The Great Slave Uprising of 1811

Fear that slaves who had come from Saint Domingue would bring knowledge and experience of the island’s slave rebellion was one reason some in Louisiana feared the 1809 slave refugees. Although there is no clear connection between the two events, in 1811 slaves upriver from New Orleans rebelled against their masters in what became the largest slave revolt in U.S. history. In January 1811, an enslaved man named Charles led others to take control of the plantation of Miguel Andry. The slaves believed there might be a large collection of weapons on the plantation, but were disappointed not to find them. Most of the slaves were armed only with farm tools. As they began their approach toward New Orleans, they convinced other slaves to join them. Their numbers certainly exceeded 150 and may have been as high as 500. But the poorly armed rebels were no match for the local militia and U.S. Army forces that surrounded them two days into their march. Many of the slaves were killed in the fighting that followed. Those who were captured were taken to New Orleans for trial. Twenty-one slaves were hanged, and their heads were then placed on poles along the route they had taken toward New Orleans. This would serve as a warning to other slaves who might consider rebellion. Although the 1811 slave rebels were defeated, the sheer numbers of slaves involved make the revolt an important part of the nation’s history.