Joseph C. Miller Memorial Lecture Series

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From “Little Better than Slaves” to “Cowskin Heroes”: Poor White People in Jamaica, 1655–1782

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Introduction: Settlement policies

What differentiated the British West Indian islands from plantation societies in the American South was demography. The rise of the large integrated plantation coincided with the worst period in the demographic history of white colonization in the British West Indies. Despite considerable immigration, white population failed to thrive. Indeed, it declined precipitously. The main reason was yellow fever, which ravaged the islands following its first appearance in the early 1690s. The success of the plantation system, which brought in thousands of immune carriers of yellow fever from Africa, as well as the particular ecology brought on by having large numbers of non-immune Europeans living, as soldiers and sailors, in close contact with each other, thus allowing epidemics to spread easily and devastatingly, brought planters great wealth but destroyed the white population. White population figures in Jamaica plummeted from low levels in the 1690s and did not regain parity until the 1730s or even the 1770s.[1]

The low levels of white population in Jamaica and the high levels of wealth among the richest sector of this population – sugar planters and transatlantic merchants – have encouraged scholars to treat the white population as an undifferentiated whole, operating in opposition to the numerically dominant but extremely oppressed population of enslaved people of African descent labouring mainly as plantation workers.[2] We

1 For yellow fever, see John Robert McNeill, *Mosquito Empires: Ecology and War in the Greater Caribbean, 1620–1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010). For the demography of white population in Jamaica, see Trevor Burnard, "'The Countrie Continues Sicklie': White Mortality in Jamaica, 1655–1780," *Social History of Medicine* 12/1 (1999): 45–72.

2 Vincent Brown, *The Reaper's Garden: Death and Power in the World of Atlantic Slavery* (Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2008); Richard S. Dunn, *A Tale of Two Plantations: Slave Life and Labor in Jamaica and Virginia* (Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2014).

have started the process of differentiating this majority black population, singling out 'privileged' slaves and free people of colour for special investigation.[3] We need to do similar processes of differentiation for the white population who, though few in number given the malign disease environment that prevented white population growth, were not all wealthy planters and who were not always in agreement with each other. Ordinary whites were extremely important in shaping Jamaican life in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. This article chronicles the ways in which they were important. In particular, it traces how ordinary white men improved their status during the eighteenth century, especially during the Seven Years' War when a major slave revolt – Tacky's Revolt – in 1760 forced white colonists to recognise that the colour of a person's skin was more important than that person's status as either unfree or free in respect to maintaining settler control over the island. In short, ordinary whites, including poor white people who had been considered unfree, as servants or convicts, went from being a problem, as commentators thought they were in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, to becoming a vital cog in the maintenance of racial boundaries in a very racially divided society. As a result, the tensions involved in some white people being unfree in a society where freedom was increasingly equated with being white disappeared as ordinary white people became categorised as free and as fewer white people who might be thought of as being unfree – convicts or servants – arrived in the island. At the same time that the rights of people of colour were being restricted as a result of legislation implemented after Tacky's revolt, the rights of white people, no matter how poor, were being enhanced, with all white people sharing in the privileges of whiteness – privileges which were considerable in Jamaica in the second half of the eighteenth century. Contemporaries, and later historians, have extrapolated those privileges from the late eighteenth century, when whiteness was the principal axis along which Jamaican society divided.

[3] Justin Roberts, "The 'Better Sort' and the 'Poorer Sort': Wealth Inequalities, Family Formation and the Economy of Energy on British Caribbean Sugar Plantations, 1750–1800," *Slavery & Abolition* 35/3 (2014), 458–473; Trevor Burnard, *Jamaica in the Age of Revolution* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2020), 131–150.

But, as this essay shows, the movement of poor whites from unfreedom to freedom and from inferior social esteem to the having all the privileges of whiteness was a process that evolved gradually over the course of the eighteenth century.

Seventeenth-century transformations

I recently outlined the pattern of the employment of ordinary whites in Jamaica in the seventeenth century and how that pattern changed in the eighteenth century. Slavery was present from the start of English settlement in Jamaica in 1655 and was always the principal labour form. Servants, however, were a sizeable part of the Jamaican labour force until the difficult years of the 1690s. The years between 1690 and 1720 were years of rapid transformation in Jamaica and in the American South. It took some considerable time for Jamaica to become a fully developed plantation society, in which large numbers of enslaved Africans worked producing tropical commodities under the direction of a small and well-remunerated managerial class of white employees. A variety of interrelated factors brought about this change, which included the opening up of the Atlantic slave trade to interlopers making available a large influx of affordable slaves at good prices to aspiring and large planters, and a land squeeze that forced small landholders and poor men to find jobs within the plantation sector.[4]

Planters found a cadre of men trained in violence who could undertake the arduous if well-paid job of controlling and disciplining traumatized and potentially hostile African men and women as a consequence of frequent Atlantic wars after 1688 and as a result of lots of white men becoming brutalized by serving as sailors in the Atlantic slave trade. I showed how a society of independent smallholders, white indentured servants, convicts, and relatively small gangs of slaves was transformed into the classic plantation society of large planters, white managers and

[4] Trevor Burnard, "'A Pack Of Knaves': The Royal African Company, the development of the Jamaican plantation economy and the benefits of monopoly, 1672–1708," *Journal of Colonialism and Colonial History* 21/2 (2020), doi:10.1353/cch.2020.0013.

black slaves. Ordinary white men were not just spectators in the great developments that created vibrant but brutal plantation societies in British America but vital actors in making these developments a reality. In essence, in Jamaica they were offered a bargain by large planters as the opportunity to become landowners closed down for most poorer whites at the end of the century. That bargain involved receiving high wages and being treated as employees, rather than servants, working as overseers in the plantation system and, even more important, being raised in status due to their white skin. In a subsequent book, co-authored with John Garrigus, we outlined how the tentative march towards Jamaica becoming a society defined by race rather than freedom with a well-developed and racist ideology valuing "whiteness" as the basis for social distinction became established firmly in Jamaican society after the trauma of Tacky's Revolt in 1760.[5]

The problem of declining white population levels led Jamaicans to rethink how they deployed indentured servants. The Jamaican Council presented a report to the Jamaican Assembly on "peopling the island" that answered questions from the Board of Trade that "the act of regulating servants is too severe, both with respect to most of the penalties and the length of servitude" though it noted that "we must augment your lordships, that the same has rarely been executed with strictness." It was especially concerned about how servants were deterred from coming to Jamaica, as "there is no provision for encouragement for women" and how it was keen to increase "the number of provision plantations and small settlements" rather than "great plantations" as it was in small settlements where "the strength of the planting interest, with respect to the numbers of white people, must consist." It thought that "if this encouragement or a suitable prospect in trade or handicrafts was to be the reward of every servant after 3 or 4 years of service, would make service agreeable and increase servant immigration." In a quickly implemented policy it noted that it was "not against your lordships method of freeing

5 Trevor Burnard, *Planters, Merchants, and Slaves: Plantation Societies in British America, 1650–1820* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 53–97; Trevor Burnard and John Garrigus, *The Plantation Machine: Atlantic Capitalism in French Saint-Domingue and British Jamaica* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), 137–163.

them at their arrival." Its conclusion as a "maxim to people the island" was that Jamaica should "indulge and cherish the newcomers and small settlements and to throw the burthen chiefly on those who are best able to bear it."[6]

Demography of unfree Jamaica

It is not an easy matter to determine the number of unfree white people who lived in Jamaica but the numbers are surprisingly large, given a white population that stayed resolutely below 10,000 before 1750 and not much more than that in the next quarter century. Before 1718, the unfree white population comprised servants and convicts. We have reliable figures on convicts. Jamaica received 1,336 convicts between 1660 and 1717, with the numbers peaking during the Monmouth riots of 1685–1686 when 353 convicts were sent to the island. In that year convicts comprised 34 percent of the 1,042 white arrivals in Jamaica. Their numbers dwindled over time, falling to low levels by the 1710s, although in 1716 the Council, somewhat provocatively, was so concerned by the low levels of white population in Jamaica that it suggested that Jacobite rebels might be shipped to Jamaica.[7] A shipment of 54 convicts in 1717 proved the final straw for a Jamaica legislature increasingly concerned about its internal security as the numbers of enslaved people rocketed up following the end of the Royal African monopoly in 1708 and increased volumes of enslaved people transported by separate traders.[8]

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6 *Journals of the Assembly of Jamaica* 2 (21 September 1716): 225.

7 *Journals of the Assembly of Jamaica* 2 (21 September 1716): 226. In fact, there were 47 Scottish "prisoners taken after the late rebellion transported to Liverpool" and then were sent to Jamaica on 16 August 1716 on the *Two Brothers*. Peter Wilson Coldham, *Complete Book of Emigrants, 1607–1776 and Emigrants in Bondage, 1614–1775,* 5 volumes (Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing Co., 1987–1993); Peter Wilson Coldham, *The Complete Book of Emigrants in Bondage, 1614–1775* (Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing Co., 1988).

8 When Whitehall protested at how Jamaica imposed a large tax on felon migrants, Jamaica's Council noted that "[if] it be prudence in England to banish rogues; it must certainly be prudence here to endeavour to keep them out"; quoted in A. Roger Ekirch, *Bound for America: The Transportation of British Convicts to the Colonies, 1718–1775* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), 70, 113, 137–139. After the end of the American

The number of servants who came to Jamaica is harder to ascertain but they were numerous. In 1675, Edward Canfield reported that in the "last three or four years 500 servants came from England" as well as "1200 or 1400 men and women free."[9] In 1685–1686, 390 of 1,042 migrants (37 percent) were servants. As everywhere in British America, the number of indentured servants declined after 1700, but the numbers were still substantial. We have records of indentured servants leaving from London between 1718 and 1759 with the greatest number – 1,572 or 105 per annum – leaving London for Jamaica between 1725–1739. Numbers declined, from 280 white servants arriving in 1725, to 179 in 1730, to 148 in 1735 and to 73 in 1743. They went into rapid decline in the late 1740s to under 30 per annum and under 20 per annum in the early 1750s before virtually stopping during and especially after the Seven Years War and after Tacky's Revolt in 1760. Most servants (89 percent) came from England, especially from the Home Counties and London, and were, compared to servants in North America, relatively high status. Skilled tradesmen accounted for 64 percent of seventeenth-century migrants to Jamaica and 55 percent of eighteenth-century indentured servant migrants. Their prospects were handicapped by Jamaica's dreadful demography, with 36 percent dying within 5 years of arrival and 53 percent not surviving more than 10 years in Jamaica. Just 26 percent of indentured servants were still alive or present in Jamaica 18 years after arrival.[10]

The last time that indentured servants were in Jamaica in appreciable numbers was in the early 1730s. Excessive white mortality, notably in the charnel house of Kingston, home to one-third of the white population of Jamaica, meant that the native-born population failed to thrive and experienced constantly declining population. Their places were taken by immigrants, many of whom were servants. The result was a population

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Revolution, when Britain was faced with the problem of where to send convicts, there was some suggestion that convicts might be sent to the Mosquito Shore. Lord Sydney to Governor Alured Clarke, 5 October, 1784, London, C[olonial] O[ffice]. 137/84/146, National Archives, Kew, London.

9 Observation of Present State of Jamaica by Edward Canfield, 1675, C.O. 138/2/119.

10 Trevor Burnard, "European Migration to Jamaica, 1655–1780," *William and Mary Quarterly* 53/4 (1996): 774.

that in a census of 1730 contained almost double the number of white servants (4008) as free white adults (2251). The number of servants was identified as a problem by Governor Robert Hunter, a grizzled military man who was unimpressed by what he thought was the sorry state of the Jamaican militia as it faced a serious challenge from Maroons in the Jamaican interior. He lamented that "our indifferent Militia" was comprised mostly of white servants, many of whom were Irish and thus whose loyalty was intrinsically suspect, "of whom much the greater part is not to be trusted with arms."[11]

These servants were a sizeable percentage of the white population in every parish but were especially prominent within the most rural parishes with the greatest commitment to sugar production. The parish with the highest number of servants was St. Elizabeth in the south-west where 438 of 596 whites were servants (73.5 percent of all whites and 85.7 percent of white adults). The far southwestern parish of Westmoreland had 318 servants, (which was 71.8 percent of all whites and 84.4 percent of white adults). The central parish of St. John and the parish immediately north of Kingston, St. Andrews, also had over 70 percent of the white population and over 80 percent of the adult white population as servants. Of the four subdivisions of Jamaica, the eastern subdivision of Surrey had the highest percentage of servants (59.9 percent) followed not far behind by the western division of Cornwall, with servants comprising 54.2 percent of the white population. The area with the lowest percentage of servants was the urban parishes of Kingston and Port Royal, where 41.8 percent of the white population were servants. By contrast, the remaining parishes of Jamaica, which were mostly rural, had a majority of the white population (51.3 percent) as servants.[12]

These figures suggest that, as the Council and Board of Trade recommended in 1716, indentured servants were steered towards the countryside, to work in the plantation economy as overseers and bookkeepers.

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11 Robert Hunter, "Governor Robert Hunter to the Council of Trade and Plantations, 4 July, 1730," in *Calendar of State Papers, Colonial Service: America and the West Indies 30, 1717–1718*, ed. Cecil Headlam (London, 1930): 311.

12 Governor Robert Hunter, Governor of Jamaica to His Majesty, Relating to the Unhappy Situation of Affairs of That Island, by the Increase and Success of Their Rebellious Negroes, 11 February 1731, C.O. 137/19/2.

Nevertheless, few of them by 1730 were indentured servants in the traditional sense of people whose time was owned by masters and who could not leave their master's employ before serving the time that they were bound for. It appears that the period when indentured servitude in that traditional sense was significant in Jamaica was very brief, lasting only in the 1670s and 1680s, in the period before the plantation economy had been fully implanted into the island. Between 1674 and 1689, there were 299 servants listed in 153 inventories (1.95 servants per inventory) which accounted for 4.9 percent of the labour force of 6,278. A few large planters, such as Robert Phillips, Francis Mann and Andrew Orgill, listed 6 or 7 servants in their inventories but most inventories included just one or two servants amongst a largely African slave force. That percentage shrunk dramatically in the 1690s, with indentured servants accounting for just 0.7 percent of the labour force of 7,866 in that decade. Only Sir Thomas Modyford in the 1690s had more than one indentured servant, with 4 servants and 527 enslaved persons. By the early eighteenth century, the number of indentured servants listed in inventories had declined to virtually nothing, with just three indentured servants noted in inventories made between 1700 and 1730. After that date no person was listed in an inventory as an indentured servant, suggesting that servants were all waged employees rather than bound to labour.[13]

And by the 1750s, the number of people termed servants, even if they were waged employees, was rapidly declining. In St. Andrews in 1754, the number of servants was 210, working on 89 estates, down from 375 servants in the parish in 1730. Eight proprietors had five or more servants with Philip Pinnock having easily the most, with 16 servants, alongside his 280 enslaved persons. They accounted for a minimal percentage (2.6 percent) of the labour force of the parish. In the fast developing but newly settled parish of St. James in the same year, planters had stopped calling waged employees as being servants: there were only 34 servants in a white population of 1,070, accounting for 3.2 percent of all whites and 4.8 percent of white adults. Only 17 of 223 properties listed servants, with two having four servants, three having three and five

[13] Inventories, 1674–1708, IB1/11/1–6, Jamaica Archives, Spanishtown.

with two servants.[14] 1754 was probably the last year when indentured servants came to Jamaica in any number, with 16 coming from London. With the outbreak of the Seven Years War in 1756, indentured servants ceased to be anything other than a very minor part of European migration to Jamaica. Whereas between 1751 and 1756 77 servants departed London for Jamaica (11.1 per annum), only 49 servants left London for Jamaica between 1757 and 1776 (2.3 per annum) with just 15 servants in the 10 years before the outbreak of the American Revolution (1.5 per annum).[15] In the last three years before the American Revolution, when imports of captives from Africa reached a peak of over 15,000 per annum, Bernard Bailyn notes that just eight indentured servants went to the entire West Indies.[16] Much earlier than in North America, white migration to Jamaica became free migration – the changes effectively occurring before the Seven Years' War and to a large extent before the War of Austrian Succession and Jamaica's Treaty with the Maroons in 1739, which opened up settlement in Jamaica's north, west and east.[17]

Unfree stories

Unfree white people in Jamaica were more than numbers but it is hard to find out much about them or to hear their voices. They died quickly, without establishing families or leaving much wealth behind them. Just 19 of the 1,780 servants who went to Jamaica from London between 1719 and 1759 left wills before 1765.[18] We do get some idea of them

14 Jack P. Greene, *Settler Jamaica in the 1750s: A Social Portrait* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2016), 102–105, 188.

15 Peter Wilson Coldham, *Complete Book of Emigrants, 1751–1776* (Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing Co., 1993), passim.

16 Bernard Bailyn, *Voyagers to the West: A Passage in the Peopling of America on the Eve of the Revolution* (New York: Vintage Books, 1986), 212–213.

17 Aaron S. Fogleman, "From Slaves, Convicts, and Servants to Free Passengers: The Transformation of Immigration in the Era of the American Revolution," *Journal of American History* 85/1 (1998): 43–76.

18 Trevor Burnard, "European Migration to Jamaica, 1655–1780," *William and Mary Quarterly* 53/4 (1996): 780.

as people, however, from records of servants who returned illegally to Britain and got caught up in the legal machinery of the Old Bailey.

Robert Perkins, executed on 5 July 1721, for returning unauthorized from transportation, had been sent to Jamaica for a term of seven years, having been brought up in reasonably comfortable circumstances in Hertfordshire as the son of an innkeeper. He had, he stated, "an opportunity of being led into an honest, sober and industrious Course of life" but "his natural inclinations directed him to Ease, Idleness and Pleasures." He was sold in Jamaica for £10 "but his trade being Nothing there" (he was a baker) "he was put to Hoeing, planting Tobacco, and all the Hardships that the Negro Slaves endured." His master was unhappy with him, arguing "that no Words nor Stripes could make him Work in that way," and sold him to a baker so he could make bread. This master, according to Perkins, was brutal, beating him, and underfeeding him, so that he "stole away from Jamaica to Carolina then Maryland." He was captured by Spaniards and "by chance" arrived back in England where he worked two years at a trade but was "always uneasy and afraid." With two children dead and a wife "young enough to maintain herself," he turned himself in "to suffer as the Law directed."[19]

Another transported convict who returned home and was executed in 1721 was 31-year-old William Barton. A Londoner, he went to sea in 1702 and ended up in Jamaica where his Father, "lately Dead," had been a substantial planter. In an unexplained way, Barton did not "look after his Father's Effects" and returned to sea, where, like Perkins, he was captured by Spaniards and "treated barbarously." He returned to England, fell afoul of the law, and was again transported to Jamaica for a term of eight years. He was sold for £10 "but was not used as a Slave but set to overlook the Negroes in their Work and to lash them when they neglected it." He thought this time "was the happiest part of his life; that he endured no wretchedness, had no Care but found whatever was requisite for the sustaining Life provided for him." He left this agreeable employment as a plantation manager due to him being "so very restless" and wanting to return to a "far distant" wife he returned to

[19] Ordinary's Account, Executions, 5 July 1721, OA17210705. https://www.oldbaileyonline.org/

England where he was caught up in the machinery of the Old Bailey.[20] Stephen Delaforce, just 18 when hanged, told a similar story to Barton. He was transported and sold to a woman. He noted that "after the Lady he was Slave to had given him his Freedom he could have spent his life in Happiness and Plenty in that Part of the World" but was "unhappily" impressed onto a Royal Navy ship and was in some sort of unspecified way "led astray by a woman of ill design who persuaded him to forsake his father."[21]

Perhaps the most interesting testimony came from William Burk, executed for violent assaults and robberies, aged 22. He was not himself transported but became a seaman who went to Jamaica and was "involved in fighting the Spaniards," leading a "bad life" during three years sailing about the coasts of Americas when "sailors encouraged him to play tricks with the inhabitants of the Plantations." The result was he began "to look upon Pilfering and Thieving as no more than merry Jokes and Jests." Burk was a truly Atlantic figure, working not just in Jamaica but in Maryland, Virginia, West Africa and the Baltic, as well as in the Atlantic slave trade, about which he had several stories. His main value to us in this essay is his aside about conditions in Jamaica in the 1720s. He noted that Jamaica was "full of Negro-servants" but "destitute of White Servants, so that, a Woman who had been Transported from Newgate, was grown Rich by marrying in Jamaica." Burk became himself a servant in Jamaica, "living very well there," until his penchant for playing pranks backfired and his mistress sold him to Maryland rather than giving him his freedom.[22]

Once in Jamaica, servants can be hard to find. Occasionally, they pop up in advertisements in newspapers.[23] In 1718/1719, the *Weekly Jamaica Courant* ran three advertisements for runaway servants. John

[20] Ordinary's Account, Executions, 12 May 1721, OA172105R. https://www.oldbaileyonline.org/

[21] Ordinary's Account, 26 October 1720, OA17201026. https://www.oldbaileyonline.org/

[22] Ordinary's Account, executed criminals, 8 April 1723, OA17230408. https://www.oldbaileyonline.org/

[23] We are greatly handicapped in tracing servants by the poor survival rates of newspapers from early Jamaica. There are only occasional issues and no sizeable runs of newspapers from before the 1780s.

Swinstead, a Barbadian aged about 35 and 5 foot 7 inches, escaped from the estate of James Pinnock of St. Andrew Parish and was described as having "a down look and lisps in his speech, very weak in his hands and legs, having once lost his limbs by the Bellyache." A further detail noted that he "usually wears a Cap, having no hair." On 11 July, an advertisement was placed by John Morgan of Passage-Fort about two white servants for whom he offered 40 shillings reward. One was "a Harness maker, named Richard Paul" who wore "an old Broad-Cloth Coat with Silk Loops, short hair, wears a Brown Broad-Cloth Jackey with Silver Trimming." The other was "a Yorkshire boy, named Joshua Hole, wears an old dirty Broad Cloth, an Oznabrig Jacket, and Speckl'd Shirt." On 30 July 1718, "a white servant boy named John Bradus, aged about 16" was described as having "absented himself […] from his Master Doctor Smithell Motson's service." The newspaper advertisement went into considerable detail about his appearance and character. He was "well set, fair complection, has Short Yellow hair, wears a pair of oznabrig breeches, speckled Shirt and Blew striped Jacket with an old black hat, Shoes and Stockings." Suggesting that he was not English, it was noted that "he speaks good English and Dutch, and can read and write, Bleed, Sing and Dance." Possibly he had been a sailor as "on each of his Arms is the sign of the Jerusalem Arms and several blew spots on his hands." His master offered 20 shillings reward for his return while threatening anyone who "entertains him" that this "bee at their peril."[24]

There were further white servants noted as having run away in later issues of the newspaper. On 5 June 1720, two "Indented Servants" in the service of Thomas Fish of Clarendon – Richard Smith, a carpenter, wearing a "blue and white Striped jacket and breeches" and John Bate, who did not have his clothing or trade specified were noted as runaways. On 22 March 1726 a 28-year-old man, John Henderson, from the estate of Colonel Harris in St. Thomas in the East was noted absent. He wore an "old brown Coat, Oznabrig Jacket and Breeches" which was the same clothing as worn by another indented servant, John Turner, also 28, runaway from Edward Pennant, Esquire in Clarendon. In 1728, John

[24] *Weekly Jamaica Courant*, 30 July 1718, 5 August 1718, 11 February 1719.

Brown, an "indented White Man-Servant" who was 27 years old and a "shipwright by trade, served his Time in Chatham Yard" was listed as a runaway. In 1730, Richard Steele, aged 21, of Hanover "absented himself, sometime past" noted as "commonly wear[ing] a brown drugget coat with silver buttons" while in the same issue an advertisement was placed by Messieurs Bickford and Grant in St. Elizabeth about a "Man-Servant, John Thompson, Irish, wheelwright by trade young; has been in the Island about nine weeks." The masters declared that "returners will be well rewarded."[25]

More detailed information about servants is very rare. One servant we know about is William Crookshanks, a serving man from St. James, Westminster who in 1753 was bound to Thomas Pullen to serve for four years in Jamaica.[26] By 1754, Crookshanks was working alongside Thomas Thistlewood, an immigrant overseer from Lincolnshire who supervised enslaved people on William Dorrill's Egypt estate in Westmoreland. Thistlewood did not like Crookshanks, especially after Crookshanks, demonstrating his Cockney origins, abused Thistlewood's enslaved mistress, Phibbah, "in a strange Billingsgate language […] which she answer'd pretty well." What made Thistlewood think particularly poorly of Crookshanks was that his underling became enamoured of an enslaved woman named Myrtilla, whom he rented for £20 from Dorrill and Dorrill's free coloured mistress, Elizabeth. Things came to a head on 1756 when Crookshanks resisted Elizabeth and her new partner, William Mould, who was also an indentured servant, being a "blue-coat boy" from Christ's Hospital for orphans in Horsham, Surrey, reclaiming Myrtilla. Crookshanks was distraught and made "an extraordinary scene" hysterically abusing Myrtilla's owners, much to Thistlewood's disgust.[27]

Crookshanks had damaged his position as a white person by showing excessive concern for an enslaved woman, whom Thistlewood believed manipulated her lover and was a malingerer, and in questioning one of the fundamental principles of Jamaican life, which was that a white per-

25 *Weekly Jamaica Courant*, 24 April 1728, 13 March 1730, 24 June 1730.
26 ATSM/f.13, Corporation of London Record Office, London.
27 Trevor Burnard, *Mastery, Tyranny and Desire: Thomas Thistlewood and His Slaves in the Anglo-Jamaican World* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 98.

son (and in this case a free person of colour) had complete authority over enslaved property. Crookshanks left his employment at Egypt, moving to the Mosquito Shore in Central America where, to Thistlewood's evident satisfaction, as noted in diary entries from the summer of 1761, he did not prosper and eventually perished.[28] Crookshanks' fate was typical, it appears, of servants – their limited presence in inventories suggest that they either died quickly after arrival or did not leave substantial assets when they died. Occasionally, however, a servant did well. William Mould became, after his marriage to Dorrill's wealthy coloured mistress, a landowner and part of a circle of readers of books along with Thistlewood in Westmoreland.[29]

The rarest mentions of servants were of women, which makes the appearance of Elizabeth O'Hara in a notorious divorce case of 1739 between wealthy Kingston merchant, Edward Manning and his wife, Elizabeth, recorded at length in the *Journals of the House of Assembly*, especially valuable. O'Hara was Elizabeth's servant but the relationship between the two was not happy and O'Hara was dismissed by Edward after she had accused Elizabeth of a "familiarity with negroes." Edward dismissed her "with as great resentment as any gentleman could show, without breaking the peace." When Edward found out that Elizabeth had been committing adultery with a wealthy planter, Ballard Beckford, and sought to divorce her, O'Hara took her revenge and repeated the scandalous claims that Elizabeth had slept with enslaved men. Her revenge backfired. After she gave her evidence, a number of supporters of Elizabeth traduced O'Hara's character, calling her "a noisy woman" who was reputed to have born and then killed an infant child and who was habitually drunk, a scold and tattletale, and a mischief maker.[30]

What was especially revealing about this testimony was that O'Hara had a particularly difficult relationship with enslaved people who neither respected her nor accepted her authority over them. Witnesses

28 Trevor Burnard, *Mastery, Tyranny and Desire: Thomas Thistlewood and His Slaves in the Anglo-Jamaican World* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 98–99.

29 Trevor Burnard, *Mastery, Tyranny and Desire: Thomas Thistlewood and His Slaves in the Anglo-Jamaican World* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 109.

30 *Journals of the Assembly of Jamaica* 3 (13 April 1739): 474–498.

declared that O'Hara had "made an unusual noise scolding negroes" who were "very impudent to her." They told "a lamentable story" about how an enslaved woman had "flung a brick" at O'Hara when O'Hara had attempted to whip an enslaved man. The brick-thrower had declared that if she did whip this man "she should never whip anybody again." Such threats were not made lightly in Jamaica and that the woman was not severely punished for her "impudence" demonstrates the limited control this supposedly quarrelsome servant woman had over enslaved people who did not see O'Hara as having the authority they expected to see from white people and that white authorities did not see much difference between the poorer sort of white people and enslaved people.[31]

The problem of the white poor

Writers such as Richard Blome, referring to Jamaica in 1670, thought the problem of the English idle poor could be solved by sending the destitute to the tropics, allowing "those multitudes of vagrants and idle poor" who were a "shame" to England to become productive members of society if allowed to live in a place where they could "live both honestly and plentifully." It became received opinion that poor white people retained their troublesome character and idle ways even when sent to places of plenty and abundance. They preferred to drink, fornicate and fight rather than work. John Taylor was typical in his disdain for poor white men in his account of Port Royal, the privateer's capital in 1688. He described the town as "very lo[o]se in itself," and as infected by prostitutes, who were a "walking plague." The town itself, full of "wild young blades," was rude and antique that "ere was Sodom, fill'd with all manner of debauchery."[32]

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31 Trevor Burnard, "'A Matron in Rank, a Prostitute in Manners …': The Manning Divorce of 1741 and Class, Race, Gender, and the Law in Eighteenth-Century Jamaica," in *Working Out Slavery, Pricing Freedom: Perspectives from the Caribbean, Africa and the African Diaspora*, ed. Verene Shepherd (London: Palgrave, 2002): 133–152.

32 Henry Colt, "The Voyage of Sir Henry Colt, Knight, to the Islands of the Antilles in the Ship Called the 'Alexander,' Anno 1631," in *Colonising Expeditions to the West Indies and Guiana, 1623–1667*, ed. Vincent Todd Harlow (London: Hakluyt Society, 1925):

Poor whites in nineteenth-century Barbados, the only British West Indian island where they resided in any number had a similar bad reputation among the well-born. Barbadian planters were highly contemptuous of what they termed "redlegs," people who were by legend the descendants of Irish and Scottish convicts and prisoners of war sent to the island in the seventeenth century. They called them "as degenerate and useless a race as can be imagined" or "the most indolent, ignorant and impudent race of beggars that were ever tolerated in any community." It is significant that commentators used the word "race" to describe them, attributing their deficiencies to their seemingly degraded origins and to their close resemblance to African slaves. George Pinckard made the connection clear in 1795, stating that "redlegs" "are reduced to a state not much superior to the condition of free negroes." They were especially despised by the planter elite as being a potentially dangerous element of the population, determined on their rights, being "as proud as Lucifer," and engaged in trading goods, food and alcohol with slaves, upon whom they notoriously depended for charity.[33]

The development of a permanently poor white underclass as happened in Barbados did not occur in Jamaica. In that society, we see a change in how poorer white people were incorporated into larger social patterns, as Jamaica moved in the 1760s from a society in which the principal axis of distinction was around freedom to one that was around race. By the second half of the eighteenth century, and primarily as a result of Jamaica's enhanced attention to security and to firm categories of racial difference after the shock of Tacky's Revolt in 1760, poorer whites were treated very differently to "redlegs" in Barbados. They were seen as vital supports to the maintenance of white supremacy in the island. The transition from "freedom" to "race" as the principal marker of difference in

65; Thomas Verney, "Thomas Verney to Edmund Verney, 10 February 1639," in *Letters and papers of the Verney Family down to the End of the Year 1639*, ed. John Bruce (London: Camden Society, 1853): 192–195; Richard Blome, *A Description of the Island of Jamaica* (London: T. Milbourn, 1672); David Buisseret, ed., *Jamaica in 1687: The Taylor Manuscript at the National Library of Jamaica* (Kingston: University of West Indies Press, 2006).

33 George Pinckard, *Notes on the West Indies. Written during the Expedition under the Command of the Late General Sir Ralph Abercromby,* 2 volumes (London: Cambridge University Press, 1806), 132–134.

Jamaica may have seemed a marginal difference as poorer white people, even those coming in as unfree people, had always been better treated than Africans, even Africans who had attained freedom. But the difference was significant, meaning that the nature of white society changed from the 1760s with it becoming increasingly impossible to conceive of white unfreedom in a society in which, as Bryan Edwards explained in the early 1790s, Jamaicans' sense of conscious equality derived from "the pre-eminence and distinction which are necessarily attached even to the complexion of a white Man, in a country where the complexion, generally speaking, distinguishes freedom from slavery." He noted that there was in Jamaica "a marked and predominant character to all the white residents" as they had "an independent spirit and a display of conscious equality throughout all ranks and conditions" so that "the poorest white person […] approaches his employed with an extended hand."[34]

Establishing white racial superiority

It is important to note, however, that what Edwards described in the 1790s and which he believed was a fundamental and lasting characteristic of white social relations in Jamaica was of relatively recent standing, existing only in the eighteenth century and strictly speaking since the 1760s. It only really came into place after the changes in Jamaican society that arose after the shock of a great slave rebellion, Tacky's Revolt.[35] In the seventeenth century, white Jamaicans had a similar view of white servants as Edmund Morgan argues was common in Virginia, indicative of a contempt for poor people brought over from England in the early seventeenth century.[36] John Taylor in his entertaining account of life

[34] Trevor Burnard and John Garrigus, *The Plantation Machine. Atlantic Capitalism in French Saint-Domingue and British Jamaica* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), 142–143.

[35] Vincent Brown, *Tacky's Revolt: The Story of an Atlantic Slave War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2020).

[36] Edmund S. Morgan, "Slavery and Freedom: the American Paradox," *Journal of American History* 59/1 (1972): 24. Such contempt continued and to some extent was amplified into the late eighteenth century and especially into the nineteenth century, as landless whites, sometimes employed as overseers, sometimes close to vagrancy, were

in Port Royal in 1688 described the lives as servants as unenviable. He argued that "the wealthy planter" was "verey severe to his English servants, for alltho' they are not put to worke att the hough as the Negroa slaves are, yet they are kept very hard to their labor att felling of timber hewing staves for casks, sugar boyling and other labours, soe they are little better than slaves." Indeed, warming to his theme, Taylor suggested that servants might be worse off than slaves as planters were inclined to treat enslaved people as valuable pieces of property while servants were cheap and disposable. He argued that "there is not half that car[e] taken over 'em [servants] as over their Negroes, and when dead noe more ceremony at their funeral than if they were to belong to a dogg."[37]

One might think that this contempt towards white unfree people would have led these derided poor white people to combine with the majority of poor people – enslaved Africans – in attacks on well-off white Jamaicans. That never seemed to have happened. I am not aware of any servant revolt in Jamaica similar to Bacon's Rebellion in Virginia in 1675 or Clarke's Conspiracy in 1708 in Maryland. And blacks, unlike what sometimes happened in Barbados before 1660, do not seem to have seen poor whites as allies, even in the early stages of Jamaican history. In 1685–1686, dozens of enslaved people belonging to "Madam Guy" rose in violent rebellion, and "murther'd fifteen Christian souls, all that belonged to the plantation but two, as the overseer which was then at the Port about his mistrise's negotiations, and Madam Guy herself whom a Negro Woman […] had amongst old Negroe cloaths."[38] Local planter John Helyar blamed the white servants for what happened to them as they had "gotten drunk and therefore unable to Quell" Madam Guy's slaves.[39]

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derided by wealthy planters. See Laura Sandy, *The Overseers of Early American Slavery: Supervisors, Enslaved Labourers, and the Plantation Enterprise* (New York: Routledge, 2020).

37 David Buisseret, ed., *Jamaica in 1687. The Taylor Manuscript at the National Library of Jamaica* (Kingston: University of West Indies Press, 2006), 274–278.

38 David Buisseret, ed., *Jamaica in 1687. The Taylor Manuscript at the National Library of Jamaica* (Kingston: University of West Indies Press, 2006), 276.

39 John Helyar to William Helyar, 27 March 1686, Helyar Mss., Somerset Record Office.

Occasionally, whites and blacks did collaborate. On 24 April 1730, an advertisement in the *Weekly Jamaica Courant* "two indented White Servant Men; a joiner Named Moses Taylor and a Tailor named Andrew Dunbar, tall and elderly" ran away in the company of enslaved men, Tom, described as "pretty old" and Ben, who was "a young creole."[40] More often, however, poorer whites insisted on maintaining a firm distance between whites and blacks. They had good reason to do so, as what we see happening in the first half of the eighteenth century was a steady rise in the status of whites, especially poor whites, and a gradual move from a society in which the principal dividing line was around freedom to one in which the dividing line was around colour. It was an uneven process, because there were powerful forces within the Jamaican elite who wanted to advance the position of wealthy free people of colour (to whom the elite was often related) so that they might have all the rights and privileges of white people. To an extent this is what happened but it did so over the strenuous objections of poorer white people who resented even the notion that any free person of colour might be considered equal, or, even worse, superior, to the lowest of white people, such as indentured servants, plantation employees, urban bookkeepers and, more controversially, sailors and soldiers.[41]

They were emboldened to make such protests in favour of restructuring Jamaican society around maintaining the privileges of whiteness by the solicitations made towards keeping poor whites satisfied as white elites worried about the failure of the white population to increase. We have seen this solicitation of poorer whites in the arguments of the Jamaica Council in promoting using servants to become settlers in the developing areas of Jamaica. The general attitude can be seen in two

40 *Weekly Jamaica Courant*, 24 April 1728.

41 Sailors and soldiers had an uncertain place within Jamaican society, usually designated as "strangers" or transients. Maria Alessandra Bolletino, Matthew P. Dziennik, and Simon P. Newman, "'All spirited likely young lads': free men of colour, the defence of Jamaica, and subjecthood during the American War for Independence," *Slavery & Abolition* 41/2 (2020): 207–218. Peter Way argues that soldiers in the British Army in the Seven Years War were subjected to very harsh discipline and the abrogation of rights. Peter Way, "Militarizing the Atlantic World: Army discipline, coerced labor and Britain's commercial empire," *Atlantic Studies* 13/3 (2016): 345–369.

proposals by John Knight, a wealthy absentee planter, in 1726 and the late 1730s.

In 1726, Knight put forward proposals about how the number of white inhabitants might be increased. He argued that Britain should send to Jamaica as servants 400 boys aged between 12 and 15 and 200 girls aged between 11 and 12. He thought that if the servants came as boys and girls they would do so before they had "contracted bad habits" and thus could "more easily conform to changes of climate and lifestyle," arriving when they still had "little attachment to their native country" so that they could "become attached to Jamaica." They would be well-treated servants, brought up to trades, and presumably paid wages, as if they were apprentices more than indentured servants. The advantages of such a scheme, Knight thought, were that these young people would "furnish the Island in a few years with Overseers and Tradesmen" on "moderate Wages" and "lessen if not entirely remove the necessity of sending to England yearly for servants or of Employing Negroes" as tradesmen.[42]

Knight developed his thoughts further in his unpublished history of Jamaica written in the late 1730s. This history was written after a decade of warfare between the Jamaican state and Maroons, massive importations of Africans through the Atlantic slave trade, and continuing stagnation in white population levels, which meant that ensuring the security of the island from attack from internal enemies was a major focus of his attention. Knight was worried about Jamaica's security because he doubted that "4 or 500 Planters" and "the White Servants they commonly Employ" could protect the country. Thus, he insisted that Jamaica needed to encourage new migrants through giving them favourable conditions on arrival so they could become settlers. It was only through having "a sufficient strength of White Inhabitants able to bear Arms, who have some property to defend; or a Military Force established among them for their protection" that Jamaica could be safe.[43]

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42 "Proposals for Increasing the Number of White Inhabitants in Jamaica," "Papers Relating to Jamaica," Add. Mss. 22,676, British Library, London, 68–69.

43 Jack P. Greene, "Introduction," in *The Natural, Moral, and Political History of Jamaica, and the Territories thereon Depending. From the First Discovery of the Island by Christopher*

The problem, he thought, was that Jamaica was not attractive to white settlers, put off by the country's malign disease environment even while attracted by the possibilities for wealth that Jamaica afforded. Jamaica, he argued, needed to target poor but industrious servants and to abandon the current situation in which servants found "no Encouragement waiting" for them on arrival and a lack of "opportunity of Advancing themselves" after their contracts had expired. Knight thought that the promotion of settlement schemes would enable servants to prosper in Jamaica and indeed purported to know several ex-servants who "have Considerable Fortunes." But increased servant migration would only enhance Jamaica's security and stop complaints about the loyalty and effectiveness of servant militia such as made by Robert Hunter if servants had reason to become "attached" to Jamaica. Presently, he argued, servants could not form a useful militia because "those whose Servitude Renders their Liberty little more than Nominal, and as such have no Property […] could never be depended on; for it cannot be supposed, that they will have the same Spirits, or Arm with the same generous Ardour, as those who Act in defense of their Liberty and Property, which is the Principal motive to great and Noble Actions."[44]

Knight was moving towards an obvious solution, which was developing quickly in fact in Jamaica. Even if white people came as servants to Jamaica, they should be treated as if they were free. They should be given the privileges of being white in a colony increasingly predicated around principles of white supremacy and should be allowed to accumulate property and status right upon arrival. One sign of the improving status of poor whites was that Jamaica did not follow in the early eighteenth century the precedent of North American colonies in punishing servant women for having interracial sex and bearing mixed-race

Columbus to the Year 1746 by James Knight, ed. Jack P. Greene (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2021): v.

44 Jack P. Greene, "Introduction," in *The Natural, Moral, and Political History of Jamaica, and the Territories thereon Depending. From the First Discovery of the Island by Christopher Columbus to the Year 1746 by James Knight*, ed. Jack P. Greene (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2021): viii.

children.[45] Another sign was increasing resentment among poor whites and servants about what they perceived as favouritism towards wealthy free people of colour. Matters came to a head in 1747 when Mary Augier, the mixed-race mistress of the extremely rich Kingston merchant, John Morse, tried to get what was called a "privilege bill" which would give her all the rights of white people. Her sister, Susanna, had been given this bill for herself and her two children, allowing them "the same rights and privileges with Englishmen" in 1738. That grant to Susanna had provoked opposition but there was much more intense opposition to Mary's application, in part because Morse, who would benefit from her application succeeding, was the person delegated by the assembly to investigate Mary's petition.

More important, however, was protests by "freeholders and others, inhabitants of the island." Daniel Livesay thinks that these "others" included poor whites and soldiers. Their objection was that if privilege bills like this could pass, it put elite people of colour in a superior position to poor whites, thus advancing the idea that being free was more important than being white in Jamaica's racial hierarchies. The group protested that if Augier's petition was granted (which indeed it was, because Mary's close blood connections to the Jamaican elite overcame the disqualifications arising from her colour) then "sundry mulattoes would be entitled to the same rights and privileges with his majesty's English subjects, free born, of white parents."[46] One can see from this complaint that it was becoming axiomatic that if one was born of "white parents," then it could be assumed that a person was free. In 1733, the Jamaican Assembly passed a bill allowing for people three generations removed from an African ancestor to be considered white. But many whites thought this dissipated white privilege too much and argued against its implications. As Reverend John Venn commented in a letter to the Bishop of London, "you cannot throw so great a Slur upon any

[45] Christine Walker, *Jamaica Ladies: Female Slaveholders and the Creation of Britain's Atlantic Empire* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2020), 219–220.

[46] *Journals of the Assembly of Jamaica* 4 (1-22 May 1747): 79–99. The controversy is covered in Daniel Livesay, *Children of Uncertain Fortune: Mixed-Raced Jamaicans in Britain and the Atlantic Family, 1733–1833* (Williamsburg: University of North Carolina Press, 2018), 47–52.

Man here as to say, or suspect, he has Negro Blood in his Veins, at how great a distance soever it be deriv'd."[47]

Poor whites were extremely sensitive to any attempt to limit their authority over non-whites, as can be seen in a curious episode in 1748. Some members of the Jamaican Assembly, led by Kingston merchants, Edward Manning and Robert Penny, proposed to allow limited black testimony to be heard in court cases, including cases in which whites were accused of brutality towards enslaved people. On 9 May 1748, a crowd of whites gathered in Kingston's main square to protest this proposal. They listened to a resident read a satirical petition that he claimed was written by the town's slaves and which praised Manning and Penny for their advocacy on behalf of enslaved people, implying that this was just the first step towards black equality and them taking over the island. Of course, the petition was a fake, written not by enslaved people but by Dr. James Smith, who used the name of 'Cudjoe' to compose a satire about blacks attacking white freedom.[48]

This was a rare occasion, James Robertson notes, when poor whites appeared as actors in Jamaican politics.[49] The Kingston crowd was resolutely opposed to any measure that placed limits on white behaviour and that suggested that a black person could have any role in moderating how whites acted towards blacks, especially in having a say in their punishments. Poor whites were obsessed that they were always considered more important than blacks. J.B. Moreton, himself a former assistant overseer, later claimed that "the conversation of overseers […] seldom extends further than […] their vast consequence and authority over their slaves."[50] He called such overseers "cowskin heroes," due to

47 John Venn to Bishop Thomas Sherlock, 15 June, 1751, Fulham Palace Papers, Lambeth Palace Libraries, 45–46.

48 Petition of Negro Slaves, 1748, 9 May 1748, in Barnett/Hall Collection, MS 220, box 3, folder 55, Mandeville Special Collections Library, University of California, San Diego, La Jolla, Calif.

49 James Robertson, "A 1748 'Petition of Negro Slaves' and the Local Politics of Slavery in Jamaica," *William and Mary Quarterly* 67/2 (2010): 319–346.

50 J.B. Moreton, *West India Customs and Manners: Containing Strictures on the Soil, Cultivation, Produce, Trade, Officers, and Inhabitants: with the Method of Establishing, and Conducting a Sugar Plantation. To which is Added, the Practice of Training New Slaves* (London: J. Parson, 1793), 88.

their fondness for using whips on enslaved people. Any proposals to limit the ill-treatment of enslaved people threatened white authority and were not to be countenanced. The Jamaica Assembly condemned Smith for writing his petition but only because he had breached assembly privileges by describing their debates in public. There was no comment on the petition's content. The Assembly backed down very quickly and the extension of legal rights to testify in court to enslaved people (and to the great majority of free people of colour) was blocked, not reappearing in law until after emancipation. As Robertson concludes, a project backed by the governor and Jamaican elites "came to grief once it provoked external opposition among the white electorate," including the many whites, such as servants, who could not vote and thus were not formally part of the Jamaican polity.[51]

Life after Tacky: From freedom to race

By the start of the Seven Years' War, the battle had been almost won by poorer white inhabitants, who insisted that their colour rather than status as unfree people should take precedence in determining their role within Jamaican society. Patrick Browne, in his natural history of Jamaica published in 1756, devoted a small amount of attention to the characteristics of white society. While recognizing divisions within white society, including white "*dependents*, who consisted of mechanics, clerks and servants," he claimed that some of these dependents had done well enough in Jamaica to "acquire very decent, if not ample fortunes" with a few having risen "so far as to be considered among the first rank of people," though such people are hard to find in the historical record. Pre-shadowing Edwards, Browne thought whiteness such a common connection between white people that he "thought it legitimate to deem" all whites as "one united people."[52]

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51 James Robertson, "A 1748 'Petition of Negro Slaves' and the Local Politics of Slavery in Jamaica," *William and Mary Quarterly* 67/2 (2010): 341.

52 Patrick Browne, *The Civil and Natural History of Jamaica* (London: T. Osborne, 1756), 22–24.

Whiteness was always valorised in Jamaica but it became the paramount value dividing people from each other after the shock of Tacky's Revolt in 1760 had encouraged legislators to prioritize white unity as a principal defence against future slave insurrection. The idea that white people might be unfree and black people might be free had been dying for much of the previous thirty years but any suggestion that white people might in some circumstances be considered unfree and hence having less status than free people of colour ended abruptly in the 1760s. White colonists became rigorous about restricting the rights of free people of colour and especially in stopping their capacity to be treated as if they were white. When Mary Augier died in 1760, she was described as a widow rather than a free person of colour. Her relatives, Jane Augier and Jane's son William, died in 1766 and were denoted by colour rather than by status or occupation. The Augiers only passed as white for not much more than two decades.[53] At the same time, whites promoted "whiteness" as the principal characteristic uniting whites in a *herrenvolk* democracy. Laws were passed that increased the authority of whites over enslaved people, especially in how whites disciplined blacks. The authority of white power was made increasingly inviolable within a legal structure predicated on the idea that whites could do as they pleased towards blacks. Enslaved people were kept cowed and terrified by constant surveillance and free people of colour were confined by restrictive laws to an inferior intermediate place within Jamaican society.[54] Thus, ordinary whites' insistence that colour trumped status had resulted by the time of the American Revolution in a transformation in their status as being the only people in Jamaica entitled to claiming that they were free people without any of the restrictions associated with being of African descent.

53 Trevor Burnard and John Garrigus, *Plantation Machine: Atlantic Capitalism in French Saint-Domingue and British Jamaica* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), 154.

54 Trevor Burnard and John Garrigus, *Plantation Machine: Atlantic Capitalism in French Saint-Domingue and British Jamaica* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), 150–154; Trevor Burnard, *Mastery, Tyranny, and Desire: Thomas Thistlewood and His Slaves in the Anglo-Jamaican World* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 85–88; Trevor Burnard, *Jamaica in the Age of Revolution* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2020), 120–125.

White people in Jamaica were more privileged around the time of the American Revolution than at any time in the history of the island.

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The principal axes along which seventeenth and eighteenth-century Jamaica divided were those of colour and of freedom. By the late eighteenth century, it became axiomatic that all Protestant whites were free and that all blacks were either enslaved or marked out for discriminatory action as a result of not being white. But this situation was new: before the Seven Years' War and the trauma of Tacky's Revolt in 1760, a considerable proportion of the white population was unfree, including many indentured servants and, before 1718, convicts. This article estimates the numbers of unfree whites before the 1760s, allows as far as sources allow some voice to these poor whites, and examines their status as unfree people in a society increasingly oriented around principles of white supremacy. Over time, the political and economic position of ordinary whites dramatically improved as the principles of white racial superiority took hold in the last quarter of the eighteenth century. It meant that the people somewhat derisively called 'cowskin heroes' due to their penchant for lording it over enslaved people were in the ascendant as the principles of white racial superiority took hold as the foundations of social, economic and political order in the island.

THE AUTHOR

Trevor Burnard is Wilberforce Professor of Slavery and Emancipation at the University of Hull and Director, the Wilberforce Institute. He is the author of 8 monographs, 3 edited books, 4 collections of articles and nearly 100 articles and book chapters on Atlantic history, imperial history and the history of plantations societies in the British Atlantic world in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Among his major works are *Jamaica in the Age of Revolution* (2020); *The Plantation Machine: Atlantic Capitalism in British Jamaica and French Saint Domingue* (2016); *Planters, Merchants and Slaves: Plantation Societies in British America, 1650–1820* (2015); and *Mastery, Tyranny, and Desire: Thomas Thistlewood and His Slaves in the Anglo-Jamaican World* (2004).