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Kingdom Comin': The Largest Slave Rebellion in U.S. History

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Abstract

Over at Present in the Past, Michael Lynch recently posted a [provocative question and accompanying video](#) about slave revolt. It got the wheels in my head turning. It also helped that Monday night was my first lecture scheduled on my course syllabus to dig into the "political war." My mind's been swimming with concepts of violence and resistance, freedom and slavery.

Keywords

CW150, Gettysburg, Gettysburg College, Civil War Era Studies, Civil War Interpretation, Slavery, Slave Rebellion, Freedom, Resistance

Disciplines

Cultural History | History | Public History | Social History | United States History

Comments

Interpreting the Civil War: Connecting the Civil War to the American Public is written by alum and adjunct professor, John Rudy. Each post is his own opinions, musings, discussions, and questions about the Civil War era, public history, historical interpretation, and the future of history. In his own words, it is "a blog talking about how we talk about a war where over 600,000 died, 4 million were freed and a nation forever changed. Meditating on interpretation, both theory and practice, at no charge to you."

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Interpreting the Civil War

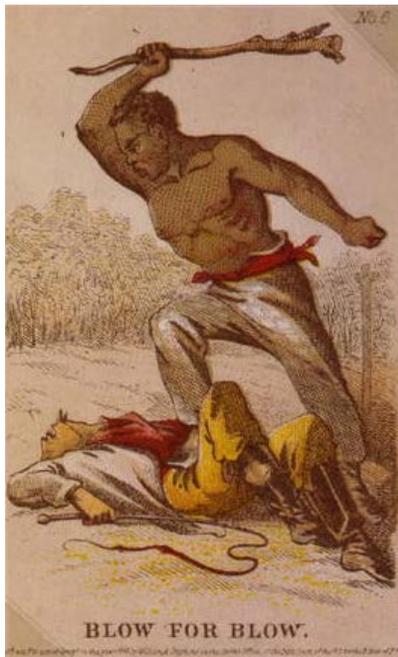
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Kingdom Comin': The Largest Slave Rebellion in U.S. History

THURSDAY, MARCH 29, 2012



Violence begets violence; oppress someone long enough and they will rebel. / PD LOC LC-USZC4-2523

Over at *Present in the Past*, Michael Lynch recently posted [a provocative question and accompanying video](#) about slave revolt. It got the wheels in my head turning. It also helped that Monday night was my first lecture scheduled on my course syllabus to dig into the "political war." My mind's been swimming with concepts of violence and resistance, freedom and slavery.

So what was the largest slave rebellion in U.S. History? That requires a key definition: what is a slave rebellion?

Toussaint-Louverture and his fellow revolutionaries in the Saint-Domingue rebellion, one of the first truly successful slave revolutions in world history, certainly throw light on one necessary ingredient: blood. The Haitian Revolution's iteration of slave rebellion was truly violent work, undertaken by one race of men against another race in response to their subjugation in spite of the master class espousing the tenants of freedom. For Toussaint-Louverture, that master race were the French. Violence was the first national language of Haiti.

Prosser's slave Gabriel, planning his revolution at the turn of the 19th century amid the growing state capital at Richmond, likewise chose violence as his language. But Gabriel more than likely had fewer than 30 allies. On Bastille Day, 1822, Denmark Vesey planned to rise up with a few more than a hundred slaves to strike

Charleston, South Carolina. The plan leaked and it went no where. Just shy of a decade later, down the road in Southampton County, Nat Turner likewise echoed the idea of violence in service of freedom. Nat Turner's rebellion saw an army of as many as 200 slaves rising up to kill over 50 local whites.

The LearnLiberty.org link Michael posted on his blog points to the Black Seminole revolt, claiming that John Horse and his fellows, "led the largest slave revolt in U.S. history." But I'm not so sure that's true.

The largest slave revolt in U.S. history involved nearly 5,000 slaves from Alabama, rising up to strike a blow against their masters. Over 5,000 more joined in from South Carolina. Mississippi saw over 17,000 black folks seize arms and draw a bead on the master class. Nearly 25,000 men from Louisiana joined the fight to secure freedom. All told, nearly 100,000 black men from across the South rose up in this slave rebellion, carried guns and killed those who would see them manacled and sold to the highest bidder. With them were nearly 80,000 black allies from the North, joining the fight alongside their enslaved brethren. This mass of men, in open and hostile rebellion against a

government and economic system which would see them reduced to chattel, blows any other slave rebellion out of the water in a test of scale.

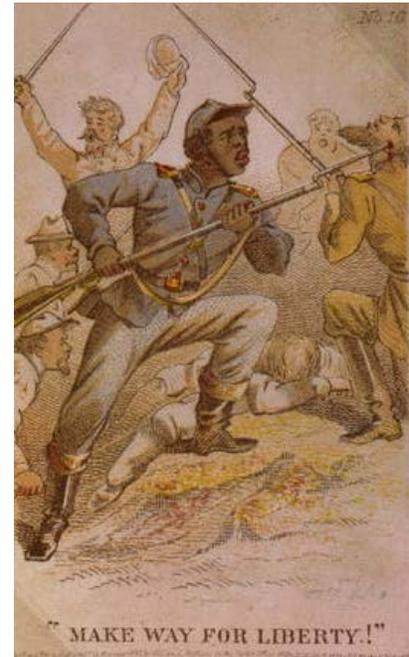
Never since the world began was a better chance offered to a long enslaved and oppressed people. The opportunity is given us to be men. With one courageous resolution we may blot out the hand-writing of ages against us."

The American Civil War could be seen, after the Emancipation Proclamation offered black men throughout the United States the opportunity to, "be received into the armed service of the United States," as the greatest slave rebellion in U.S. history. Much like the wildest dreams of John Brown, Nat Turner or Gabriel Prosser, black men were now marching across the South, physically destroying the institution with every bullet they fired and forward step they took. They were grasping manhood, proving their mettle and speaking a language of rebellion.

The hour has arrived, and your place is in the Union army. Remember that the musket – the United States musket with its bayonet of steel – is better than all mere parchment guarantees of liberty. In your hands that musket means liberty...."
-Frederick Douglass, 1863

What happens when we, for a moment, think of the Civil War as the largest American slave rebellion?

It's [a familiar, simple game of language](#), I will admit. These games, though, are instructive. They throw a new perspectives onto the war, forcing us to see the war through fundamentally different eyes and from radically different perspectives. Was that thrilling emotion felt by a USCT soldier donning his uniform and firing his gun for the first time really all that different than the emotion felt as Nat Turner's men swung axes against their masters' skulls? Both times, men were simply responding to a violent system with the only language that system would understand: violence.



Striking a blow for freedom.
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