

Lost in time

The community of Kensington in South St James is not abuzz with the excitement of yesteryear as the site of the 19th-century Christmas Rebellion has become a quiet farming community.

The rebellion, which occurred in 1831, helped to change the face of slavery throughout the Western Hemisphere. But even though its chief instigator, Samuel Sharpe, has since been conferred with national-hero status, all that stands in the community in recognition of the historic event is an unkempt monument. "This should be a thriving tourist attraction. Many years ago, tourists would come into the community, not only for its historical background, but to enjoy the view of the valley," says former educator and community stalwart, 85-year-old Mervis Henry. "The terrible condition of the road leading into the community might have something to do with it. I can't say for a fact, but nothing happens in that regard anymore." Historic event The story that gave Kensington a place in history was the uprising, which was sparked by the refusal of the slaves to return to work after the Christmas holidays unless they were going to be paid. The planters' refusal to yield to their demands and the counter-revolutionary violence by the white militia escalated the conflict. Followers of Baptist preacher 'Daddy Sharpe' set fire to the trash house at Tulloch Estate in Kensington on that fateful night, which triggered similar responses on plantations across the country. Terrible retribution followed. While 14 white people died during the rebellion, more than 500 slaves lost their lives, most of them as a result of the court trials that followed. Sharpe was hung on May 23, 1832. The Slavery Abolition Act was passed in 1833 by the British parliament, influenced greatly by the Christmas Rebellion, which had helped to win over supporters for the abolition movement in Britain. The act created a period of controlled abolition - apprenticeship - which lasted from August 1, 1834, to August 1, 1838, when slavery was fully abolished in the British West Indies. As far back as 1999, Member of Parliament for South St James Derrick Kellier announced plans to establish heritage tourism to commemorate this event and to improve the economic well-being of the village. This thrust, he had stated, would include a museum and rehabilitation of the estate house, mill, and the trash house. Up to press time, several efforts to contact Kellier proved futile. Residents migrating There has been a steady migration of the residents to urban areas in search of job opportunities as the economic life of Kensington continues to wane. The community is also without piped water, leaving residents to rely on rainfall or the trucking of the precious commodity - at a cost. But for Teacher Henry, there are signs of hope. "Persons are returning to the area, and that is a very good sign. So there are some positives." One aspect of culture that remains strong in the community is the Baptist faith. "The community thrives and was founded on the Baptists. It is still a big influence in Kensington, a very peaceful place, and so we keep our faith that things will get better."