was to destroy infrastructure not to kill people. Only fourteen white people died during the revolt.[96] Most

[86] TNA: CO137/185/1, fol. 155r–v. Horse Guards was Mr Bowen's "Mountain House."

[87] TNA: CO137/185/1, fol. 219v; see also TNA: CO137/185/2, fols. 375v, 385v.

[88] TNA: CO137/185/1, fol. 218r.

[89] TNA: CO137/185/1, fols. 218v, 224r.

[90] Brown, *Tacky's Revolt*; John K. Thornton, "African Dimensions of the Stono Rebellion," *American Historical Review* 96, no. 4 (October 1991): 1101–13; Manuel Barcia, *West African Warfare in Bahia and Cuba: Soldier Slaves in the Atlantic World, 1807–1844* (Oxford, 2014).

[91] Brown, *The Reaper's Garden*, 57, calls the Jamaican sugar economy's consumption of human life "one of history's greatest episodes of creative destruction." Creativity should also be recognized in the destructive responses of the enslaved.

[92] TNA: CO137/185/1, fol. 202v.

[93] TNA: CO137/185/1, fol. 156r; TNA: CO137/185/2, fol. 273v.

[94] TNA: CO137/185/1, fol. 165v.

[95] TNA: CO137/185/1, fols. 117v, 220r; TNA: CO137/185/2, fol. 250r.

[96] TNA: CO137/185/1, fol. 59r.

owners, overseers, bookkeepers, and their families fled to Montego Bay as soon as they could. Those who remained were usually "directed" to leave their houses before the buildings were burned.[97] As Ann Pearce, of Content in Hanover, testified:

> They took Mʳ Pearce [the overseer] out of the House and had some conversation with him, Mʳ Pearce then came into the House and told me that the Prisoners [Joseph Brissett and James Scott] promised protection to myself & children and requested that he would leave the place as his presence prevented them from doing what they wished to do. They also told me to make myself easy as they would protect me. They also told Mʳ Pearce that they intended to burn down the Works.[98]

Nobody was reported to have died in any fire.

In most cases movable property was taken from the buildings before they were torched. Enslaved people took what the masters and overseers had denied them: food, drink, clothing, furniture, and some domestic comforts.[99] They took mattresses and pillows from Whitehill; a mattress, a chest of clothes, and tables from Moor Park; and a bed from Unity Hall overseer's house.[100] In many places the stores, often under the houses, were broken open and the contents redistributed.[101] At Anchovy, "They were all fighting to take Saltfish and every thing out of the Stores."[102] At Levyom, they took rum and sugar, but also "some Turkies."[103] At Moor Park it was "Saltfish[,] Sugar, [and] Rice"; and at Wiltshire, a barrel of flour.[104] At Kensington Penn, Jonathan Dunbar was spotted with "a Bottle of Champaign" in his hand; at Worcester, Thomas and Daniel Dehany rolled home a puncheon of rum.[105] Some of this was for immediate consumption. At Bogue estate, "after the House was on fire," John Mattick "went into the Garden, & made use of Master's Liquors."[106]

Evidence was given that people, including free people of color, had saved their own things, and even those of the masters or their white employees.[107] There are indications that some forms of "property" were not to be burned. Success, who set the fire at Sunderland, "took all the Coopers tools and put them into a Basket & gave them to a Girl named Ellen to keep."[108] In contrast, at Wiltshire, Thomas Fowles, the head carpenter, saw his workshop burn and was annoyed that John Clarke "did not give Witness notice before he set fire to the house so that he might have saved his tools."[109]

By contrast, some things were targeted for destruction. Elizabeth Harding, a free person of color, was asked for her aunt's belongings by Thomas Richardson. He and two others then broke open the "Aunts Chest, and took out every thing—also the papers in it, and tore them up, saying they did not want to see papers as papers would ruin them." He set them and the house on fire.[110] Another witness reported Richardson declaring that "Paper do them enough." This sense of the power of writing, and of the cartographic images produced by surveying, to document, organize, oversee, and enforce bonded labor may have animated

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[97] TNA: CO137/185/1, fol. 77v; TNA: CO137/185/2, fol. 246r–v.

[98] TNA: CO137/185/3, fol. 477r.

[99] Roderick A. McDonald, *The Economy and Material Culture of Slaves: Goods and Chattels on the Sugar Plantations of Jamaica and Louisiana* (Baton Rouge, 1993).

[100] TNA: CO137/185/1, fols. 120r–v, 160r, 210v; TNA: CO137/185/2, fol. 246r.

[101] TNA: CO137/185/1, fol. 218r.

[102] TNA: CO137/185/2, fol. 410r.

[103] TNA: CO137/185/1, fol. 150v.

[104] TNA: CO137/185/1, fols. 161r, 176v.

[105] TNA: CO137/185/1, fol. 211r; TNA: CO137/185/2, fol. 389r.

[106] TNA: CO137/185/1, fol. 203v, see also fol. 179r.

[107] TNA: CO137/185/1, fols. 104r, 197r–v, 199r–v.

[108] TNA: CO137/185/1, fol. 218r.

[109] TNA: CO137/185/1, fol. 176r.

[110] TNA: CO137/185/1, fol. 177v.

the fire-starting in estate offices and the tearing of maps from their frames at Adelphi.[111] At Moor Park, Adam certainly "told the men to take away the papers from [Charley]—& put them in the fire—that they were all Masters for themselves—they no have no Master again."[112]

There was a desire to get something from the upheaval: a little sweetness or a hit of alcohol, a bit more sustenance or comfort. Yet everyday objects were meaningful too, and their acquisition spoke of freedom. After Sam Griffiths killed the old planter John McDonald and burned his house, he "took the Shoes off McDonald's feet and put them on his Own and said 'No Man can brag and say I get free and have not Killed a White Man.'"[113] In Westmoreland, John Linton celebrated burning Argyle Estate in a similar way. He "took a pair of shoes from [the] great house, … & said 'I have done a great deal of good this morning at Argyle & shall not walk away barefooted'."[114] For the shoeless, shoes were a sign of freedom and power.[115] There was meaning to the "plunder." It could be a free for all. At Hermitage, William Bowen "said if there was anything good in the House—witness [William Clarke] was welcome to come & take it."[116] At Anchovy, Charles Strahan was frustrated by what the lack of plunder signified about the willingness of those enslaved there to rise up, saying "Damn those nasty Negroes on the estate them no want any thing belong to their Master. Else they would have moved them. D--- me I will put fire to it," and he did.[117]

There were more collective forms of redistribution too. Jonathan Dunbar was said to have "ordered Massa's people to take things out of the House [at Kensington]—the furniture & other things; after taking the things out of the House they shared them among themselves."[118] It was testified of Alexander Gow, Castle Wemyss estate's head driver, that as well as organizing the inhabitants to block the roads "to prevent the White people from coming there," and arranging guards "preventing other people from coming to destroy the place," he got the keys and "took every thing out of the Store and shared amongst the people." Binding the estate together in its own defense, "he had the Bushas Poultry & hogs Killed & made a dinner for the Negroes in the Mill House."[119] Here the self-liberated turned a site of life-sapping sugar production and the meagre provisioning characteristic of slave diets into a space of self-defense and communal control over the right to provide bodily sustenance beyond bare life.

In support of this Gow also contemplated burning buildings: "he said before the Busha should come back & get any benefit from the Estate he would burn it down."[120] Once again, this was a form of creative destruction, a regeneration of the land and landscape through fire. To burn the plantation down—the vernacular term was "burnt down smooth" or "smack smooth"—meant to erase some uses and make the place ready for others.[121] At Bona Vista Pen, Elizabeth Sawyer reported that only the great house and pantry were destroyed, and "they said they burnt the House because they had no master again."[122] At Flint River in Hanover there were "nightly meetings at Daniel Gardiner's House, consulting

[111] TNA: CO137/185/1, fols. 158r, 178r; TNA: CO137/185/2, fol. 366r–v; B. W. Higman, *Jamaica Surveyed: Plantation Maps and Plans of the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries* (Kingston, 1988); Caitlin Rosenthal, *Accounting for Slavery: Masters and Management* (Cambridge, MA, 2018).

[112] TNA: CO137/185/1, fol. 160v.

[113] TNA: CO137/185/2, fol. 364r.

[114] TNA: CO137/185/3, fol. 540r.

[115] Douglas F. Mann, "Becoming Creole: Material Life and Society in Eighteenth-Century Kingston, Jamaica" (PhD diss., University of Georgia, 2005), 155.

[116] TNA: CO137/185/1, fol. 222v.

[117] TNA: CO137/185/2, fol. 287v.

[118] TNA: CO137/185/1, fol. 210v.

[119] TNA: CO137/185/2, fols. 328r–v, 329v.

[120] TNA: CO137/185/2, fol. 328r.

[121] TNA: CO137/185/1, fols. 156r, 164r, 205v, 216r.

[122] TNA: CO137/185/2, fol. 367r.

about fireing and their Freedom."[123] At Sunderland, Blacque Lawrence "said the reason he set the fire [was] because free for we."[124]

These fires aimed to deny particular people a place to be. George Lawrence burned the bookkeepers' barracks at Worcester because "that was where the White people were going to be harboured."[125] In Westmoreland, James Green travelled from Enfield to burn Clontarf, and "bawled out very loud that he was going to burn and would burn down every Great House and White persons house he could."[126] In St. Elizabeth, it was said that "they make them Swear On the Bible at Ginger Hill that they must burn down all the Properties. Buckra [white people] have no Law for them."[127] Accordingly, at Moor Park, Thomas, who helped burn the newly built bookkeepers' housing, "said no Buckra should live in these Barracks again," and Virgil, who set fire to the great house, was "heard [to] say that they burnt the place to make the White people go off the country."[128] In retaliation the militia burned the enslaved out of their homes. Those who had risen at Moor Park also debated whether they would allow "brown people" to live on the property or should burn the buildings they might inhabit.[129] Significantly, those who destroyed the slaveholders' habitations contemplated using their remnants to (re)build their own. As Edward Parnther put it, expressing a distinctly practical philosophy of what fire had wrought, "what is masters house but mortar and stones[?]"[130] The fires were intended to displace those who claimed the land for white ownership and plantation capitalism and open it up to something new.

There were deliberations over which buildings to burn that hint at desired futures. At Flint River in Hanover, burning the boiling house, still house, and overseer's house was an extension of strike action, preventing a return to work.[131] Eliza Mason heard one of the large party at Prospect in Westmoreland say that "they were fighting for their privileges & that they were all going down to burn the Blasted Estates, and do away with all the sugar works, it was them that kept them from their freedom."[132] In contrast, as noted earlier, Joe Payne claimed he confronted the rebels at Unity Hall and "told them not to burn the mill house and boiling house as it will be useful to them if the Country came good."[133] More broadly, at Chesterfield, Alexander Milne "told all of us not to burn anywhere because we would require the Houses ourselves when Buckra left the Country," and, perhaps more selfishly, Blacque Lawrence "was Vexed because they burnt the Great House" at Kensington that he said "would have served him to live in."[134] Unsurprisingly, there were confrontations when rebel fires, either deliberately or accidentally, threatened the "negro houses." Many would have agreed with George Grant of Retirement Estate when he said "I wont have my house burnt. I don't care a damn about the works."[135]

These burnings were, therefore, as Blackstone suggested, a direct challenge to the power-laden and racialized "right[s] of habitation" within Jamaican slave society. Buildings—the infrastructure of plantation slavery—were the target. Other, movable, property might be repurposed. The "works" were the heart of sugar plantations, and exemplified the ways in which capital, land, and labor were oriented solely to intensive commodity production

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[123] TNA: CO137/185/3, fol. 467r.

[124] TNA: CO137/185/2, fol. 376r; TNA: CO137/185/1, fol. 211r.

[125] TNA: CO137/185/2, fol. 392v.

[126] TNA: CO137/185/3, fol. 615r.

[127] TNA: CO137/185/3, fol. 669r.

[128] TNA: CO137/185/1, fol. 209r; TNA: CO137/185/2, fol. 365r. At Cow Park, Westmoreland, Richard Skelton "burned the house himself, saying no white person shall live there again": TNA: CO137/185/3, fol. 542r.

[129] TNA: CO137/185/1, fol. 160r.

[130] TNA: CO137/185/3, fol. 535r, see also fol. 467r.

[131] TNA: CO137/185/3, fol. 476r.

[132] TNA: CO137/185/3, fol. 553r.

[133] TNA: CO137/185/1, fol. 155v; TNA: CO137/185/2, fol. 246v.

[134] TNA: CO137/185/2, fols. 341r, 375r.

[135] TNA: CO137/185/1, fol. 112v.

supported by forcing the enslaved to live their everyday lives within systems of want, restriction, precarity, and punishment.[136] While some of those involved in the uprising saw a future where they directed sugar production, the more general desire was "to burn the Blasted Estates" and to live and work differently. Residential buildings—overseers' houses, bookkeepers' barracks, and especially the great houses—materialized the different ways in which dwelling reinforced subordination. Their destruction was a remaking of land and landscape as a precondition for other forms of habitation, of ideas of space and place unconfined by the ledger and the map, and of potentially more communally directed ways of providing security and sustenance, such as those that tentatively emerged at Castle Wemyss. There were, however, significant tensions that also structured these burnings. These existed within the groupings of enslaved people on any plantation, and also between the plantation "community" and the broader collective of the potentially free on the island. These tensions can be explored by considering these burnings as "conflagrations": collective and contested social processes of spreading fire.

Conflagrations

The courts took the 1831–32 fires as evidence of both individual rebellion and collective rebellious conspiracy, as an exchange with James Gordon, overseer at Kirkpatrick Hall, suggests:

> Question. Are the negroes on Kirk-patrick Hall in a state of Rebellion or not?
> Answer. They are. They have burnt down the works.
> Question. Do you consider James Stewart and Billy Lawrence as guilty of the charges of Rebellion as any other of the slaves belonging to Kirkpatrick Hall?
> Answer. I do consider them so.[137]

These burnings might, therefore, involve different forms of collective participation. At Seven Rivers, for example, evidence was given that "plenty of people" were with Martin Williams when the fires were set, and "Several persons were picking up things in the Yard and throwing them on the fire but prisoner was the only person that put the [fire]."[138] This was always a spectacle with an audience. They might be at a distance, seeing smoke and flame as signals of the uprising's progress.[139] They were certainly close at hand. At Old Montpelier, for example, "plenty of people were in the Yard when the fire was put."[140] Waiting while furniture and stores were removed must have increased the anticipation, and when the flames came, they were accompanied by shouts and blowing horns, bugles, and shells.[141] The scene set for the courts was often celebratory. Richard Hutchison said that "after they set fire to the Busha's house [at Anchovy] the party fired a Volley & then laughed & jumped."[142] At Windsor Castle they gave a "whora" [hurrah].[143] These collective acts might also be more reflective. It was reported from Clifden in Westmoreland that "When they had fired the house they went under the Walnut tree close the Barbicue and prayed on their knees."[144] Fire would have signified differently in the various spiritual traditions and practices of the enslaved.

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[136] Trevor Burnard and John Garrigus, *The Plantation Machine: Atlantic Capitalism in French Saint-Domingue and British Jamaica* (Philadelphia, 2016); Browne, *Surviving Slavery*.

[137] TNA: CO137/185/1, fol. 103r.

[138] TNA: CO137/185/2, fol. 274r.

[139] Copy of the Report of a Committee of the House of Assembly of Jamaica, appointed to inquire into the Cause of, and Injury sustained by, the recent Rebellion in that Colony, British Parliamentary Papers, House of Commons, session 1831–32, no. 561, 20.

[140] TNA: CO137/185/2, fol. 266r, see also fol. 269r–v; TNA: CO137/185/1, fol. 153r–v.

[141] TNA: CO137/185/1, fol. 121r; TNA: CO137/185/3, fols. 485r, 618v.

[142] TNA: CO137/185/2, fol. 348v.

[143] TNA: CO137/185/2, fol. 295r.

[144] TNA: CO137/185/3, fol. 534v, see also fol. 617r.

For those intent on spreading the uprising, effort was required to draw others into involvement. This could mean forcing or encouraging other people to help start a fire, implicating them as well. This could be more collective too. At Hampton, after burning the store and the great house, Gordon and Lawrence Tharp, both Baptist leaders, "went up to Lawrence's House which was the Meeting House and Prisoners asked all of them to burn the Works as they were going to get free." As the witness reported, perhaps attempting to save himself, he was "Chopped" for being unwilling to take part.[145] In each instance, the existing social relations of the plantation shaped who got involved. At the same time, it was recognized that no matter who burned the buildings, the fact of the fire would implicate everyone in Buckra's eyes. William Hall, of Stapleton, was stabbed in the side by his son Edward after William extinguished the fire in the stable that Edward and others had started.[146] At Moor Park, "Every Body begged [William Stennett and Virgil] not to put fire, but the[y] would do so." In particular, "Virgil's wife begged him not to burn the place and he coursed [sic] her and said he would."[147] Were they trying to save Virgil or themselves, knowing that if the flame caught they would all be seen as rebels?

Those who committed themselves to war, and actively sought collective implication by fire, saw unburned buildings as an affront.[148] As Toney testified, when William Archibald came from Newman Hall to Stapleton with seven others, "he said what is this House standing up here for. This House ought to be burnt. They are saving it for Buckra to come and Stop in—burn it down."[149] Similarly, at Seven Rivers, Richard Walker, at the head of another group, "asked what all those Houses doing here. What, are they better than any other[?]"[150] These demands were often made by the more-or-less organized, armed, and militarized "parties" that moved between estates setting fires, skirmishing with the militia, and gathering recruits by coercion or consent. They sought to build collectivities across and beyond individual plantations. The largest, known as the "Black Regiment," led by Robert Gardiner and Thomas Dove, won a notable victory over the militia at Montpelier on 29 December 1831.[151] Attempts were made to coordinate these parties to affect the uprising, but they also came into conflict. For example, John Tharp stopped Charles McLenan's party on the road to Montego Bay, saying that he was "the King of the Parish" and if anyone was going to burn the town it would be him.[152]

The threat of collective implication by fire meant there were tensions between those who inhabited each plantation and those who came from outside, even though these "strange people" might already be known to the former.[153] In each case the questions were: what would be burned, what would it take to burn it, who would "rise," and who would not. The parties came in numbers, blowing horns and shells, and brandishing weapons and firesticks. Hurlock and McLenan led a "Whole parcel of them," about two hundred people, to Anchovy and said "they had already burnt down Roehampton, and should Anchovy not be burnt too[?]"[154] Such actions were crucial for making leaders and shaping the revolt. It was reported that McLenan "was a Capt[n] till after he burnt Anchovy & they made him a General there."[155] These parties brought the rebellion to other estates and forced the issue. For example, Robert Kerr arrived at Plumb Pen with an ultimatum. He left the rest

[145] TNA: CO137/185/2, fol. 356v; see also TNA CO137/185/3, fol. 467r.

[146] TNA: CO137/185/1, fols. 154v–155r.

[147] TNA: CO137/185/2, fol. 366r; see also TNA: CO137/185/2, fol. 491r.

[148] TNA: CO137/185/1, fols. 166r, 219r; TNA: CO137/185/2, fols. 385v, f406r.

[149] TNA: CO137/185/2, fol. 401v.

[150] TNA: CO137/185/2, fol. 270r.

[151] TNA: CO137/185/1, fols. 109r–110r; Edward Kamau Brathwaite, "The Slave Rebellion in the Great River Valley of St. James—1831/32," *Jamaican Historical Review* 13 (January 1982): 11–30.

[152] Report of a Committee of the House of Assembly, 33; TNA: CO137/185/2, fols. 282r, 414r.

[153] TNA: CO137/185/1, fol. 121v; TNA: CO137/185/2, fol. 287v.

[154] TNA: CO137/185/2, fols. 348r, 404r; TNA: CO137/185/1, fols. 162v–163r.

[155] TNA: CO137/185/2, fol. 281v; and TNA: CO137/185/3, fols. 551r–552r.

of his considerable party on the road and entered the estate alone. There, with sword in one hand and firestick in the other, he "said that he had already burnt his Master's place—he said that all the Men on Plumb were not worth—that we were like Women. That if we were men we would have burnt Master's House." In particular, Kerr confronted Alexander Ogilvie, the head man, telling him that if he sent the people out to work Kerr "would come and burn all their Negro Houses, and … cut of[f] my Head and burn my House, Wife and Children." With that, Kerr chopped at Ogilvie, threw him down, and set fire to the buildings. His intention to spread the uprising by fire was clear. As Ogilvie testified, "Captain" Kerr could not tolerate it "if he only was to fight to get free, and let all the others sit down and not burn their Master's property."[156]

Yet for communities of the enslaved who had increasingly deep roots and dense kinship connections within particular plantations, there might be a lot to lose.[157] As a result, the conflagrations became complex social and political processes as the revolt and its suppression unfolded. For example, at Unity Hall, George Kerr, a mason, tried to control what happened. At a prayer meeting he initially "told the people they must all Stop in their Houses and not go to Work—but must disturb no man, if no man disturb them." Yet, after the overseer ordered them back to the fields—which could have meant "strange people would destroy them if they went to Work"—Kerr directed that the overseer's house be burned along with the trash house. This did not, however, represent a wholehearted commitment to war. As well as them not burning the works, Joe Payne testified that "All the Negroes then repented and said that they ought not to have burnt the Busha's House—that they were in Liquor—they then kept guard two nights at Master's House, when strange people came and burnt it."[158]

Evidently, not all those on the plantations were ready to burn them. Moreover, whether or not they had been involved, it became imperative to try and convince the authorities they had not rebelled. The accounts given of these conflagrations in court were certainly strategic, but also had to be credible. Witnesses said that they and others had tried to prevent the burnings until force of numbers, dogged determination, or threats or acts of violence overwhelmed them.[159] Other witnesses testified that they or others had succeeded in dousing the flames.[160] Whether the fire spread or not depended upon which collectivity was stronger. For Thomas Hislop at Leogan, it was testified that "he set fire in the long piazza and he Killed it when the people swear after him." As his sister told it, "he was quite drunk—we called out Shame and he Killed it."[161] In contrast, at Retirement, Sandy Peterkin told Blacksmith James "it will take you and twenty men on the property to set the fire and you should not put the fire if I saw them." James answered, "I dont care a damn, I am as free as any one now, If you have a master I don't consider I have one," and told Peterkin that "I will soon have twenty men here and see what you can do." The property burned and Blacksmith James was hanged for it.[162] When "Adelphi people" came to burn Marley there was another confrontation. Edward Rowan, Adelphi's "Head Man," set fire to the kitchen shingles, but Dan Down "said before any one should burn Marley he would suffer his Head to be taken off before he would allow it, and he Killed the fire." Rowan then set fire to the "Old House" and the "Old Temple," but each time others put out the flames.[163] The contrary action—ensuring that the fires kept burning—was also as much a social and political act as a material one. Evidence was given that Walker had arrived at Seven Rivers "with a large party all armed with Guns &c." Seeing the Works still standing, they

[156] TNA: CO137/185/2, fols. 379r–380r.
[157] Dunn, *A Tale of Two Plantations*; Higman, *Montpelier*.
[158] TNA: CO137/185/2, fol. 359r.
[159] TNA: CO137/185/1, fols. 121r–v, 152v; TNA: CO137/185/2, fols. 382r–383r.
[160] TNA: CO137/185/1, fols. 123r–124v, 150r; TNA: CO137/185/2, fols. 368r, 371r–372r.
[161] TNA: CO137/185/2, fols. 317v, 320v.
[162] TNA: CO137/185/1, fol. 113v.
[163] TNA: CO137/185/2, fols. 412v–413r; see also TNA: CO137/185/3, fol. 661r.

were determined to burn them. Holding off those opposed to it at gunpoint, and "making a great noise at the Works & firing off their Guns and blowing their Horns," they set the fires "and they guarded the place until the Buildings were nearly consumed & then they went away."[164]

The contested process of burning the plantations meant that different collectivities, on and beyond each estate, were both forged and transmuted in the flames. They could not be taken for granted. Those determined to wage war used fire as a means to build its collective basis. They sought to produce a conflagration. The grounds on which those on the estates who were determined to set fires, or those who came from elsewhere committed to burning, were able to find allies on each plantation is difficult to determine. Firestarters could be seen as a threat or as bearers of freedom. Some saw those who arrived at their gates with firesticks as "strange people" who threatened their lives and dwelling places, others made common cause with them. In each case it was uncertain whether the collective built in the light of the fire, for or against the uprising, would hold. This was put under further strain by military action. Finally, these processes can only be seen now through trial records that repeated, as allegations and contested evidence, the political process of the making and unmaking of collectivities as part of the attribution and avoidance of culpability and its deadly consequences. For example, the part that "Anchovy people" had played in its burning was as strongly disputed in court as it had been on the ground. William Gifford testified that "Anchovy people did not join in burning down the works—they quite vext—too many people came & could not stop them from doing [it]." Yet Harry Hine, a serial witness, argued simply that "Anchovy own people set the fire by order of Capt McLenan." What is certain is that Edward Lewis and William Burnett of Anchovy were executed for rebellion.[165]

Conclusion

Samuel Cunningham, an enslaved Baptist deacon imprisoned in Montego Bay under threat of execution, thought it was obvious what the fires meant:

> Their ultimate object?—Thinks there is no occasion for anyone to ask that question; thinks it sufficiently shown by their destroying their masters property and houses, and taking so much care of their own. What other object should they have but to take the country to themselves?[166]

Burning was, for Cunningham, a collective claim to place made by the enslaved against the planters. Fire in Jamaica in 1831–32 was the assertion of a right to habitation as a central part of what it meant to be free.

Understanding the "Emancipation War" through its fires emphasizes its rootedness in the materiality and social relations of the plantation and its forms of everyday life. The knowledges, practices, and materials deployed against slavery in 1831–32 were those of creolized plantation labor rather than the techniques of African warfare that had shaped eighteenth-century revolts. Even the "parties" that moved from estate to estate bringing fire, skirmishing with the militia, and armed with whatever weapons they could gather owed as much to plantation work gangs as they did to more militarized forms of organization. What those who set the fires intended was the destruction of buildings—the infrastructure of plantation commodity production and the domestic social reproduction of white supremacy—in pursuit of new forms of habitation. It was done so that "Buckra" and "Busha" had nowhere to be. There are glimpses of the variety of future habitations that burning buildings down

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[164] TNA: CO137/185/2, fol. 269v; see also TNA: CO137/185/3, fol. 619r.
[165] TNA: CO137/185/1, fols. 106v, 170v, 349v.
[166] Report of a Committee of the House of Assembly, 39. Cunningham's sentence was commuted to six months' imprisonment, TNA: CO137/185/1, fol. 96r.

"smack smooth" would enable. Those who rose up did not head for the high ground to live like the Maroons. Instead, they saw their futures on the lands they already inhabited. There was the collective control of security and sustenance organized by Alexander Gow at Castle Wemyss, and the promise of taking over houses or house-building materials elsewhere. In St. Thomas in the east, at the other end of the island, it was reported that rebels had built a village of huts close to their provision grounds.[167] However, the newly freed might even seek to control production "if the Country came good," as at Unity Hall. Indeed, at Ginger Hill in Westmoreland the overseer William Annand gave evidence that those who had taken over the estate asked him to sign it over to them "in writing ... that they intended presenting it at Black River with others."[168] No single vision prevailed as uneasy collectivities for or against strike, rebellion, or war were forged and melted away within and across the burning plantation landscape.

Inevitably, this account of the uprising is shaped by the sources used to construct it. The trial record presents a more fragmentary and contested view of events than those constructed by the planters, the Baptist Missionary Society, or the imperial authorities. Their focus on the nonconformist missionaries and their congregations, or on the rebels' leadership and organization, and the military response to it, was pursued through official inquiries and the gathering of prison "confessions." These aimed to provide overviews that apportioned responsibility and analyzed causes.[169] It is certainly the case that the trial record, with its close focus on the fires and a restricted questioning of defendants and witnesses, only offers fractured glimpses of the movement of rebel parties and the role of Black Baptist leaders as they negotiated the politics of plantations in revolt at Daniel Gardiner's house at Flint River or prayed after burning Clifden.

It is important, however, to recognize that the trial record can represent, albeit in ways shaped by the threat of judicial violence, the experience of the revolt on the ground. The circumstantial evidence they provide shows the grounding of the burnings in everyday plantation life, reveals the contested politics of habitation that animated them, and dramatizes the intensely difficult situations that enslaved people faced as the uprising appeared as smoke on the horizon or came to their doors bearing a firestick. What collectivities they imagined themselves part of on or beyond the plantation would have shaped their responses, along with the immediate dangers of getting involved in or being implicated by the fires. The contingencies of moment and location were important, but they existed within broader histories and geographies. Occurring twenty-five years after the slave trade had ended, among a population that was both aging and creolizing in place on the plantations—producing an intense focus on controlling women's reproductive labor—both the threat and the promise the 1831–32 fires brought was to claims made over places of long-standing habitation and communal and familial interrelation.[170] The fires were, for those who fanned the flames, a means of opposing plantation production, changing the "rights of habitation," and encouraging modes of provisioning, living together, and organizing communal protection that went beyond immediate planter coercion. For others, fire threatened to destroy what they had built in adversity for themselves and those close to them. The challenge was that the burnings sought to "take the country to themselves" by making

[167] TNA: CO137/185/2, fols. 453r–455r.

[168] TNA: CO137/181, fol. 23v.

[169] *Narrative of Certain Events Connected with the Late Disturbances in Jamaica, and the Charges Preferred Against the Baptist Missionaries in that Island* (London, 1832); Report of a Committee of the House of Assembly; Report from the Select Committee on the State of the West India Colonies, British Parliamentary Papers, House of Commons, session 1831–32, no. 127.

[170] Higman, *Slave Population and Economy*; Turner, *Contested Bodies*; Diana Paton, "Gender History, Global History, and Atlantic Slavery: On Racial Capitalism and Social Reproduction," *American Historical Review* 127, no. 2 (June 2022): 726–54; J. R. Ward, "Demographic Trends in Late-Slavery Jamaica, 1817–32," *Economic History Review* 76, no. 1 (February 2023): 60–86.

plantation spaces, places, and landscapes into a ground for future freedom that went beyond modes of work, free or unfree, to the broader questions of post-slavery ways of life.

This challenge was evident in the real and symbolic violence of the authorities' responses. Militiamen and soldiers burned the houses of the enslaved and destroyed their provision grounds. After the many, hurried executions ordered by the courts martial and carried out in Montego Bay, Savannah la Mar, and Lucea, the civil courts began ordering executions on the estates the rebels had burned. George Kerr was sentenced to hang on Plumb Pen, Alexander McIntosh on Leogan, and Alexander Gow at Castle Wemyss. Judicial terror sought to reclaim those properties for planter habitation.[171] Even emancipation brought little change. Although the uprising hastened the passing of the 1833 Emancipation Act, that legislation only brought the freedom to work for Buckra for pay. Until 1838 this was under an "apprenticeship" system, which guaranteed labor to the planters, and then as "free wage labor."[172] These versions of emancipation from above offered nothing to address the demands for land and location that animated emancipation from below and had stoked the fires of 1831–32.

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[171] TNA: CO137/185/2, fols. 380v, 315v, 327v.

[172] Thomas C. Holt, *The Problem of Freedom: Race, Labor, and Politics in Jamaica and Britain, 1832–1938* (Baltimore, 1992).