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# Bussa's Rebellion

How and why did the enslaved Africans of Barbados rebel in 1816?

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## Introduction

Resistance among enslaved Africans began the moment they were captured, and took many different forms. Some chose to do the following:

- Speak their native language in private.
- Perform African rituals like drumming.
- Appear to accept Christianity, but secretly practise their religion.
- Run away.
- Poison their masters.
- Pretend to be sick in order not to work.
- Damage tools or machinery.

Many Africans also showed their resistance through rebellion. The most successful rebellion took place in Haiti in 1791. Here the enslaved population drove out the French and British and set up the first black republic. In Jamaica, a group of Maroons, or runaway Africans, formed their own settlements in the mountains. For the next 150 years they fought against the British and helped to free others.

Slave rebellions tended to be less threatening in Barbados than on other Caribbean islands. Barbados had a well-armed police force and there was nowhere to hide. Unlike Jamaica, which still had forests, most of the land in Barbados had been cultivated to produce as much sugar as possible.

On Sunday 14th April 1816 a major rebellion broke out in Barbados. This rebellion was carefully planned and organised by the senior enslaved men and women who worked on several estates and plantations.

The rebellion started in the evening in the southeast parish of St Philip, spreading to most of the southern and central parishes of Christ Church, St. John, St. Thomas, St. George and parts of St. Michael. Three days later it was put down by the local militia (soldiers) and the imperial troops (the King's troops) stationed on the island. Martial law (army rule) was declared on Monday 15th April, and was lifted on 12th July.

## Tasks

Look at Source 1

1. This is a letter from James Leith, Governor of Barbados, to Earl Bathurst, Secretary of State for War and Colonies, 30th April 1816:
  - a) What evidence is there in this source that these events are viewed as serious?

Look at Source 2

2. This is a letter from Colonel Edward Codd to James Leith, his report of the insurrection.

- a) How many troops and weapons were used to control the rebellion?
- b) In what ways did the insurgents show their rebellion?
- c) What is the writer's view of their actions?

Look at Source 3

3. This is an extract of a private letter, St Ann's, Barbados 27th April 1816.

- a) What is the attitude of the writer to the insurgents?
- b) How many men were killed on both sides?

Look at Source 4

4. This is a letter from Colonel Edward Codd to James Leith, his report of the insurrection, 25th April 1816.

- a) What was the cause of the rebellion according to this report?

## Background

An African born enslaved man called Bussa led the rebellion on Barbados. Very little is known about him, except that he was a ranger at the Bayley plantation in St. Philip. A ranger was the head officer among the enslaved workers on an estate. He would have to look after boundaries and fences and deal with the day-to-day business arising between the estates. This meant that rangers travelled throughout the area. It is likely that Bussa enjoyed the confidence and respect of both the black community and plantation owners.

Bussa planned the uprising with people from the different estates. This included Jackey, the driver at the Simmons estate, King Wiltshire, a carpenter at Bayley's and Nanny Grigg, a literate domestic at Simmons.

The uprising started at Bayley's estate. It was an attempt by the enslaved people to change the society on Barbados. They believed that Barbados belonged to them and wanted their freedom from the plantation owners.

The act to end the slave trade had been passed in Parliament in 1807. In 1815 the slaves thought that they were going to gain their freedom when Governor Leith returned from Guadeloupe, another Caribbean island. They believed that he was bringing a 'free paper' with him to set them free.

Bussa commanded about 400 men and women against the troops. These included the West India Regiment, an all black branch of the British Army. He was killed in battle and his troops continued to fight until they were defeated by superior firepower. One white civilian and one black soldier were killed during the fighting. Compared to this, 50 enslaved people died in battle and 70 were executed in the field. Another 300 were taken to Bridgetown for trial, of which 144 were executed and 132 sent away to another island.

Bussa's rebellion was one of many rebellions that took place in the Caribbean over the centuries, showing black people's determination to gain their freedom. Rebellion was their attempt to influence the abolition movement.

## Teachers Notes

This lesson can be used with key stage 3 pupils in year 9. It looks at the story of the Bussa rebellion on Barbados based on evidence relating to the reaction of the British authorities.

### Sources

Source 1 provides evidence of the outbreak of the rebellion. Methods of social control used by the authorities are evident in the source.

Source 2 shows what happened during the rebellion and the attitudes of the authorities.

Source 3 reveals more about the attitude of the authorities and the course of the rebellion.

Source 4 provides evidence from a report into the causes of the insurrection from the point of view of the authorities.

### More Activities

Debate the reasons for and against the slave trade.

Carry out a role play/drama about giving evidence to an inquiry into the causes of the Bussa rebellion. Characters can be taken from the sources provided.

## Schemes of Work

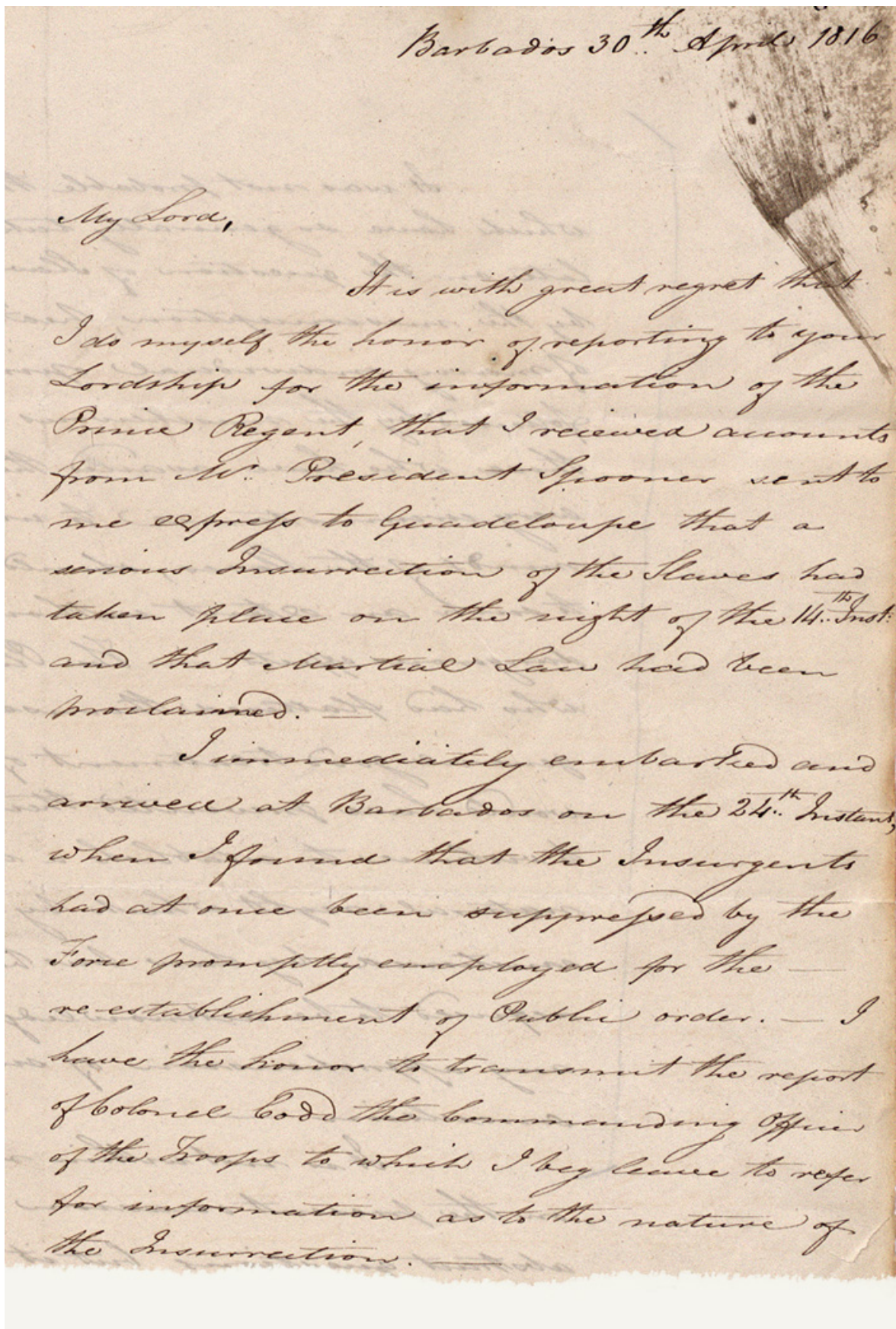
### **Black peoples of the Americas from slavery to equality?**

Key Stage 3 Unit 15

**Key stage 3 Citizenship at key stage 3 (years 7-9). Unit 04: Britain, a diverse society?**



## Source 1 : Letter from James Leith, Governor of Barbados, to Earl Bathurst, Secretary of State for War and Colonies, 30th April 1816 (CO 28/85)



Barbados 30<sup>th</sup> April 1816

My Lord,

It is with great regret that I do myself the honor of reporting to your Lordship for the information of the Prince Regent, that I received accounts from M<sup>r</sup>. President Spooner sent to me express to Guadeloupe that a serious Insurrection of the Slaves had taken place on the night of the 14<sup>th</sup> Inst: and that Martial Law had been proclaimed. —

I immediately embarked and arrived at Barbados on the 24<sup>th</sup> Instant, when I found that the Insurgents had at once been suppressed by the Force promptly employed for the re-establishment of Public order. — I have the honor to transmit the report of Colonel Code the commanding Officer of the Troops to which I beg leave to refer for information as to the nature of the Insurrection. —

## **Source 1 : Transcript of Letter from James Leith, Governor of Barbados, to Earl Bathurst, Secretary of State for War and Colonies, 30th April 1816 (CO 28/85)**

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I immediately embarked and arrived at Barbados on the 24th instant, when I found that the force promptly employed for the re-establishment of public order had at once suppressed the insurgents.

I have the honour to transmit the report of Colonel Codd, the commanding officer of the troops to which I beg leave to refer for information as to the nature of the insurrection.

### Glossary

Insurrection: an organised attempt by a group of people to defeat their government and take control of their country, usually by force.

Insurgents: rebels; people taking part in an uprising.

Suppressed: put down, stopped.



## Source 2 : Letter from Colonel Edward Codd to James Leith, his report of the insurrection. (CO 28/85)

Sir,

I have the honor to report to your Excellency, that about two O'clock on the morning of the 15<sup>th</sup> instant, I received an official notification of an Insurrection of the Negroes in the interior of the Island, on the preceding Evening, and I was requested by the President to cooperate with the Militia.

About 10 O'clock, having waited in vain for authentic Information of the strength and position of the insurgents, I deemed it necessary to march off to that quarter of the Country, where the alarm had first spread, with a force consisting of three field Pieces under the Command of Brigadier Major Brough,

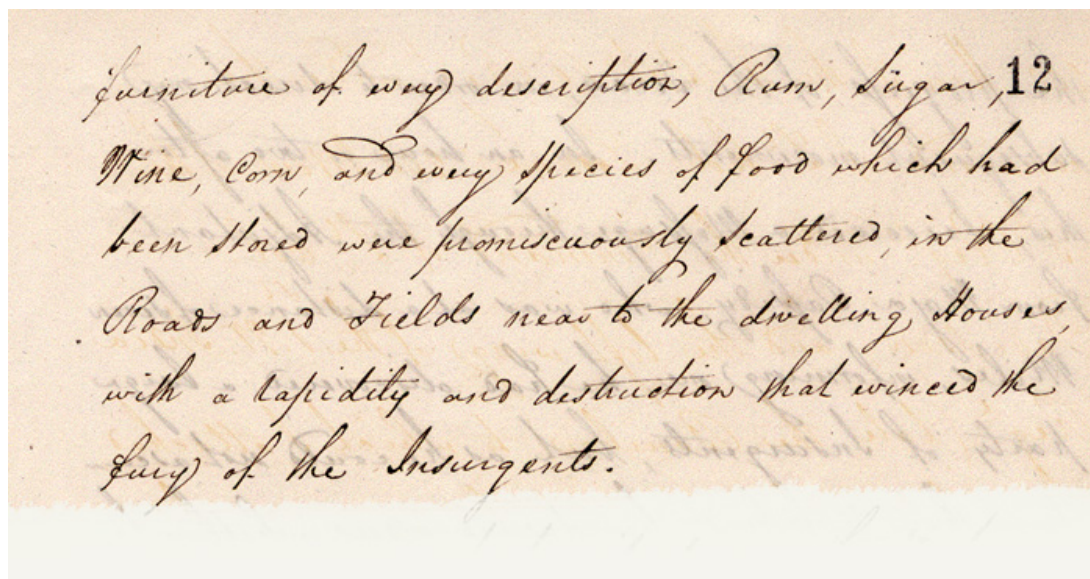


200 Men of the 4<sup>th</sup> Bat<sup>le</sup> Co<sup>rd</sup> Reg<sup>t</sup> under the  
command of L<sup>t</sup> Col: Lomas; 200 Men of the  
15<sup>th</sup> Reg<sup>t</sup> under the Command of L<sup>t</sup> Col:  
Davidson, and the left wing of the 1<sup>st</sup> M. India  
Reg<sup>t</sup> (late the Bourbon) to which I attached  
their late Officers, under the Command of  
Major Casidy, accompanied by a detachment  
of the Royal Regiment of St Michael's Militia,  
about 250 strong under the Command of  
Col: Mayes; leaving however a force fully  
adequate to the protection of the Garrison and  
Town under the Command of L<sup>t</sup> Col: Edwards  
late of the Bourbon Regiment.

On arriving in the Parish of  
St Philip, I found that the system of plunder  
and devastation, which had been pursued  
by the Insurgents had been very alarming  
in its extent and ruinous in its consequences.

Canes, Plantations, Provision grounds, a few  
dwelling Houses and Works on some of the  
Estates, in that and the neighbouring Parish  
of Christ Church having been involved, in  
a general flame whilst Household





*furniture of every description, Rum, Sugar,<sup>12</sup> Wine, Corn, and every species of food which had been stored were promiscuously scattered, in the Roads and Fields near to the dwelling Houses, with a rapidity and destruction that evinced the fury of the Insurgents.*

## Source 2 : Transcript of Letter from Colonel Edward Codd to James Leith, his report of the insurrection. (CO 28/85)

St. Ann's, April 25th 1816

Sir –

I have the honour to report to your Excellency that about two o'Clock in the morning of the 15th instant, I received an official notification of an insurrection of the Negroes in the interior of the island on the preceding evening and I was required by the President to co-operate with the militia.

About 10 o'Clock, having waited in vain for authentic information of the strength and position of the insurgents, I deemed it necessary to march off in that quarter of the country, when the alarm had first spread, with a force consisting of three field pieces under the command of Brevil Major Brough,

200 men of the 4th Battalion 60th Regiment under the command of Lt. Colonel Lomax, 200 men of the 15th Regiment under the command of Lt. Colonel Davidson, and the left wing of the West India Regiment (late the Bourbons) to which I attached their late officers, under the command of Major Cassidy, accompanied by a detachment of the royal regiment of St Michael's militia about 250 strong under the command of Colonel Mayers, leaving however a force fully adequate to the protection of the garrison and town under the command of Lt. Colonel Edwards late of the Bourbon Regiment.

On arriving in the Parish of St. Philip, I found that the system of plunder and devastation, which had been pursued by the insurgents, had been very alarming in its extent and ruinous in its consequences. Canes, Plantations, Provision grounds, a few dwelling houses and rocks on some of the estates in that and the neighbouring Parish of Christ Church having been involved in a general flame whilst household.

furniture of every description, Rum, Sugar, Wine, Corn, and every species of food which had been stored were promiscuously scattered in the Roads and Fields near to the dwelling houses, with a rapidity and destruction that evinced the fury of the insurgents.

### Glossary

Authentic: not false, genuine

Insurgents: rebels; people taking part in an uprising

Field pieces: cannons

Insurgents: rebels; people taking part in an uprising

Promiscuously: with great disorder, haphazard, jumbled

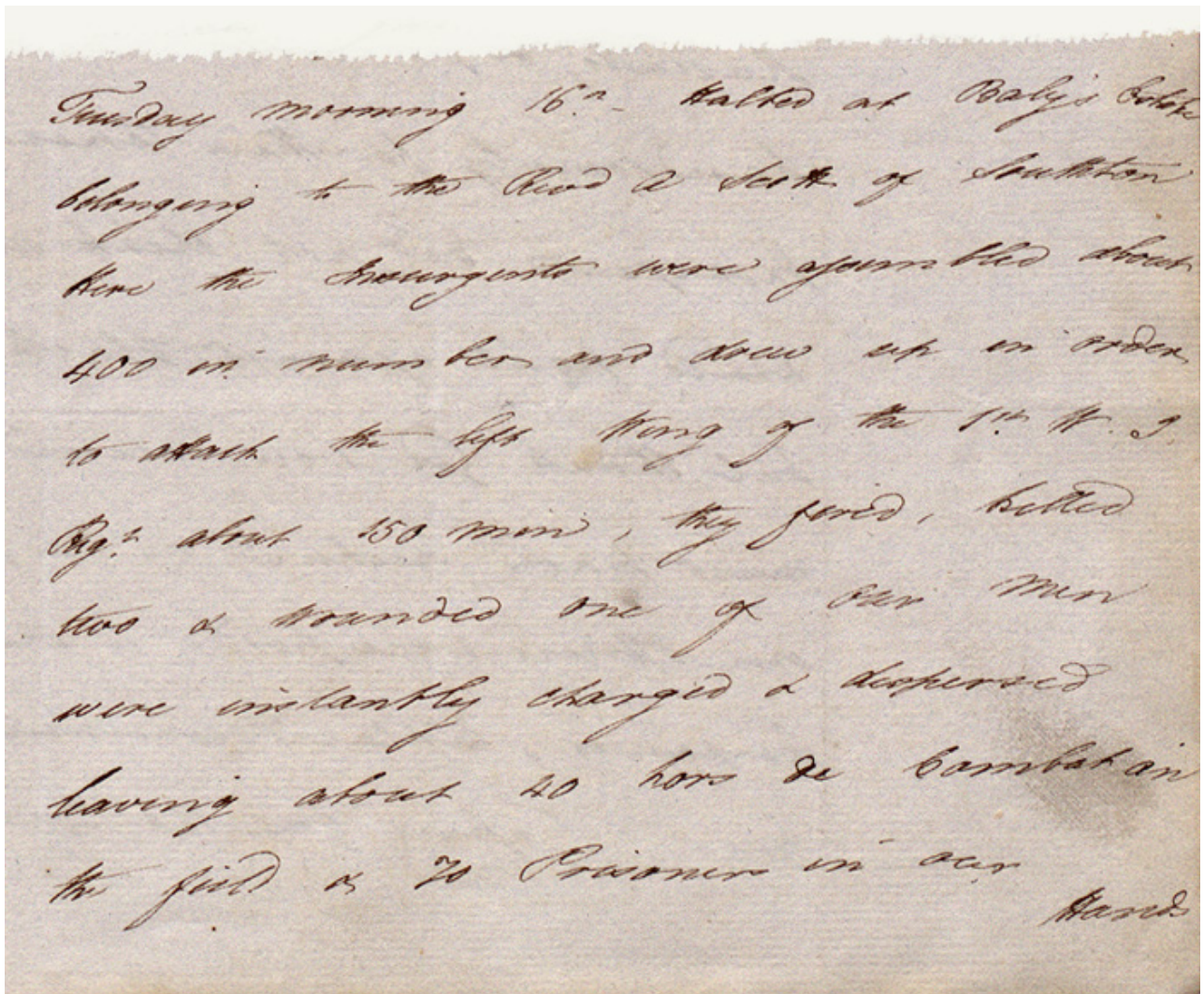
Devastation: destruction

Garrison: a fortified place where troops are stationed

Insurgents: rebels; people taking part in an uprising

Plunder: to steal of goods by force, especially in time of war; pillage

## Source 3 : Extract of a private letter, St Ann's, Barbados. (CO 28/85)

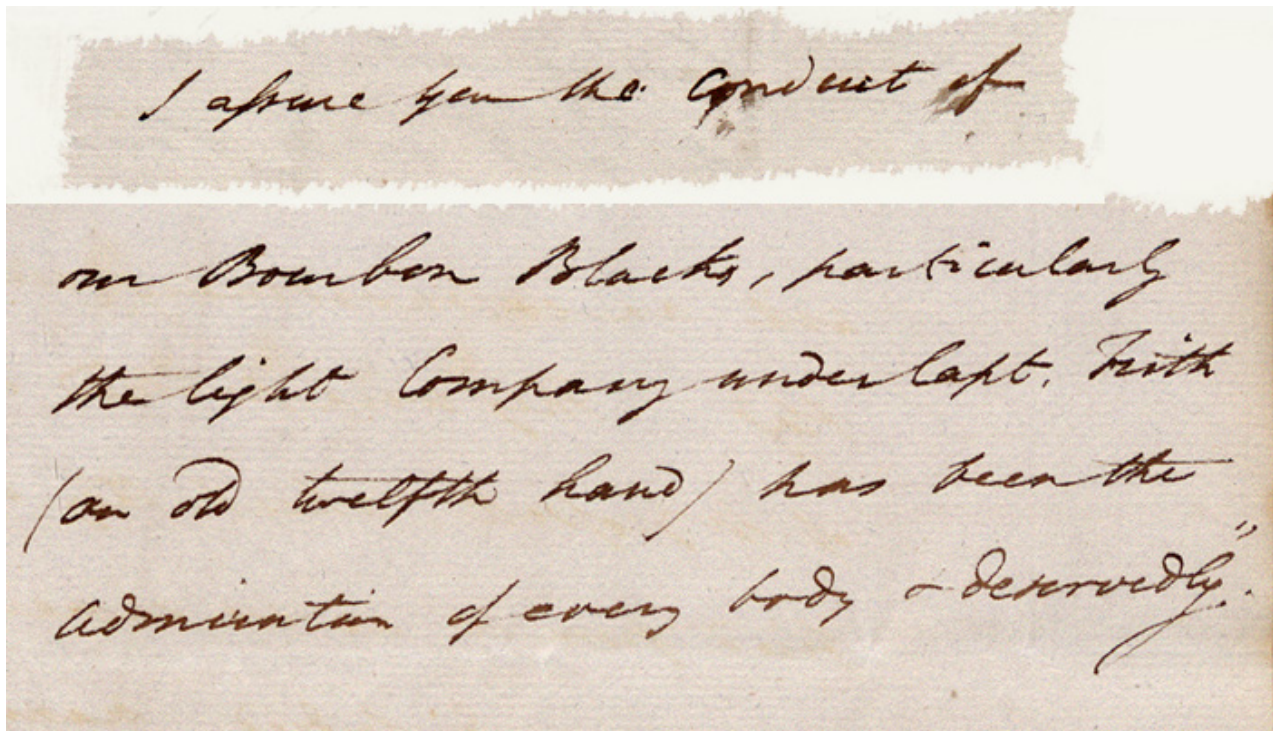


Tuesday morning 16<sup>th</sup>. halted at Bally's Creek  
belonging to the Road & South of Southton  
Here the Insurgents were gathered about  
400 in number and drew up in order  
to attack the left wing of the 1<sup>st</sup> H.I.  
Regt. about 150 men, they fired, killed  
two & wounded one of our men  
were instantly charged & dispersed  
leaving about 20 hors de combat in  
the field & 20 Prisoners in our hands



with an extraordinary emblematical  
flag. They were pursued to the house  
of Mr Grossett, which they occupied, &  
fired from it as we came up, but  
were soon dislodged, many of them  
killed & wounded, leaping from the  
windows & rushing from the doors,  
a very pretty scene did it exhibit,  
our men following them across the  
fields, & firing as fast as possible.  
A party of the 15<sup>th</sup> Regt under Major  
Grierson had also a brush with the  
Rascals, & punished them pretty  
handsomely for their temerity. The  
Insurgents did not think our men  
would fight against black men,  
but thank God were deceived.





### Source 3 : Transcript of Extract of a private letter, St Ann's, Barbados. (CO 28/85)

Tuesday morning 16th – halted at Bailey's Estate belonging to the Revd. A\_\_\_\_\_ of \_\_\_\_\_. Here the insurgents were assembled, about 400 in number and drew up in order to attack the left wing of the 1st West India Regiment about 150 men; they killed two and wounded one of the four men were instantly charged and despatched having about 40 hours of combat in the field as 70 prisoners in our hands

with an extraordinary emblematic flag. They were pursued to the house of Mr. Grosset, which they occupied and fled from it as we came up, but were soon disabled. Many of them killed and wounded, leaping from the windows and rushing from the doors, a very pretty scene did it exhibit, our men following them across the fields and firing as fast as possible.

A party of the 15th Regiment under Major Grierson also had a brush with the rascals, and punished them pretty handsomely for their temerity. The insurgents did not think our men would fight against black men, but thank God they were deceived.

I assure you the conduct of our Barbours Blacks, particularly the Light company under Captain Firth (an old twelfth hand) has been the admiration of everybody, and deservedly.

#### Glossary

Insurgents: rebels; people taking part in an uprising

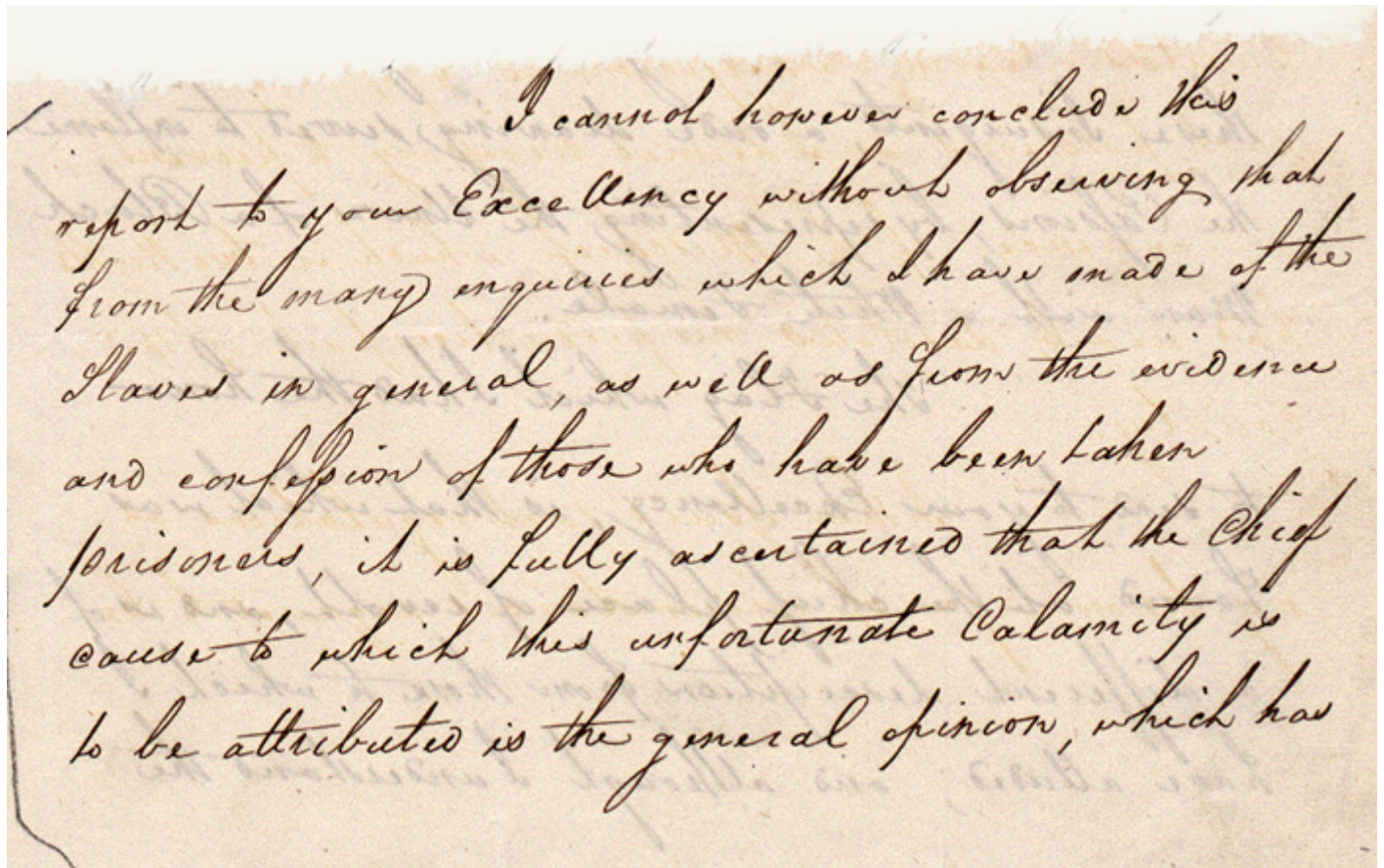
Emblematic: a symbol representing an idea

Insurgents: rebels; people taking part in an uprising

Temerity: boldness, cheek



**Source 4 : Letter from Colonel Edward Codd to James Leith, his report of the insurrection, 25th April 1816.  
(CO 28/85)**



I cannot however conclude this report to your Excellency without observing, that from the many inquiries which I have made of the Slaves in general, as well as from the evidence and confession of those who have been taken prisoners, it is fully ascertained that the chief cause to which this unfortunate Calamity is to be attributed is the general opinion, which has



peruaded the minds of those misguided people, since the proposed Introduction of the Registry Bill, that their Emancipation was desired by the British Parliament. and this Idea seems to have been conveyed by mischievous persons, and the indiscreet conversation of Individuals on the Measure.

I am happy to state that though I very particularly enquired how far ill treatment might have urged them to revolt, yet I never heard it assigned as a reason by any of them; but on the contrary it was acknowledged by all whom I spoke to or examined that they had been well treated. They maintained however to me, that the Island belonged to them, and not to white Men, whom they proposed to destroy, reserving the Females, whose lot in case of success, it is easy to conceive



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### **Glossary**

calamity: disaster

emancipation: freeing someone from the control of another, setting free

pervaded: been present in

Registry Bill: a bill passed after the abolition of the slave trade in 1807 to prevent illegal importation of enslaved Africans

mischievous: causing trouble