

A version of this article originally appeared in *African American National Biography*.

leader of the 1739 Stono slave rebellion, was born in central Africa, most likely in the Kingdom of Kongo, now part of Angola, and brought as a slave to the British colony of South Carolina in the 1730s. A majority of the African slaves sold by the British Royal African Company to South Carolina in the early eighteenth century originated in Kongo, an independent kingdom that had converted to Christianity more than two hundred years earlier. If typical of Kongoese slaves brought to South Carolina, Jemmy would have worshipped a combination of Roman Catholicism and older African faiths and may well have had knowledge of Portuguese, or some Creolized variant of that language, which was the *lingua franca* of the slave trade and of the Kongo elite. Jemmy's ability as a military leader and the fighting skills of his fellow rebels had probably been acquired through service in a series of wars fought in the Kongo region in the early eighteenth century. By the 1720s and 1730s those wars—in which Jemmy was most likely captured and enslaved—were increasingly fought using pistols and muskets. Thus knowledge of modern military tactics and weaponry, much like knowledge of rice cultivation, was something that African slaves such as Jemmy brought with them to South Carolina.

It is uncertain how long Jemmy had been living in South Carolina at the time he led the Stono rebellion. What is known is that between 1700 and 1739 South Carolina had been transformed from a relatively backward part of the British Empire to a dynamic, rapidly expanding plantation society. The slave population increased dramatically during that time period; and as a result of the labors of a predominantly young, male, and African-born labor force in the rice fields, the volume of rice exports increased as did the profits of South Carolina's planter elite. Many of the recent male arrivals resisted the long hours and back-breaking labor of rice cultivation, and they may have particularly resented having to perform agricultural tasks generally reserved for women in their native lands. Between 1732 and 1739 more than 250 South Carolina slaves—disproportionately male recent arrivals from Africa—escaped the rice fields. Many of them attempted to flee to nearby Florida, where Spanish colonial rulers offered them land and freedom, partly to undermine the British colonial presence in the Carolinas, but also because many of these slaves were fellow Catholics. In August 1739 the imminent possibility of a full-scale war between Britain and Spain persuaded South Carolina's colonial legislature to enact a Security Act requiring that all white men carry firearms to church on Sundays. Fearing that “our Negroes ... are more dreadfull [*sic*] to our safety than any Spanish invaders,” Governor Thomas Broughton doubled the number of slave patrollers and strengthened the militia (Pearson, 581).

In the early morning of Sunday, 9 September 1739, two weeks after the announcement of the Security Act, Jemmy was working with around twenty fellow slaves on a public road gang near a bridge over the Stono River, twelve miles south of Charles Town (now Charleston). Preparations for the raid may have begun earlier, at least on the evening of Saturday, September 8, if not before. The Kongoese slaves may have chosen that date to launch a revolt because it coincided with a religious holiday—the Nativity

of the Virgin Mary—which was one of the most important in the Catholic calendar. Despite the prevailing climate of fear among the slaveholders, this particular road gang, working on a day when slaves traditionally worked for themselves, appears to have been inadequately guarded. Sometime before dawn, Jemmy led his men to a nearby store, where they stole guns and gunpowder and then killed the two white men occupying the building. The rebels decapitated the two men, leaving their severed heads on the steps of the store, perhaps in retaliation for similar beheadings of runaway slaves by the South Carolina authorities or perhaps as part of a traditional African martial ritual. Jemmy then led the men immediately to the house of a man named Godfrey; they burned down the house after plundering it for supplies and killed Godfrey, his son, and his daughter. Heading south, they reached Wallace's Tavern at daybreak, but did not kill the innkeeper apparently because he was kind to his slaves. The rebels did, however, kill Wallace's neighbors and more than twenty other whites. They acquired more firearms, powder, provisions, and alcohol as they progressed south of the Stono River, headed, most scholars assume, for Florida. At least thirty and perhaps as many as eighty slaves joined the rebels as they proceeded with drums and banners, one allegedly bearing the slogan "Liberty," through the South Carolina countryside. Historians have speculated that slaves recently arrived from the Kongo, in particular, would have been drawn to the beating of drums and the use of banners. Those who followed Jemmy may have been emboldened by the apparent ease with which the rebels overcame their masters, their growing arsenal of weaponry, and by what appeared to be a strong possibility of reaching friendly territory.

Other slaves resisted Jemmy's forces, however, and the colonial authorities later rewarded thirty of them for doing so. A slave named July was given his freedom and a suit of clothes for killing one of the rebels. Others hid their masters and helped raise the alarm that brought a posse of between twenty and one hundred heavily armed militia men and planters to a large field near the Edisto River by late Sunday afternoon. More importantly, the lieutenant governor of South Carolina, William Bull, witnessed the gathering of the rebels, turned his horse around, and sounded the alarm to local whites and the authorities. Although the rebels had traveled only ten miles from the Stono River Bridge, and were still a long way from Florida, they gathered to celebrate their victory and planned to cross the river the following morning. Again, the nature of their celebrations, which involved ceremonial dancing, drinking, and feasting, resembled Kongo martial traditions. On seeing the militia approach, the rebels ended their celebrations and began firing, but they immediately received a volley of rifle fire that killed fourteen slaves. Within a few hours, thirty of the rebels were dead, while thirty or more escaped into the woods. Over the following month, most of those who made their escape were captured, killed, and in some cases beheaded. It is not known whether Jemmy was among those killed at Edisto Bridge, or whether he was one of several slaves who apparently reached St. Augustine.

The Stono rebellion proved to be the most serious and deadly slave revolt in colonial North America. The death toll among whites was not exceeded in a U.S. slave revolt until the Nat Turner slave rebellion in Virginia in 1831. Though not as deadly as similar revolts in Jamaica and other British colonies in the Caribbean, the events in the South Carolina low country in September 1739 persuaded colonial authorities to take swift action to avoid a repeat of Jemmy's uprising. In 1740, for the first time in South Carolina's history, the legislature enacted a rigid slave code so that potential rebels such as Jemmy would be "kept in due subjection and obedience." This slave code gave slaveholders more power to regulate, control, and punish their slaves. It also prohibited slaves from assembling in groups, learning to read, or even earning their own money. Such measures largely succeeded in preventing further large-scale slave revolts in South Carolina during the colonial period.

For more than two centuries black South Carolinians kept alive a memory of the Stono rebellion and celebrated the revolt as a symbol of slave resistance. Jemmy, identified in the colonial records as the captain of this raid, is the only rebel whose name was recorded by the South Carolina authorities at the time of the Stono uprising. In 1937, however, George Cato, a fifty-year-old black laborer in Columbia, South Carolina, told interviewers for the Works Progress Administration's Slave Narrative Project that his great-great-grandfather, also named Cato, had been elected by his fellow slaves to lead the Stono uprising. The first Cato was literate, having been taught to read and write by his master, and he had often written passes for fellow slaves to help them to escape. It is possible that Cato and Jemmy were the same person, though it is equally possible that both men helped direct the rebellion. George Cato's telling of the Stono rebellion, based on oral tradition passed down over two hundred years, confirms many of the details of the events of 9 September 1739 that historians have discovered. These details included the date, the number of whites and slaves killed, the slaves' celebration once they reached the Edisto River, and the goal of reaching St. Augustine. In George Cato's telling of events, the slave rebels at Stono were defiant to the last, as witnessed by the reported final words of Commander Cato: "We don't [like] slavery. We start to jine de Spanish in Florida. We surrender but we not whipped yet and we 'is not converted'" (Rawick, 100).

Further Reading

Pearson, Edward A. "A Countryside Full of Flames': A Reconsideration of the Stono Rebellion and Slave Rebelliousness in the Early-Eighteenth-Century South Carolina Lowcountry," in *The Slavery Reader* (2003).

Rawick, George P., ed. *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography, North Carolina and South Carolina Narratives* (1977).

Smith, Mark. M. "Remembering Mary, Shaping Revolt: Reconsidering the Stono Rebellion," *Journal of Southern History* (2001).

Thornton, John K. "African Dimensions of the Stono Rebellion," *American Historical Review* (Oct. 1991).

Wood, Peter H. *Black Majority: Negroes in Colonial South Carolina from 1670 through the Stono Rebellion* (1974)

See also

Turner, Nat <<https://oxfordaasc.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780195301731.001.0001/acref-9780195301731-e-34755>>