

Colonial Period

The Stono Rebellion of 1739 (also known as Cato's Conspiracy or Cato's Rebellion) was a revolt by enslaved people that began on 9 September 1739, in the region of rice plantations just south of Charleston associated with the Stono River. It was the largest slave rebellion in the Southern Colonies, with 25 colonists and 35 to 50 Africans killed. The uprising was led by native Africans who were likely from the Central African Kingdom of Kongo, as the rebels were Catholic and some spoke Portuguese. At its height, the Kongo kingdom covered parts of present-day Angola, D R Congo and Republic of Congo.

The leader of the rebellion, Jemmy, was a literate slave. In some reports, however, he is referred to as "Cato", and likely was held by the Cato, or Cater, family who lived near the Ashley River and north of the Stono River. He led 20 other enslaved Kongolese, who may have been former soldiers, in an armed march south from the Stono River. They were bound for Spanish Florida, where frequent proclamations had promised freedom for enslaved fugitives from British North America.

Jemmy and his group recruited nearly 60 other enslaved people and killed more than 20 whites before being intercepted and defeated by the South Carolina militia near the Edisto River. Survivors traveled another 30 miles (50 km) before the militia finally defeated them a week later. Most of the captured men were executed; the surviving few were sold to markets in the West Indies. In response to the rebellion, the General Assembly passed the Negro Act of 1740, which restricted freedom for enslaved people, but improved working conditions and placed a 10-year moratorium on importing new slaves.