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Presentation: South Carolina vs. Jamaica in the American Revolution

History 530

Throughout the North American colonial period, colonies in different regions were created and also developed under unique conditions, by a wide range of individuals, and with differences in potential productivity. South Carolina shared similarities in economic and social structure so strongly with the Caribbean colonies, Jamaica in particular, that it was more like its Caribbean colonial counterparts than it was to the other mainland colonies, in some ways. However, there were key differences between South Carolina and Jamaica that led South Carolina to join the Revolution but led Jamaica to remain loyal. The differences included a much different ideological reception of pre-Revolutionary taxes and Parliamentary acts, nationalistic connections that developed in South Carolina but not Jamaica because of absenteeism, and most importantly, slavery and the fear of slave revolts. The very real possibility of violent slave revolts on Jamaica was not as strong of a threat in South Carolina. Differing rates of planter absenteeism also contributed to this as did greater numerical disparities between whites and enslaved persons created this condition. White colonists' fears of violent slave revolts led to a welcomed military presence in Jamaica that was, conversely, seen as oppressive and invasive in South Carolina. All of these conditions led South Carolina to rebel in the spirit of independence and Jamaica to remain loyal to its imperial ruler.

The colonies of South Carolina and Jamaica possessed a remarkable level of similarity in some aspects from the time of the first colonials arriving all the way up through the outbreak of the American Revolution. Historians Trevor Burnard and Emma Hart in their comparative analysis of Charleston, South Carolina and Kingston, Jamaica show that in many ways, South Carolina was an extension of the British Caribbean on the mainland. Among the various similarities of these two towns are some significant facts pointed out by Burnard and Hart: whites were outnumbered by slaves, mortality rates were so high that the population was not self-reproducing, women enjoyed a relatively high degree of participation in the the economy and social life, and they were the centers of concentrated wealth in the colonies.¹ Furthermore,

¹ Burnard, Trevor and Emma Hart. "Kingston, Jamaica, and Charleston, South Carolina: A New Look at Comparative Urbanization in Plantation Colonial British America." *Journal of Urban History*, Vol. 39, No. 1 (2012): pg. 215-219.

historian Andrew Jackson O'Shaughnessy says in *An Empire Divided: The American Revolution and the British Caribbean*, the islands and southern colonies were similarly “materialistic, individualistic, competitive, exploitative, and comparatively secular”.² The similarities between the two colonies continue with their commercial significance within the British Empire. South Carolina and Jamaica were both major exporters of valuable tropical commodities. South Carolina's principal exports were rice and indigo in the 1700s. Britain, particularly its poor population, consumed a great deal of rice. Indigo was a valuable commodity squabbed over by London's elite traders.³ Jamaica's most significant exports were sugar and rum during the same time period. The vast majority of these exports were being transported either to Britain or between colonies.⁴

Taxes and duties applied to the colonies, and especially reactions to them, was a significant difference between the two colonies in the years leading up to the American Revolution. These taxes affected both imports, and importantly in the cases of South Carolina and Jamaica, shipping. For example, the Stamp Act of 1765 was received by the colonists of South Carolina with violent rejection. According to historian Huw David, “Riots erupted in Charles Town in October 1765. An effigy of a stamp official was hanged, people suspected of supporting the act were harassed, and the house of a man rumored to be involved with the distributing of stamps was attacked and ransacked”.⁵ In South Carolina, the Stamp Act, and realistically all of the subsequent taxes that were levied prior to the Revolution were each seen as assaults on the mainland colonists' basic rights as subjects of England. In a letter addressed from South Carolina to the deputies assembled at the First Continental Congress in Philadelphia in 1774, the William Henry Drayton writes, “when the people of England, in the early part of the last century were oppressed by illegal taxes . . . they believed their liberties were on the point of being ravished from them . . . an anonymous letter touching the inconveniences and grievances of the State, was communicated to the Members”.⁶ Then, Drayton continues by comparing, “Upon subjects of grievance similar with, yet indefinitely more serious than those of that period -- now at a time threatening, not

² O'Shaughnessy, Andrew Jackson. *An Empire Divided: The American Revolution and the British Caribbean*. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000). pg 7.

³ David, Huw. *Trade, Politics, and Revolution: South Carolina and Britain's Atlantic Commerce, 1730-1790*. (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2018). pgs. 115-119.

⁴ Burnard and Hart, 221.

⁵ David, 102.

⁶ Gibbes, R.W. *Documentary History of the American Revolution consisting of letters and papers relating to the contest for liberty chiefly in South Carolina, from originals in the possession of the editor, and other sources, 1764-1776*. New York, 1855. pg. 11.

insurrection from discontent, but a civil war from despair -- . . . I thus have the honor, publicly, to make known my sentiments to . . . [the] General Congress to deliberate upon a subject of at least high import to the British Crown and the people of America . . .".⁷ Jamaica generally received taxes differently than did the mainland. A great deal of stamps were provided to Jamaica, but the taxes it faced were heavy and opposition light. The most likely reasons for the difference in reactions to these duties include the absence of outspoken Revolutionary leaders like existed on the mainland, a lack of commitment to resistance by local printers, an aversion to asserting that the taxes compromised residents' fundamental rights as English subjects, and a belief that the taxes should be criticized from a commercial perspective rather than a constitutional one.⁸

Absenteeism from the island plantations, especially on Jamaica, by the elites and the wealthy, powerful planter-class was also a much different tradition than in South Carolina. South Carolina was indeed a plantation colony, but it also had a much stronger commitment to an identity of a settler colony than Jamaica did even up to the beginning of the Revolution. Therefore, the sense of a nationalistic, or even regionalistic, identity was much more difficult to develop in the Caribbean than it was on the mainland. According to O'Shaughnessy, "West Indian whites were not committed to permanent settlement".⁹ Absentee Jamaican landowners and planters were so common in England that held a powerful lobby, a strong merchant class, and attended prestigious schools.¹⁰ Absenteeism was indeed a feature of South Carolina's landowning class, but not on the scale practiced in the Caribbean.¹¹ A sense of nationalism had certainly developed in South Carolina, and throughout the rest of the mainland colonies, by the outbreak of the American Revolution. A circular letter distributed to the assemblies within the several districts of South Carolina on June 30, 1775 declared that the British had "slaughtered the unarmed--the sick--the helpless--having long been indiscriminately oppressed, they have now massacred our fellow-subjects in Massachusetts Bay . . . the voice of America thus describes the commencement of this unnatural war" some one thousand miles and even greater cultural difference away.¹² Yet, the writer of this document distributed in South Carolina recognizes their "fellow-subjects" in Massachusetts and a voice of America.

⁷ Ibid, 11.

⁸ O'Shaughnessy, 101-104.

⁹ Ibid, 4.

¹⁰ Ibid, 16, 19-23.

¹¹ David, 71-73. O'Shaughnessy, 11.

¹² Gibbes, 108.

Connections between South Carolina and Jamaica existed beyond their commercial identities through slavery, even if only loosely. While South Carolina imported the vast majority of its slaves directly from Africa, an estimated 20% of slaves came to South Carolina through the Caribbean as opposed to only 1% from other mainland colonies during the 18th century.¹³ In this regard, South Carolina had a much stronger economic connection to the West Indies than to the mainland colonies. According to Kenneth Morgan in his article about the slave trade in Charleston, “Southern planters preferred ‘Seasoned Negroes’ to new imports, but the former were more expensive and not always available”, but would generally originate in the Caribbean colonies.¹⁴ The reason that planters in South Carolina preferred slaves from the Caribbean would have been their acclimatization to the relatively similar conditions to those of Jamaica.

Slavery was a major facet of the social and economic fabrics of both South Carolina and of Jamaica from even the early days of each colony. However, rates of slavery on Jamaica far outpaced that of South Carolina, as Jamaica became the largest slave market in the British world. Jamaica received approximately 2.5 times as many slave ships as the entire mainland, including approximately 4.5 times as many slave ships than arrived at Charleston. Overall, over a million Africans were taken from Africa between 1655 and 1808 with an intended destination of Jamaica, over 900,000 completed the Middle Passage to the island, and over 700,000 African individuals remained on the island after arrival.¹⁵ Conversely, while South Carolina’s slave trade was the largest on the mainland, it was not close to the size of Jamaica’s. Between 1706-1775, South Carolina imported a total of 93,000 slaves.¹⁶ The slave trade and enslaved persons were prominent features of life in both South Carolina and Jamaica, but Jamaica’s was certainly more prevalent by many times.

Ultimately, the number of slaves in the Caribbean, including in Jamaica, gave white planters and the small number of other white colonists fear of slave revolt. This fear is undoubtedly one reason that that South Carolina would embrace rebellion in the American Revolution when Jamaica and other Caribbean colonies

¹³ Littlefield, Daniel C. *South Carolina Encyclopedia*. “The Slave Trade.” Columbia, S.C.: University of South Carolina, 2018.

¹⁴ Morgan, Kenneth. “Slave Sales in Colonial Charleston.” *The English Historical Review*, Vol. 113, No. 453 (1998): no page numbers.

¹⁵ Burnard, Trevor and Kenneth Morgan. “The Dynamics of the Slave Market and Slave Purchasing Patterns in Jamaica, 1655-1788.” *The William and Mary Quarterly*, Vol. 58, No 1 (2001). pgs. 206-207.

¹⁶ Morgan, *Charleston*, no page.

would not. The whites on the island were incredibly outnumbered. In order to offset, or at least attempt to minimize this threat, the Caribbean colonies welcomed armed British military presence to provide protection. According to O'Shaughnessy, "Fear of slave revolts and the presence of autonomous maroon communities, more than fear of foreign attack, explains the willingness of white colonists to seek the assistance of professional troops from Britain".¹⁷ While the islands had shared the aversion towards permanent garrisons of troops during the early 18th century, a maroon war on Jamaica and slave revolts elsewhere in the islands turned opinion towards troops favorably. In the 17th century, Jamaica's status as a garrison colony actually dissuaded many prospective settlers from traveling to the island.¹⁸ Nevertheless, by the pre-Revolutionary period, Jamaica was financially supporting troops, constructing buildings of all varieties to support their needs, and incurring the cost of their transport and movement around the island. When troop levels decreased, the islands requested more. Jamaica even requested a full, additional regiment in the 1750s.¹⁹ South Carolina was the closest mainland comparison to Jamaica and other Caribbean colonies in relation to the rate of slavery, but even then it was not particularly close to the same rate overall. Unique among the mainland colonies, whites were outnumbered by blacks in South Carolina. Also, South Carolina had welcomed the military support like the islands early in the 18th century. Nevertheless, "even South Carolina became a leading opponent of the quartering of troops in 1757-58 and again in the late 1760s . . . In contrast to the British Caribbean, South Carolina's support for the army gradually diminished . . . [and] the army became the chief symbol of tyranny in North America".²⁰ In the contention of historian Donald F. Johnson, "The occupation of Charleston from 1780 to 1782 demonstrates . . . military rule turned civilian populations against the empire".²¹ Demand and support for troops to prevent slave revolts on the islands worked to draw those colonies closer to their British rulers, whereas military presence pushed the mainland colonies to the brink of war and past it.

¹⁷ O'Shaughnessy, 43.

¹⁸ Pestana, Carla Gardina. *The English Conquest of Jamaica: Oliver Cromwell's Bid for Empire*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2017). pgs. 228-229.

¹⁹ O'Shaughnessy, 43-45.

²⁰ O'Shaughnessy, 55-56.

²¹ Johnson, Donald F. "The Failure of Restored British Rule in Revolutionary Charleston, South Carolina." *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, Vol. 42, No. 1 (2014). pg. 22.

Similarities between South Carolina and its Caribbean counterparts, especially Jamaica, are evident. Each of these colonies was a planter colony, dependent on English consumption of its staple exports. Each of the colonies had some level of absenteeism among the wealthy and powerful. Both South Carolina and Jamaica depended on the enslaved labor of Africans in order to produce the wealth enjoyed by the planters and the products enjoyed by the English. However, by the mid-1770s, South Carolina joined with the other mainland colonies in the American Revolution while Jamaica and the other colonies of the Caribbean did not. Parliament's taxes were seen as an assault on the republican rights of the mainland, but were not as strongly resisted on the islands. Absenteeism in the Caribbean was far more common, which likely contributed to preventing a strong nationalistic identity from developing as it did in South Carolina and elsewhere on the mainland. Slavery's prominence in South Carolina was dwarfed by that of Jamaica, making the threat of violent slave revolts there a much more threatening possibility. In order to defend against this possibility, islands like Jamaica became garrison colonies or demanded large numbers of English soldiers to be stationed there; military presence was welcomed. In South Carolina, the British military soldiers were seen as an oppressive, occupying force who represented the great oppression that the Revolution was all about. As a result of all of these factors, and certainly likely more, South Carolina joined in the American Revolution and the Caribbean did not.

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