

The legend of Jack Mansong

Perhaps the most feared runaway slave in Jamaica during the 1700s was Jack Mansong, popularly known as 'Three Fingered Jack' - Jamaica's first infamous bad man.

A slave who's exploits as a guerilla fighter, starting in 1780 until his death in January 1781, sparked a wave of literary works which kept his legend alive well beyond the shores of Jamaica. Historians say that the very mention of Mansong's name drove fear into the hearts of white plantation owners in Jamaica and those in Britain. He was also the first fugitive in Jamaica's history to have a bounty, £300, placed on his head. During the slavery years, there were many runaway slaves and rebels, but Jack's reputation was legendary, considering that his time as a fugitive lasted less than a year - between 1780 and 1781. The marker, mounted in 1978, says of Jack, in part: "Strong, brave, skilled with machete or musket, his bold exploits were equalled only by his chivalry. He loved his country and his people. He was said to have never harmed a woman or child." Who was Jack Manson? Where was he born? These are among the questions that continue to haunt students of history fascinated by the legend of Three Finger Jack. Jack Mansong fled the slave plantation and at first hid at a spot at the head of the Cane River, but later retreated to the Queensbury Ridge of the Blue Mountains, living in a cave that came to bear his name. He and his band of runaways would lie in wait on the highway in the vicinity of Eleven miles where they robbed and killed travelers on the Windward Road that linked Kingston with the eastern part of the island. Believed to be a giant in stature, standing close to seven feet tall, he became known as Three Finger Jack after losing two digits in a fight with a Maroon known as Quashie, who would eventually be credited with killing him. By the end of 1780, the colonial government had become frustrated that all efforts to rid the society of Three Fingered Jack had failed, despite the posting of rewards by the British Government and the colonial assembly. To boost their drive to capture Mansong, the colonists offered full freedom to any slave who could bring the feared rebel to justice, dead or alive. Jack Mansong's short but effective guerrilla warfare ended on January 27, 1781, according to an account in the Royal Gazette of February 3, 1781. The report states that Three Fingered Jack was surprised near the entrance of his cave by Quashie, who had converted to Christianity and was now known by the name John Reeder and a small slave boy known as 'A Good Shot'. Alone and unarmed, he reportedly had time only to seize a machete before being shot three times, when attacked by Quashie. Mortally wounded, Jack threw himself off a precipice and Quashie followed. The two engaged in hand-to-hand combat with Jack putting up a good fight before succumbing to Quashie. The slave boy bashed in his head with a rock and both he and Reeder proceeded to cut off his three-fingered hand and head.

Feared as much for his fighting skills as his obeah, Jack who in life was the essence of the strong spirit of a freedom fighter, was reduced to a humiliating end. His decapitated head was put on a bamboo pole and carried by his proud victors, followed by a crowd, celebrating as they marched first to Morant Bay and then to Spanish Town to collect the reward of £300. The head and hand of Jack Mansong were preserved for 20 years at Spanish Town. Despite driving fear into the hearts of the colonialists and being branded a cold-blooded murderer, the exploits of Three Fingered Jack were used by anti-slavery activists in England to advocate human dignity for both West Indian and African blacks. Next time you drive out to St Thomas from St Andrew in the vicinity of Bull Bay, be sure to look for the historic marker in honour of Three Finger Jack