

The Significance of Emancipation

Slavery was fully abolished in Jamaica and throughout all British colonies on August 1 1838. The Emancipation Act (1833) declared that as of August 1, 1834, all slaves would be granted their freedom, on condition that those who were six years and older, serve a period of Apprenticeship for up to six years.

On August 1 1838, thousands of apprentices gathered at the Spanish Town square in St. Catherine to hear the reading of the Emancipation Declaration, which finally set them free. For the freed slaves, Emancipation meant they had control over their own lives and they could share in the building of their communities.

A description of the celebratory activities which took place in churches and public squares is presented by Dr. Swithin Wilmot in **Freedom in Jamaica: Challenges and Opportunities 1838 – 1865** (JIS, 1997). A meeting at the Salters Hill Baptist Church in St. James (pages 1 -2) was described as:

“A hymn being sung, preparations were made for the burial of slavery. The whip, the chain and the shackle, were separately produced, and the question asked, what is to be done with the old slave whip? ‘Cut it up’ was the reply. It was done. What with the chain? ‘Break it’. This was also done. What with the shackle? ‘To be destroyed’. After each was exhibited, three enthusiastic cheers were given, that they were no longer to be liable to the evils of slavery but released from its terrors.”

And, in a public meeting in Falmouth, Trelawny, William Kerr said (*ibid*, page 2):

“Let me remember that we been on Sugar Estate from sunrise a-morning till eight o’clock at night: the rain falling, the sun shining, we was in it all. Many of we own colour behind we, and many before; we get whip, our wives get beat like a dog, before our face, and if we speak we get the same; they put we in shackle; but thank our heavenly Father we not slave again! (Cheers)”

A freed man speaking at a dinner to commemorate the anniversary of Emancipation in Mount Regale in Clarendon on August 2, 1842 said:

“My dear brodders and sisters, me head quite full of joy to see you all so free and happy here today. At dis hour in slave time, we all go to de field to dig cane holes or pick coffee and if we sick Buckra flog we for true, and no hear when we cry for mercy. But now no Overseer can come and drive we off to the field. Now we can work when we like, and stay at home when we sick. We can buy our own land, build our own house, and go to we own church.”

(ibid, page 1)

Wilmot said that (ibid, page 3):

“Clearly, the freed people were well aware of the oppression that they had endured and they had a highly developed consciousness of their new rights as workers and they expected qualitative changes in the work routine on the estates.”