

# The Maroon Wars

Imagine a small band of displaced Africans standing up to the European slave trade and refusing to be its victims. Imagine resisting the full force of the Spanish and British militaries, and



winning. Imagine the Maroons.

Everyone knows the foul history of African enslavement in the Americas. But few know the heroic tale of the ones that got away. This is the story of those tenacious freedom fighters, the Maroons, symbols of resistance even today.

The name Maroon evolved from the Spanish word *cimarrón*, meaning wild and unbroken. Beginning in the 16th century, native Taino slaves, then African slaves, would sometimes escape their captors. They would flee into the island's more hostile terrain, the high mountains, from which they could defend themselves and vex their pursuers. Using ambush strikes and rapid retreats, the hardy holdouts resisted the Spanish military until the mid-17th century, then the English military through the 18th century.

Never large in number, defiant Maroons did wield fear over their would-be masters, preventing settlement of large territories by raiding plantations in search of arms, supplies, and women. The Europeans devoted much attention to subduing them, at one point importing dogs from Cuba, at another point bringing Miskito natives from Central America.

Constantly on alert, Maroons communicated with talking drums and hollowed out animal horns, called abengs. Most spoke the

Akan language from Africa.

Leeward Maroons, in the western Cockpit Country, followed the leader Cudjoe and his brothers, Johnny and Accompong. The British negotiated a treaty with Cudjoe in 1739, which awarded his band 2.3 square miles for



a settlement called Trelawny Town in St. James and 1.5 square miles for Accompong in St. Elizabeth.

Windward Maroons, in the eastern Blue and John Crow mountains, lived where the rivers and rains made pursuit even more difficult for the Europeans. In 1739 one of the eastern leaders, Quaco, signed a peace treaty with the


British. In 1740 the legendary Nanny of the Maroons signed a separate deal, receiving .77 square miles to establish Moore Town in the Rio Grande Valley.

Chief, tactician, and grandmother, Nanny remains larger than life even today. The only female among Jamaica's seven official national heroes, she occupies the core of its ancient oral tradition, and the front of its 500-dollar bill.

Peace reigned until 1795, when long-simmering issues exploded after two Trelawny Town Maroons were flogged for stealing pigs. Again young warriors took up arms, raided plantations, and plundered crops. The 300 fighters of Trelawny Town held out against 1,500 British soldiers, finally traveling to Montego Bay in 1796 to negotiate a new treaty.

But Governor Lord Balcarres tricked them, threw them onto ships bound for Port Royal, and had them deported to Nova Scotia. Ironically, they sailed back to Africa two years later and established themselves as the new elite of Sierra Leone. Although Trelawny Town was razed, the site was reestablished more recently as Maroon Town, but repopulated with non-Maroons.

Maroon communities at Accompong in St. Elizabeth; Moore Town and Charles Town in Portland; and Scot's Hall in St. Mary each have a leader called colonel. The communities still enjoy freedom from taxation, which



Strong Jamaican women

This year the Hon. Portia Simpson Miller became the first strong woman to lead Jamaica as prime minister, but she was not the first strong woman to lead Jamaicans. That distinction went to Nanny of the Maroons in the 18th century (illustrated at left). Operating in the windward Blue and John Crow mountains, Nanny inspired her little band of African freedom fighters to resist the slave trade and refuse to be its victims. Still a symbol of resistance today, Nanny is the only female among Jamaica's seven official national heroes. An artist's rendition of her graces the country's 500-dollar bill.



they negotiated with the British in the 18th century. They still practice old African customs.

Separation from the larger society has broken down through work, education, and intermarriage. Today, many descendants proudly introduce themselves as Maroons. Formerly isolated communities now welcome visitors and share many of their fascinating rituals.

But despite the new openness,

**Opening spread: "Maroons in Ambush on Dromilly Estate, Trelawny, 1796." Left: "A Maroon Warrior." Above: "Cudjoe Making Peace." All illustrations courtesy of the National Library of Jamaica.**

communities still hold some secrets very close. By passing down sacred traditions in isolation — including sorcery, divination, and healing — the Maroons provide Jamaica's closest link to ancient Africa, and perhaps to the island's indigenous Tainos.

Out west, the Accompong Maroon

Tour takes visitors into the nearly inaccessible Cockpit Country to meet villagers and see historic sites, 952-4546. Each January the village of Accompong hosts a big festival. In the east, tours of settlements among the Blue and John Crow mountains require a bit more planning. 🍍