

Maritime Marronage and Spanish Trinidad

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This paper foregrounds the Spanish Caribbean island of Trinidad as a known destination for maritime fugitives from slavery, emphasizing the two decades following the Seven Years' War (1756-1763). It explores the degree to which enslaved people in the protestant-governed European colonies of the Southern Caribbean at-large looked to Trinidad as a territory that might offer them a way out of slavery in a broader region where that same institution was expanding. Charting the canoe and small boat movements of enslaved people from Carriacou, Demerara, Essequibo, Grenada, and Tobago, it suggests the Spanish crown's longstanding policy of asylum in Trinidad motivated enslaved people to attempt maritime escape from both island and mainland coastlines in the region-at large. These escapes, as the paper shows, prompted planters and colonial officials to appeal to Spanish officials for fugitives' return and re-enslavement.

In exploring these themes, the paper seeks to build on two key historiographies. First, historians studying maritime marronage in the colonial Caribbean have long shown Spanish Trinidad to have been a significant destination for fugitives from slavery during the eighteenth century. This paper builds on these works by foregrounding the everyday struggles of enslaved people themselves, situating their efforts within a changing Southern Caribbean in the era following the Seven Years' War. Second, scholars exploring the history of Atlantic slavery in Trinidad tend to begin their studies in 1783, when the Spanish crown offered generous incentives to prospective settlers in the hope the island would become a productive plantation colony. The crown's efforts, at least to some degree, worked. In the years that followed, plantation agriculture and racial slavery expanded on the island. By turning our attention to the two decades preceding these transformations, the paper illustrates how enslaved people across the region at-large shaped the island's history in advance of plantation agriculture's expansion.