

Differences Between Black and White's Perspective on the Stono Rebellion

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Abstract: The Stono Rebellion, an early act of rebellion against slavery in America, holds significant historical and cultural importance. This research explores the differing perspectives on the rebellion from Black and white observers, highlighting the diverse interpretations of the event and its implications. The white view portrays the rebellion as an irrational outburst, while the Black perspective emphasizes the rebels' political justice and human rights aspirations. By examining contrasting narratives, we gain a nuanced understanding of the complexities of interpreting historical events within systems of inequality and oppression. This analysis sheds light on the resilience and agency of the enslaved Africans, challenging dehumanizing narratives of slavery. The Stono Rebellion serves as a reminder of the universal human desire for freedom and dignity, emphasizing the importance of resistance in the face of oppressive systems. Understanding diverse perspectives on historical events fosters a more comprehensive understanding of the past and its implications for the present and future.

Keywords: stono rebellion, human rights, different perspectives, American history, colonial period

1. Introduction

We live in a world of tremendous violence. The question, though, is how that violence will be interpreted: who is on the side of justice? Whose violence is justified? This has been a problem throughout history, even in situations where the ethics seem, to us, clear. For instance, in 1739, there was a slave rebellion known as Stono's Rebellion: the largest slave revolt in the colonial era. It received radically different interpretations by Black and white observers. White observers viewed the Stono Rebellion as an irrational outburst, while a long Black tradition explained that a sense of political justice and human rights governed the enslaved people. This research delves into an in-depth analysis of the differences between Black and White perspectives on the Stono Rebellion — a poignant reminder that history is not always monochromatic but often a vibrant tapestry of diverse perceptions and interpretations.

2. What Is the Stono Rebellion?

The Stono Rebellion, one of the earliest known acts of rebellion against slavery in America, occurred in 1739, during the early stages of the formation of the slave society. It was a period where

the institution of slavery was still taking root in the nascent American colonies. It was a far cry from the later years when chattel slavery would be deeply entrenched in the socio-economic fabric of the United States and when other more renowned rebellions would occur [1].

Situated in South Carolina, near the Stono River, the rebellion was ignited by approximately twenty enslaved people. These enslaved people, led by Jemmy, seized weapons from a store, raised a flag, and began marching south towards Spanish Florida, which had promised liberty to enslaved people escaping from British colonies. The rebellion occurred against a backdrop of tension between Spain and Britain, and it seemed that the rebels intended to exploit this geopolitical situation to their advantage [1] (Figure 1 and Figure 2).



Figure 1: A Map of the British and French settlements in North America, 1755, detail including Charles Town, South Carolina, and St. Augustin[e] in Spanish Florida.



Figure 2: A map of South Carolina and a part of Georgia, 1780, detail including Charles Town and

the Stono River.

As the group journeyed, they rallied more enslaved people to their cause, their numbers swelling to around 100. They burned plantations and engaged in confrontations with white colonists. However, due to the developing nature of the slave society, the rebellion was comparatively more minor in scale than later slave revolts.

The South Carolina militia eventually suppressed the rebellion. The aftermath of the uprising was brutal for those involved; many rebels were killed during the conflict, and the surviving rebels were executed. The rebellion led to a harsh response from the authorities, which included stricter laws known as the Negro Act of 1740 to prevent further uprisings. This Act restricted the assembly, education, and movement of enslaved people, further embedding the institution of slavery into colonial society.

While the Stono Rebellion may have been quashed, its historical significance is undeniable. As one of the earliest major slave uprisings, it presented a stark challenge to the burgeoning institution of slavery in the British colonies. It marked a crucial point in the resistance against an oppressive system, paving the way for future acts of defiance in the face of systemic injustice. Although the Stono Rebellion occurred when the slave society was not as mature or widespread as in later years, it still represented a powerful assertion of the desire for freedom among the enslaved.

3. Research That Has Been Done

The Stono Slave Rebellion has been subject to a great deal of scholarship. For instance, Jack Shuler wrote a chapter about the rebellion called “Claiming Rights: The Stono Rebels Strike for Liberty.” In this chapter, he expanded upon historical analyses of the Stono Rebellion and suggested a relationship between the Stono Rebellion and human rights discourse in early American literature [2]. Also, Peter Wood devoted a chapter of his study, *Black Majority: Negroes in Colonial South Carolina from 1670 to the Stono Rebellion*, to the topic. He argues that the enslaved African population, despite living under the oppressive system of slavery, developed distinctive cultures and forms of resistance that significantly shaped the socio-economic landscape of colonial South Carolina [3].

4. Methodology

What neither author does is compare the interpretation of the events from Black and white audiences. This will be the focus of my paper. To analyze this question, I will compare two accounts of the Rebellion, one from a white voice and one from a Black voice. These two sources are high quality and well-suited to the topic under study. An unidentified white official wrote the source from the white perspective and was direct and accurate. The other source for the black view is a vivid and detailed story described by someone associated with the uprising. Procuring authentic Black perspectives presents substantial challenges, yet I have made a considerable effort to ensure their inclusion and accurate representation [4].

5. White People’s Perspective

The narrative unfolds as an eyewitness account of the Stono Rebellion. Written by an unidentified white official soon after the uprising, from a white observer’s standpoint, the report paints a visceral portrait of the rebellion as an event characterized by violence, chaos, and a seeming lack of reasonable cause [5].

As it comes to life in this narrative, the rebellion was instigated by a proclamation from the King of Spain, promising freedom and protection to any enslaved Africans who could reach Spanish

Florida. The interpretation offered in these recounts paints the uprising as a wild and irrational outburst, a sudden violent insurrection against the established order of the colony. The rebels are portrayed as wild and unruly, engaging in spontaneous acts of violence and destruction.

Detailing the plundering and burning of plantations, the indiscriminate killing of men, women, and children, and a relentless march toward Spanish Florida, the narrative highlights the rebels' actions as sudden and uncontrolled. The instances of rebels becoming drunk on stolen rum are employed as narrative elements to emphasize this perspective, portraying a lack of self-discipline that undercuts any moral or political justification for their actions.

Central to this account is the character of Jemmy, an enslaved African identified as the leader of the rebellion. Jemmy and twenty other enslaved Angolans are credited with instigating the uprising. Yet the narrative attributes no strategic planning or political motivation to him. His actions are presented as spontaneous, violent, and somewhat chaotic. The marching rebels' chanting of 'Liberty' is briefly noted but not explored further for its underlying implications or the broader context of a genuine desire for freedom.

At the time, Colonel Bull, the Lieutenant Governor of South Carolina, encountered the rebels and narrowly escaped their pursuit. His flight and subsequent raising of the local militia further inject a sense of unpredictable danger into the narrative. From the white populace's perspective, the rebellion is a sudden, unexpected shock to the established order of things.

The swift and severe response of the local militia underscores this perspective. The fact that many enslaved people, upon returning to their plantations, were shot without trial indicates a ruthless determination to stamp out the perceived threat of rebellion. Such a reaction might imply a profoundly ingrained fear within the white population and governing bodies, suggesting they recognized the rebellion as a significant challenge to their authority rather than dismissing it as mere chaos.

The concluding part of the narrative outlines measures General Oglethorpe took, including increased patrols, strengthening fortifications, and issuing rewards for captured fugitive slaves. These actions underscore the white authorities' sense of alarm, an acknowledgment of the potential for further disturbances, and a tacit understanding of the enslaved Africans' discontent.

In effect, this narrative serves as a revealing reflection of the attitudes, perspectives, and fears of a society built upon the institution of slavery. While the white view portrayed in the account dismisses the rebellion as a senseless, irrational outburst, the immediate and severe responses suggest an underlying, though unspoken, acknowledgment of the rebellion as a desperate, bold assertion of the enslaved peoples' desire for freedom and dignity. Such a contradictory stance reflects the tensions and complexities of the era, highlighting the inherent contradictions of a society that sought to suppress human liberty while championing the virtues of freedom.

6. Black People's Perspective

George Cato's captivating narrative passed down over generations, provides a distinct and invaluable black people's perspective on the Stono Rebellion, allowing us to see the event not merely as a historical fact but as an embodiment of a more profound struggle for justice and human rights. The narrative showcases his ancestor Cato, the purported rebellion leader, as a literate and politically conscious individual striving to liberate all enslaved people. Despite the defeat, the rebels maintained their principles, underlining their resilience and resistance. This account, viewed from the lens of the descendants of the alleged rebellion leader, underscores the belief that enslaved Africans were not merely passive victims of their circumstances but were individuals driven by an innate desire for political justice and a recognition of their inherent human rights [6].

According to George Cato's retelling, the slaves who participated in the rebellion, particularly its leader, his ancestor Cato, were acutely aware of their oppressive circumstances and motivated by a

clear sense of political justice. This is evident from Cato's dedication to the cause of the rebellion, not only for his liberation but for the emancipation of all enslaved people. His actions and the Rebellion can be seen as an assertion of the fundamental right to freedom, a total rejection of the institution of slavery, and a pursuit of political justice.

The detail that Cato was taught to read and write by his master signifies the level of political awareness among some enslaved people. Literacy provided Cato with the tools to understand the world beyond his immediate environment and possibly access information about the more significant political dynamics, such as the promise of freedom by Spanish Florida. This suggests that some enslaved people had developed a political consciousness and were motivated by political justice and a desire for freedom.

George Cato's narrative also argues that these slaves, guided by a sense of justice and a belief in their rights, were willing to risk their lives for the cause. The Rebellion was not a spontaneous or irrational act of violence but a calculated resistance against their enslavers. It's especially notable that, according to the narrative, Cato and other leaders harshly criticized those drinking and dancing, emphasizing the seriousness of their cause.

The fact that the Rebellion resulted in a significant loss of life, including 21 white colonists and 44 enslaved Africans, demonstrates the severity of the situation and the lengths these slaves were willing to go in their quest for freedom. The Rebellion may not have been successful in its immediate goal of achieving independence for the enslaved people involved, but it was a powerful assertion of their humanity and their rights.

Furthermore, the aftermath of the Rebellion, as narrated by George Cato, clearly portrays the unyielding spirit of the rebels. When surrounded by the militia, instead of pleading for mercy or trying to deny their involvement, they stood their ground. As passed down through the generations, Cato's final words were a declaration of their principles and refusal to be subjugated. This sense of defiance, standing up for their rights even in the face of certain death, testifies to their sense of political justice and human rights.

In conclusion, George Cato's narrative provides an essential and unique viewpoint on the Stono Rebellion, arguing that black people think it was not just an act of desperate individuals but a politically charged response driven by a deep sense of justice and an assertion of human rights. This perspective challenges the often-dehumanizing narratives of slavery and emphasizes the enslaved's agency, resilience, and political consciousness. These individuals were not just passive victims; they had a strong sense of their rights and made conscious decisions to resist their oppression, even at the cost of their lives. By highlighting this perspective, we can better understand the complex dynamics of slavery and resistance in colonial America.

7. Conclusion

The Stono Rebellion, while a lesser-known event in the annals of American history, serves as an essential milestone in the larger narrative of the African diaspora's struggle against the institution of slavery. As illustrated by the accounts of an unidentified white official and George Cato, different communities understand the event differently, reflecting their unique experiences and perspectives. The white perspective views the rebellion as a spontaneous, irrational burst of violence. In contrast, the black perspective frames it as a politically conscious act of resistance driven by a sense of justice and human rights.

By understanding these contrasting narratives, we can appreciate the complexities of interpreting historical events, especially those embedded in systems of inequality and oppression. Our understanding of history is not always objective but is colored by our experiences, biases, and perspectives. Considering all these perspectives in historical analysis is crucial, as they offer us a more comprehensive, nuanced view of past events and their significance.

In the context of the Stono Rebellion, it's clear that there's more to the event than a simple outbreak of violence. It was a manifestation of a deeply rooted desire for freedom and dignity. Whether it was seen as a dangerous disruption or a brave assertion of human rights depended mainly on the observer's perspective. This interpretation is vital for historians seeking to understand the experiences and motivations of those involved in the rebellion and the societal responses to it.

The Stono Rebellion underscores the crucial role of resistance in the face of oppressive systems. Despite the harsh penalties and almost certain death, the enslaved Africans chose to fight for their rights and freedoms. This speaks to their resilience and determination and reflects the universal desire for freedom. Recognizing this human aspect is essential for a balanced and accurate understanding of historical events such as the Stono Rebellion.

In this way, by understanding the diverse perspectives on the Stono Rebellion, we can better appreciate the multifaceted nature of history, giving us the insight necessary to understand the complexities of the past more fully. This understanding can also serve as a foundation for an informed discussion on the implications of historical events on our present-day society, ultimately helping us to learn from the past and make better decisions for the future.

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