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Empire of Diaspora: Exploring African & Jewish Fights for Sovereignty in the First Maroon War

*Joshua Darrish*¹

In 1711,² Jamaica's colonial Legislative Assembly passed *An Act for Regulating Fees*. It stipulated that "no Jew, Mulatto, Indian, or Negro shall be capable to officiate or be employed to write in or for any of the above offices upon any pretense whatsoever," effectively guaranteeing Jamaica's government as a White Christian establishment.³ By imposing *de jure* second-class citizenship upon Jews, the *Act* informs the wider intertwined history of the Jewish people with the histories of other marginalized groups in the British Caribbean, specifically of free and enslaved Africans.

From the late 1690s through the eighteenth century, the Jewish merchant class (an economically fluid and professionally diverse subgroup) largely held a dual position of socioeconomic privilege and repression in Jamaica. The Crown reaped the benefits from their productive commercial activity along port towns, but locals' intolerance often led to economic burdens that were disproportionately placed on many Jewish merchants. Enslaved Africans' and Jewish peoples'

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² The paper discusses a number of groups who lived under the British colonial system in Jamaica. Jamaica's African population was complex to capture, but it is critical to distinguish enslaved Africans, legally freed Africans, and self-liberated Africans (Maroons) from one another. Each individual experienced his or her own version of colonial life, hardship, and resistance. Attempts are made in good faith to define and recognize each one without making connotations. However, if there are instances where it is contextually inappropriate or grammatically illogical to explicate these often-shifting groups, the paper will refer to the African people as a whole. Additionally, due to the available primary and secondary sources at the time of writing, the limited surviving documentation from Jamaica's 18th century colonial period, and the selective nature of colonial writing, this paper primarily relies upon relevant sources from Jamaica's colonial authority for primary evidence, with inclusion of Jewish and African testimony. The scholarship maintains its highest possible quality by piecing together these accessible sources. But strong scholarship must recognize its own limitations in synthesizing the voices it includes.

³ Samuel Hurwitz and Edith Hurwitz, "The New World Sets an Example for the Old: 'The Jews of Jamaica and Political Rights 1661-1831,'" *American Jewish Historical Quarterly* 55:1 (September 1965): p. 41.

experiences as two distinctly maltreated diasporic people interacting in the eighteenth-century transatlantic slave trade nuanced Jamaica's racialized hierarchy of power. The 1729 to 1740 First Maroon War and imperial correspondences with Governor Edward Trelawny between 1737 and 1739 show how a conflict involving enslaved Africans' fight for freedom against the British affected Jewish lives, and how these events existed within the context of Jewish people's intellectual engagement with the Enlightenment. The related issues of citizenship expose Jews' position in Britain's racial regime, in particular. The First Maroon War is a practical case study of the Atlantic Jewish merchant experience, intertwining with African Maroons who revolted against plantation slavery. For the African Maroon, the war was a divorce from a society that denied them bodily autonomy. For Jewish merchants, it was a protest from within a society that denied them equal rights.

The First Maroon War reveals how these merchants who were active in the London network complicate the narrative of the transatlantic slave trade. They bridge the plight of people who chose to move to the Antilles with that of those who were forced to labor there. In Jamaica, a set of vocal Jewish merchants navigated their civic rights to vote, participate in the legal system, and have non-discriminatory economic treatment between the White Protestant British elites, free and enslaved Africans, and mixed-race people. Although their financial and social interests did not always or entirely align, Maroon Africans' push for bodily and communal sovereignty and the Jewish push for political equality did indirectly affect each other. In contrast, popular scholarship has often drawn a line between them. The 1730s war transformed one group's fight for self-sovereignty into another's fight for place. The Enlightenment made such ideas even more potent.

Contemporary scholarship on eighteenth-century Jewish port merchants in the transatlantic slave trade has largely been limited to their economic condition in relative isolation from other marginalized Jamaican populations. It has alternatively been mired in debate about the extent of Jews' complicity in trading enslaved Africans. Much of the discourse has leaned upon anti-Jewish tropes to further historical mischaracterizations of the "supposed crimes of Jews against black people" through their "[helping] finance the slave trade."⁴ This claim has narrowed an understanding of the scope and practice of an exploitative economic system as a Jewish perpetration, unproductively biasing historical knowledge. It was a worldwide operation that involved a diverse array of people, from Catholics to Protestants to Muslims. This antisemitic argument overrides more constructive conversations about the ways Jewish and African lives intersected to overcome their limits under Britain's racialized hierarchy. Elsewhere, scholar Werner Sombart's *Jews and Modern Capitalism* (1911) tied capitalism's early foundations to Judaism; a conclusion could be made in his Judeophobic argument that

⁴ David Mills, "Half-Truths and History: The Debate Over Jews and Slavery," *The Washington Post*, October 17, 1993.

transatlantic slavery's early form of European capitalism was a Jewish project.⁵ Reality does prove that some Jewish merchants were active in the slave trade, and a community of Jewish planters in the Caribbean enslaved people. Historian Salo W. Baron's firm assertion to the contrary falls short of the myriad cases of Jews transporting and owning enslaved Africans, as well as their trade in goods produced by enslaved labor.⁶ However, the harmful (and false) narrative about pervasive Jewish control over the transatlantic slave trade must be countered to re-center the truth of the historical record. At the inception of the Dutch West India Company in 1621—the organization that monopolized the trade from West Africa—only 1.2% of its starting capital was contributed by Jewish backers; decades into the operation, and only *seven* of 167 stockholders were Jewish.⁷ Just four-tenths of one percent of vessels carrying enslaved Africans to Jamaica were owned by Jewish captains between 1742 and 1769.⁸ Jewish involvement was minuscule, with Jewish merchants being just one of many groups who participated in this tragic economic system.

Between the polarized and flawed positions of mischaracterization of Jewish activity in the period, free and enslaved Africans' and Jews' concurrent demands for expanded rights placed them closer in the colonial hierarchy than is regularly depicted. This paper intends to illustrate the complex lives of Jewish port merchants and African Maroon actors in the eighteenth-century Antilles. To do so, one must recognize that Jewish Jamaicans were involved members of an entrenched slave society who held a range of views on slavery. And although their advocacy for Jewish liberty was sometimes contradictory due to their participation in that society, the Enlightenment gave Jewish people the language to demand civic equality in a colony defined by sharp inequality. Meanwhile, enslaved Africans were far more than a statistic, but human beings with agency and action to combat a system that treated them as such. The Maroons struggled to create their own communities free from bondage. Historical scholarship improves when history is complicated, and Caribbean studies are strengthened when seemingly disparate people with seemingly disparate goals are revealed to have substantive overlap beyond merely existing in parallel, as is traditionally written of eighteenth-century power hierarchies. Maroons and Jewish people may have rarely, if ever, worked together to achieve their ends. Still, the

⁵ Holly Snyder, "Under the Shadow of Yoto createur Wings': Religiosity in the Mental World of an Eighteenth-Century Jewish Merchant," *Early American Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 8:3 (2010): pp. 585–86.

⁶ Jonathan Schorsch, "Revisiting Blackness, Slavery, and Jewishness in the Early Modern Sephardic Atlantic," in *Religious Changes and Cultural Transformations in the Early Modern Western Sephardic Communities*, ed. Yosef Kaplan (Brill, 2019), p. 537.

⁷ Eli Faber, *Jews, Slaves, and the Slave Trade: Setting the Record Straight* (New York University Press, 1998), p. 21.

⁸ Faber, *Jews, Slaves, and the Slave Trade*, p. 73.

First Maroon War was a key inflection point in British colonial history, allowing both groups to extend their natural rights.

The remaining scholarship has more comprehensively depicted Jewish rights and self-advocacy in the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Caribbean. But it often comes at the cost of a more thorough analysis of African liberation's significant impact on Jews' own place in the British colonial structure. They were both transplanted people, brought to the Western Hemisphere under external conditions: slavery and religious persecution. Yet, despite living in separate social conditions that arose from these circumstances, the racial hierarchy would make their interactions inevitable and vital to Jamaica's politics, security, and social philosophy. Holly Snyder, and Samuel and Edith Hurwitz mention enslaved Africans' treatment by Jewish merchants, but the topic is usually relegated to singular statements. Other academics, like Stanley Mirvis, have more thoroughly illustrated African-Jewish relations; although, even for Mirvis his analysis in "The Peril of Port Royal (1670-1740)," from *The Jews of Eighteenth-Century Jamaica: A Testamentary History of a Diaspora in Transition* turned Africans' First Maroon War into a backdrop rather than the centerpiece of their own story in discussing Jews' fight for rights.⁹ The field of Jewish Studies has essentially put Africans on the periphery.

Furthermore, Jonathan Schorsch acutely notes the "too-often and unsystematic conclusions" that have plagued the academic field of Jews in the Vast Early Caribbean.¹⁰ In reality, throughout the eighteenth-century colonial crises, the African fight for freedom directly relates to the extension and constriction of Jews' rights and their expression of emancipation. The First Maroon War is not merely an isolated incident but a prime example of colonial strife that closely affected African and Jewish expressions of liberty.

The Enlightenment context provides a framework for the accelerating momentum toward social equality in eighteenth-century Jamaica. The Enlightenment explosively reshaped European and Atlantic intellectual thought. It particularly touched Judaism. Eighteenth-century Hebraist Naftali Herz Wessely articulated a vision of the Enlightenment's impact on Jewish religious life:

For secular matters were already prepared by the Creator when He created man's soul, in which he implanted knowledge and discernment for its own self-interest, enabling man to understand many of the details of perceptible reality and to derive good practices whereby a community can be established in every location.¹¹

⁹ Stanley Mirvis, *The Jews of Eighteenth-Century Jamaica: A Testamentary History of a Diaspora in Transition* (Yale University Press, 2020): p. 62.

¹⁰ Schorsch, "Revisiting Blackness," p. 513.

¹¹ Naftali Herz Wessely to the Jewish community of the Holy Roman Empire, "Words of Peace and Wisdom" 1782.

To Herz Wessely, G-d imbued humanity with the capacity to reason—to uncover material and social truths about the world, including the physical sciences, language, and etiquette. Jewish people have an obligation to engage with the secular world to effectively translate the Torah and central texts into usable forms of instruction. Some Jews, in adopting this philosophy, “soon internalized [the] value of tolerance for diverse religious opinions. It was the prospect of their increased tolerance by Christians that drew Jews to identify with the non-Jewish world and, of course, to hope for their social and political integration.”¹²

Some Jewish voices were more skeptical of the movement, especially as it was underscored by thinkers like Voltaire, who repeated anti-Jewish rhetoric in his publications. Eighteenth-century Jamaican rabbi Joshua Hezekiah DeCordova questioned the *philosophes* of the Enlightenment, calling them ignorant of an omnipotent Supreme Being. By focusing so heavily on an increasingly empirical understanding of reason (where knowledge comes solely from physical sensation), they “became so far savages as to assert, like them, that nothing could be believed which was not seen and understood...”¹³ There were clear divisions on how Jewish practitioners would respond to the Enlightenment movement that included thinkers who were at times hostile to organized religion and Judaism, specifically.

Nevertheless, the Enlightenment did foster an abstract sense of greater social cohesion among a society’s inhabitants. It addressed the Jewish community’s growing tension between their enforced social segregation and their economic importance. It profoundly implicated the Jewish sense of place, both internally and externally. Beyond protecting Judaism’s transmission of culture and religion from one generation to the next, Herz Wessely also advanced the notion that the Enlightenment’s embrace of reason placed Jewish people in an advantageous position within the empire. He wrote, “The study of etiquette, science and mathematics, besides being the glory of those who know these subjects, prepares them to assist in strengthening the kingdom and its inhabitants.”¹⁴ Contributions to the secular world would allow Jewish people to be participatory members of their hosting society. At a time when enslaved Africans and merchant-class Jews alike “were considered primarily in terms of their utility to the State and its rulers,” rather than holding intrinsic value as multidimensional human beings, Herz Wessely’s position was a testament to the promise that Enlightened thought had for a

¹² Michael A. Meyer, “Modernity as a Crisis for the Jews.” *Modern Judaism* 9:2 (1989): p. 155.

¹³ Joshua Hezekiah Decordova, “Of Atheism and Idolatry,” in *Reason and Faith, or, Philosophical Absurdities, and the Necessity of Revelation: Intended to Promote Faith Among Infidels, and the Unbounded Exercise of Humanity Among All Religious Men* (Jamaica 1791).

¹⁴ Naftali Herz Wessely to the Jewish community of the Holy Roman Empire, “Words of Peace and Wisdom” 1782.

historically mistreated people.¹⁵ Yet on the ground, rampant abuses against Jewish people prevented them from fully conferring the benefits that total inclusivity would bring the nation. It instead generated antagonism against them despite the lack of Jewish hostility toward rulers. Evidently, though, there was a real line of Jewish thought that optimistically adopted Enlightenment idealism regarding toleration, where even a primordial conception of social equality could take hold.

Throughout the Enlightenment, several Jews on record espoused English philosopher John Locke's theory that individuals were "born possessed of rights that no government could lawfully abrogate without his consent" and thus "the question of how to define fitness for participation in the compact...[was] open to argument that Jews might be lawful participants."¹⁶ If Jews were law-abiding economic and social contributors to Anglo-Jamaica, then they deserved equality under said laws. Locke's 1690 *Letter Concerning Toleration* ignited Jewish calls for equality, which framed their petitions. They criticized anti-Jewish neighbors' "'blind prejudice' and 'indecent reproaches,'" in Jamaica as unbecoming of the Enlightenment's liberality.¹⁷ They wished to import the Enlightenment's egalitarianism to Jamaica.

Despite its rigid racialization, eighteenth-century British Jamaica was an ethnically and religiously heterogeneous space. By the 1790s, Jamaica's enslaved African population reached 300,000, vastly outnumbering the White and free populations.¹⁸ Plantation economies reigned across the colonial Caribbean, driven by the highly profitable sugar and molasses trade. They were fostered under the French, Spanish, Portuguese, and English, among other powers. The imperial governments maximized their profits through the use of enslaved African labor, a "particularly barbaric" practice in the Caribbean characterized by "[i]nterminable hours cutting sugarcane, bouts of tropical disease, and unrelenting heat..."¹⁹ The governments subsequently engaged in international trade to ship the cultivated products to foreign markets or other Atlantic colonial possessions for processing. Jamaica itself followed a "large-scale mono-crop plantation model" with slave labor being the "cornerstone of this system."²⁰ By the eighteenth century, ninety percent of the population was forced to cultivate cash

¹⁵ Hurwitz and Hurwitz, "The New World Sets an Example for the Old," p. 37.

¹⁶ Holly Snyder, "Rules, Rights and Redemption: The Negotiation of Jewish Status in British Atlantic Port Towns, 1740-1831," *Jewish History* 8:3 (2010): p. 156-7.

¹⁷ Snyder, "Rules, Rights and Redemption," p. 161.

¹⁸ Philippe Girard, "Isaac Sasportas, the 1799 Slave Conspiracy in Jamaica, and Sephardic Ties to the Haitian Revolution," *Jewish History* 33 (June 9, 2020): p. 432-33.

¹⁹ Andrew Porwancher, "Genesis," in *The Jewish opportunities World of Alexander Hamilton* (Princeton University Press, 2021): p. 14.

²⁰ Orlando Patterson, "Slavery and Slave Revolts," *Social and Economic Studies* 19:3, (1970): p. 290.

crops daily in the sweltering heat.²¹ This ballooning population sustained the absentee elites who extracted the island's wealth. With such a Black-White disparity and a system designed to treat Africans as disposable means to a financial end, paranoia about uprisings frequently rocked the island's ruling class. Therefore, Jamaica reinforces the Anglo-Caribbean archetype of an economically dependent but lucrative colonial possession home to intense racial unease. It is a practical case study of the way enslaved Africans resisted, all while interacting in a diverse world invariably tied to the transatlantic slave trade.

Before transitioning to the reality of pervasive and disturbing Jewish repression as a combined ethnic and religious minority class in the colony, the unparalleled everyday horror of African slavery must be distinguished. Paradoxically denigrated as "instruments, property, tools, albeit in human form," enslaved Africans held a uniquely exploited position; Jews, though maligned as "agents of the devil," still retained a particular human identity by the government and society at large.²² These respective designations gave rise to the available responses for enslaved Africans and Jews toward the racial hierarchy. Physical disruption of the plantation system, and even as far as rebellion, sometimes led to pockets of autonomy in Jamaica for those in bondage. Jews, in contrast, leveraged the levers of political authority to advocate for their equality. But these responses often did not occur in isolation, with one reaction feeding the other and leaving lasting repercussions. Individuals on the bottom rungs of society could create far-reaching shockwaves that threatened the elites who upheld these castes.

Jews faced marginalization as a religious and ethnic minority across Europe. Yet they became economically attractive to European Crowns: their transatlantic network with other Jewish communities created an accessible web of business opportunities. Meanwhile, their profound linguistic skills, with many Portuguese and Western Atlantic Jews' diaspora background giving them proficiency in Spanish, Portuguese, Dutch, and English, greatly propelled the empires' economies. Hosting a Jewish trader population in American colonies opened commerce for the European powers and strategically kept most Jews on the outskirts of their imperial sphere. But trading was far from the only profession in which Jewish people worked to enrich the colony. The Jewish-Jamaican population had been active since their first days moving to the island from Brazil and Amsterdam as agriculturalists, prospectors, metallurgists, among other roles.²³ Even with continued restrictions on civic participation, they were attracting wealth to Jamaica, further integrating the colony into the international economy.

England, a Protestant kingdom, took advantage of the Portuguese Inquisition that targeted Brazil's Jews.²⁴ In 1654, many were expelled from Portuguese Brazil—reclaimed from the Dutch—and

²¹ Patterson, "Slavery and Slave Revolts," pp. 291-292.

²² Hurwitz and Hurwitz, "The New World Sets an Example for the Old," p. 37.

²³ Mirvis, *The Jews of Eighteenth-Century Jamaica*, p. 27.

²⁴ Snyder, "Rules, Rights and Redemption," p. 149.

settled in the Antilles. The English Crown, “anxious to build up their economic strength and power, proved to be more tolerant” as they were absorbed into the empire.²⁵ The Jewish merchant class had a noteworthy impact on trade in the profitable Jamaican colony, and a Jewish plantation class also existed from Jamaica’s establishment. In 1741, the Jamaican Assembly acknowledged that only five Jewish merchants were involved in exporting the enslaved, and the “planters among them do not exceed that number.”²⁶ But even as “an extreme minority within a minority,” as academic Stanley Mirvis coins it, “Jewish plantation owners did not rival ‘port Jewish’ merchants but in many cases were one and the same.”²⁷ For example, several Jewish merchants’ wills bequeathed large plots.²⁸ This reality reveals Jewish labor’s broad presence in and around English Jamaica, spanning agriculture and commerce. They worked in virtually every function of the island. The dynamism inherent in Jewish Jamaican life contributed to their outspokenness in daily politics. But while anti-Jewish behavior was felt by every Jewish person, the merchants who had immediate ties to London and their Atlantic network were the ones who spearheaded the response to discrimination in the wake of the First Maroon War. They are thus deserving of close attention for their Jewish activism during the early eighteenth century.

To secure such a beneficial labor class, London allowed Jews religious freedom and relative community autonomy. By 1730, “Jews constituted perhaps ten to twelve percent of the White population of Jamaica.”²⁹ Although a small proportion of the island’s White minority, Jewish people played a key economic role that garnered the attention of the highest royal administration. Population statistics suggest the burgeoning relationship between Jewish merchant activity and the island’s growth into the jewel of the British Caribbean. Jamaica’s Spanish Town likely hosted the “the third-largest Jewish community in the English-speaking world, exceeded only by the Jewish populations of London and Kingston,” the latter of which is also in Jamaica.³⁰ But these concessions came with second-class citizenship by the local Assembly and protesting non-Jewish merchants.

With hostilities rampant between the Jewish population, non-Jewish merchants and planters, the legislative Assembly, and the governor’s council, Jews were placed in a position of marginality in a system of organized violence against Africans, millions of whom were kidnapped across the Atlantic Ocean. A petition from 1691/2 exemplifies the Jamaican anti-Jewish vitriol, where the president and Council of Jamaica petitioned against Jewish equality and mere existence in the island: “The Jews eat us and our children out of all trade, the reasons for naturalising them have been observed...We did not

²⁵ Hurwitz and Hurwitz, “The New World Sets an Example for the Old,” p. 38.

²⁶ Faber, *Jews, Slaves, and the Slave Trade*, p. 73.

²⁷ Mirvis, *The Jews of Eighteenth-Century Jamaica*, p. 66.

²⁸ Mirvis, *The Jews of Eighteenth-Century Jamaica*, p. 67.

²⁹ Snyder, “Under the Shadow of Your Wings,” pp. 611–12.

³⁰ Faber, *Jews, Slaves, and the Slave Trade*, p. 58.

want them at Port Royal, a place populous and strong without them.”³¹ Jewish merchants lived and worked closely with Africans as two diasporic peoples without citizenship, enfranchisement, or a sense of belonging. One African rebel leader went as far as claiming that they “ought to consider ourselves as one people.”³² Their association was common in the island’s politics: Jewish residents were accused of aiding and abetting Africans in their rebellious activity, encouraging theft from Christian plantation owners, and collaborating in criminal ways that would together lead to punitive tax laws levied against them despite the lack of concrete evidence.³³ Jews continued to chart their own agency amid the persecution. They leveraged the Crown’s need for their merchant skills to petition against discriminatory local politics. Africans articulated their agency through plantation resistance, rebellion, and flight.

Despite King Charles II’s 1661 Windsor Proclamation declaring that “henceforth, children born in Jamaica should be ‘free denizens’ of England and should enjoy ‘the same privileges to all intents and purposes as our free borne subjects’ of England,” Jamaica’s government refused to extend equal rights to the Jewish populace.³⁴ Jews were granted religious freedom and certain economic privileges to maximize the island’s profitability, but their disenfranchisement and designation as a foreign “nation” gave them status as non-White. Local petitions and legislation treated Jews as a distinct entity apart from English subjects. The foreigner categorization accompanied restrictions on civic participation that also plagued mulattoes and free Blacks. Alienation from Jamaica’s social and religious institutions allowed Jewish merchants to trade “extensively with the black population, selling them mainly salted fish, butter, and inexpensive wares imported from Jewish manufacturers in England.”³⁵ Discrimination against these minorities ensured that political power would concentrate among Jamaica’s Christian Whites in perpetuity. Consequently, Jews and Africans’ proximity in Jamaica’s socio-political structure was partially built upon their geographic proximity in Port Royal and Kingston, generating greater anxieties about their perceived collaboration. Anti-Jewish freeholders’ resentment continually worsened, where they “argued ‘that the Jews are a foreign nation, and...that they are at this instant governed by laws and magistrates of their own, and pay no voluntary obedience

³¹ Frank Cundall et al., “Documents Relating to the History of the Jews in Jamaica and Barbados in the Time of William III,” *Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society*, no. 23 (1915): pp. 26–7.

³² Faber, *Jews, Slaves, and the Slave Trade*, p. 62.

³³ Faber, *Jews, Slaves, and the Slave Trade*, p. 62.

³⁴ Hurwitz and Hurwitz, “The New World Sets an Example for the Old,” p. 39.

³⁵ Faber, *Jews, Slaves, and the Slave Trade*, p. 76.

to our laws.”³⁶ Marking free Africans and Jews as foreigners absolved the Assembly from having to extend the rights of citizenship.

The Assembly’s placement of Africans and Jews under direct, distinct scrutiny from the White Christian islanders ensured their suppression. This practice of othering continued into the late eighteenth century. The 1661 decree remained largely preclusive. A letter from 17 April 1772 identifies “intelligence of a contraband trade carried on by the Jews at Kingston.”³⁷ Eighteenth-century authors attempt to prove Jews’ inherent non-English origin by singling them out in correspondence. The act of being Jewish was evidence of criminality that made it easier to prosecute them for crimes. Explicit identification also made it easier to surveil Jews. Jamaica’s legal ostracization created a negative feedback loop: it selectively prosecuted free Blacks and Jews, creating an image of mistrust in the public’s eye. That mistrust would lead to more discrimination, resulting in an uptick in prosecutions.

The 1729 to 1740 First Maroon War was a significant episode during this period of intense derision. Enslaved Africans’ physical resistance helped spark Jews’ lobbying for their own civic equality. Self-liberated Africans (the Maroons) who lived autonomously in the Blue Mountains fought the British army during the First Maroon War. How oppressed groups freed themselves further discloses their social positions. Jews did not necessarily need open rebellion to advance, with the Royal Court and lower-level legal pursuits being available tools for change. The enslaved had no such standing, making violence an inescapable reality for their vision of a freer life. These Blue Mountain Maroons used guerrilla warfare tactics, having “won de facto sovereignty over swathes of Jamaica.”³⁸ They achieved independent communities that existed in parallel with Britain’s plantation society. The British eventually recognized these enclaves in non-aggression pacts. Open insurrection was an opportunity for enslaved Africans to achieve liberty.

But, as a consequence of Jewish and African proximity, Jews were accused of materially supporting the revolts and were penalized for their alleged betrayal of the colony. Historian Edward Long refers to his popular 1774 *The History of Jamaica*. He writes about the “contemptible gang of Negroes,” derogatorily named “the wild Negroes” who “held out against forty times their number, though unsupported during the time with any fresh supply of arms of ammunition, except what were

³⁶ Snyder, “Rules, Rights and Redemption,” p. 159.

³⁷ George Rodney to Earl of Hillsborough, “Admiralty Office; Lord of the Admiralty to the Earl of Hillsborough Regarding the Sending of a Ship to Newfoundland to Protect the Shipping There and Inclosing a Letter from George Rodney Concerning Illicit Trade Carried Out By the Jews of Kingston,” April 17, 1772.

³⁸ Philippe Girard, “Isaac Sasportas, the 1799 Slave Conspiracy in Jamaica, and Sephardic Ties to the Haitian Revolution,” *Jewish History* 33 (June 9, 2020): p. 414.

sold to them by the Jews...”³⁹ Long expressed both racism and Judeophobia, hence representing the synergy between African and Jewish debasement in broader eighteenth century Jamaican discourse. He signals African and Jewish alienation from and antagonization toward Jamaica’s Christian White majority; like the petitions calling for Jewish expulsion, Long’s writings indicate attitudes, shared by fellow British Jamaican historian Charles Leslie, that Africans’ *and* Jews’ “little roguish tricks are such that they prove very detrimental to any society in which they live.”⁴⁰ The First Maroon War effectively separated a community of Africans from Britain’s racial hierarchy. Though it stoked existent anti-Jewish sentiment, that “Jews might find common cause with slaves and join with them to overthrow the White Jamaican ruling elite.”⁴¹ The body politic manufactured the colonial crisis into evidence that Jews helped orchestrate the tumult, and whose alleged disloyalty precluded them from enjoying equal rights or privileges.

Beyond the social stigmatization against Jews during the First Maroon War, the Assembly imposed disproportionately high taxes on them to bolster the island’s defense. The higher taxation was a legal mechanism for defining their non-citizenship. A sequence of correspondence and orders from 1737 to 1739 between the Crown’s Privy Council (a colonial advisory board) and Jamaica’s governor, Edward Trelawny, highlights the local economic pressures directed against Jamaican Jews during a significant moment in Maroon freedom. In addition, it shows Jews’ advocacy to the Imperial government. On 12 January 1737, Privy Council member R.G. wrote to incoming Governor Trelawny. R.G. interceded on behalf of the Jewish population:

Whereas complaint hath been made unto Us by several traders to Our said Island of Jamaica and others in behalf of the Jews–Inhabitants of that Island setting forth that several Acts have been passed there whereby extraordinary Taxes have been imposed and great hardships laid on the Jews...you do not give your assent to any Act or Acts to be past [passed] in the Assembly of Our said Island whereby any Tax shall be imposed on said Jews...⁴²

The order follows a tradition of Jewish protest to the Crown in times of heightened regional antisemitism. The Crown’s tolerance toward Jews gave the merchants and others in the community a

³⁹ Edward Long, *The History of Jamaica, Or, General Survey of the Ancient and Modern State of That Island: With Reflections on Its Situation, Settlements, Inhabitants, Climate, Products, Commerce, Laws, and Government* (London: 1774), p. 124.

⁴⁰ “The Jews of Jamaica: A Historical View,” *Caribbean Quarterly* 13:1 (1967): p. 47–8.

⁴¹ Mirvis, *The Jews of Eighteenth-Century Jamaica*, p. 75.

⁴² G.R. to Edward Trelawny, “Additional Instructions to the Governor of Jamaica Relating to the Jews,” January 12, 1737, p. 2-3.

key ally in the battle against the Assembly.⁴³ The Privy Council intervened against the local government, ordering Trelawny to comply. Proponents of the tax stated that it was a matter of military necessity to protect the island during the First Maroon War, and that it incidentally affected Jews en masse.

However, the Assembly's call for increased wartime revenue originated from an unconfirmed report that a "Jacob, a Jew," sold gunpowder to the Nanny Town Maroons, making the claim of simple military necessity dubious.⁴⁴ Jamaica's Jewish merchants were well known for petitioning the Assembly, but the intensifying discrimination forced them to request assistance from the highest possible imperial authority. Their invocation of transatlantic connections was another feature of Jewish activism that brought London's nucleus of power closer to the colonial community in times of duress: Jamaica's Jewish leaders delivered an appeal "to the officers of London's Sephardic community, in which they asked the Londoners to intercede for them with the colony's newly appointed governor" to challenge attacks against them for refusing to participate in the militia on holy days.⁴⁵ The Jewish people were anything but passive.

Although the First Maroon War's expression of African freedom initially appeared to jeopardize Jamaica's Jews, merchants' persistence with the Crown led to their victory, too. On 12 January 1738, another order from the Privy Council, composed by William Sharpe, demanded that Governor Trelawny respect the decision of "Your Majesty...not to pass any Act whereby such extraordinary taxes and hardships may for the future be laid upon the said Jews..."⁴⁶ The 1738 letter was an escalation from the 1737 order. It applied additional pressure on Trelawny to comply by referencing "Your Majesty," King George II himself. The letter continues, "but that on the contrary they [the Jews] may enjoy all the Rights, Privileges, and Immunities which they are intitled [entitled] to, in common with any of Your Majesty's natural born Subjects in that Island."⁴⁷ Invoking the 1661 Windsor Proclamation, Sharpe escalated the necessity for colonial policy to maintain consistency with the motherland's law. Such assertive language attacking the Assembly's prejudicial policies sent a clear message to Trelawny, who became a champion for Jewish rights in this matter. The petitioning Jewish merchants successfully played London against the colonial government. They may have been

⁴³ Frank Cundall et al., "Documents Relating to the History of the Jews in Jamaica and Barbados in the Time of William III," *Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society*, 23 (1915): p. 27.

⁴⁴ Mirvis, *The Jews of Eighteenth-Century Jamaica*, p. 61.

⁴⁵ Faber, *Jews, Slaves, and the Slave Trade*, p. 60.

⁴⁶ William Sharpe to Edward Trelawny, "Order of Council for the Governor of Jamaica Not to Suffer the Jews to be Taxed Higher Than the Other His Majesty's Subjects," January 12, 1738, p. 1.

⁴⁷ William Sharpe to Edward Trelawny, "Order of Council for the Governor of Jamaica Not to Suffer the Jews to be Taxed Higher Than the Other His Majesty's Subjects," January 12, 1738, pp. 1–2.

marginalized second-class citizens, but their voice was disruptive to the imperial order and hierarchy, as the First Maroon War was for enslaved Africans. By 1739, Trelawny confided to the Privy Council about his struggles to prevent the Jewish tax from passing, even having “been forced to consent” to it.⁴⁸ The fight did not stop there, however, and by late 1739, Trelawny kept his promise to the Board in blocking the Assembly.

The First Maroon War first justified predatory anti-Jewish legislation, but Maroons and Jews claimed degrees of victory upon its conclusion. By the “peace treaty in 1740,” London’s Board of Trade, another promoter of Jewish merchants like the Privy Council, “succeeded in imposing its will on the Assembly and the tax was formally abolished.”⁴⁹ The British signed peace treaties that respected Maroons’ autonomous communities. Jews, meanwhile, were no longer subject to the targeted taxes. The Naturalization Act of 1740 cleared a pathway for Jewish naturalization in the Caribbean colonies; Jamaica was included.⁵⁰ Such an encouraging reform did not extend to most Africans. In fact, the treaty that followed the First Maroon War required Maroons to not only capture any future runaway slaves and immediately return them to the plantations in exchange for compensation, but to “take, kill, suppress, or destroy” noncompliant rebels.⁵¹ There was indeed positive development for specific African communities at this time, but slavery remained an existential reality. As for the Jews’ precarious situation, taxation struck at the heart of their classification in British colonial society. The centrality of taxation to the Maroons’ war allowed Jews to make meaningful strides in receiving improved legal rights. Progressive removal of those legal barriers eventually eroded their foreign “nation” designation.

Enslaved Africans and Jewish merchants used their available means and channels of power to gain rights in a transatlantic world designed to keep them as outsiders. Without the numerous written requests brought to the Empire’s highest seat, the Assembly would have likely continued its oppressive practices unabated. After all, the Assembly received and rejected Jewish merchants’ petitions against high taxes throughout the seventeenth and early eighteenth century.⁵² Heightened antisemitism during the First Maroon War would have worsened the trend. Both acts of resistance—physical violence by enslaved Africans and legal activism by Jewish merchants—affirm marginalized communities’ underlying agency in the transatlantic slave trade. 1740 did not end the march for equality for either Africans or Jews. The Jamaican plantation society remained strong despite the disruptions brought on by the admittedly small Maroon community. Jews continued to face the ire of non-Jewish merchants

⁴⁸ Edward Trelawny to G.F. Judah, “Correspondence—Trelawney, G.E. (Box 1, Folder 3),” April 16, 1739, p. 3.

⁴⁹ Mirvis, *The Jews of Eighteenth-Century Jamaica*, p. 62.

⁵⁰ Snyder, “Rules, Rights and Redemption,” p. 153.

⁵¹ Orlando Patterson, “Slavery and Slave Revolts,” *Social and Economic Studies* 19:3 (1970): p. 311-12.

⁵² “The Jews of Jamaica: A Historical View,” *Caribbean Quarterly* 13:1 (1967): p. 47–8.

and policymakers. Despite these future hurdles, the First Maroon War did mark a critical juncture in the lives of Africans and Jews, paving the way for greater freedoms in the years, decades, and centuries that followed.

The First Maroon War helps unpack the complex, non-linear quest for sovereignty within Britain's eighteenth-century colonial regime. Understanding an intersecting port-based Jewish and Maroon history not only enhances insight into eighteenth-century Jamaican society but also symbolizes the depth of minority resistance to oppression. The transatlantic slave trade asserted a racialized hierarchy of power during a time of considerable intellectual reflection by Jewish people on their position in the empire: inserting the vocal Jewish merchant petitioners blurs the empire's castes. These merchants effectively leveraged the Crown's reliance on them to counter marginalization on the local level. The millions of Africans condemned to labor in the abominable elements and without the limited privileges given to other oppressed communities carved their own freedom through physical resistance. The First Maroon War gave formerly enslaved Africans an autonomous society outside British plantation rule. It ceded ground to free Africans on a society-shaking scale; it simultaneously advanced Jewish petitions for fair economic treatment and naturalization as two marginalized diasporic people living in a hostile space. Enslaved Africans and Jewish merchants went beyond enduring the colonial Caribbean to navigate it on their own terms.