

Law, Lineage, Gender, and the Lives of Enslaved Indigenous People on the Edge of the Nineteenth-Century Caribbean

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In 1821, more than ninety enslaved men, women, and children approached the British superintendent of Belize and claimed their freedom based on Indigenous ancestry. The superintendent took their claim seriously and created a board of commissioners to investigate the matter. The men and women who had enslaved the petitioners responded with a vigorous, years-long legal counterattack. In 1826, the petitioners' case failed on its legal merits, but they received freedom due to shifting attitudes toward slavery in the age of amelioration, abolitionism, and emancipation. The intervening five years saw the creation of a remarkable documentary record that provides an unusually clear view into the lives of enslaved Indigenous people and the role that they played within the societies of both the Mosquito Shore and Belize. Particularly striking is the evidence it supplies about the Indigenous slave trade and slaveholding, the institutional contours of Indigenous slavery, enslaved Indigenous people's knowledge of colonial society and racial thought, the importance of women-centered kin and social networks, and the lived experience of Indigenous people in bondage. Ultimately, this case study advances the work of scholars who have situated Indigenous slavery within larger discussions about the changing nature of slavery, race, gender, labor, and empire.