OPINION

Reenactment brings historical slave revolt to life for columnist

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Louisiana has been revered by many as a cultural epicenter. Our food, festivals, music and sense of community are unmatched. People still come from far and wide to experience only a taste of this unique state. What we are today would not be possible if not for the cultural melting pot that Louisiana once was. Beneath the beautiful swampy landscapes, our history is as murky and volatile as the Mississippi, one that we've all too often chosen to ignore or minimize.

This weekend provided an opportunity to turn to the past and acknowledge its relevance to the present. Artist Dead Scott organized a reenactment of the German Coast Rebellion. Beginning on Nov. 8 and ending on Nov. 9, hundreds of reenactors armed with farm tools and unsharpened machetes walked 25 miles across in the same footsteps of the original rebels from LaPlace to Kenner, later concluding in New Orleans at Congo Square. This area was once lined with over 350 plantations — ranging from simple farmhouses to grand mansions before the American Civil War. What was once cotton, sugar cane and rice plantations have now been replaced with exurban communities and oil and gas industries.

Participation in this event became a necessity for me. It was surreal to look onward at the hundreds of us that gathered along the levee in costume. Every aspect of the march exuberated strength, determination and power. The towering militia on horses, the beating of drums and rhythmic chanting created an almost dissociative effect within me — for a second, in my mind, it was 1811 and we were "On to New Orleans," seeking "Liberty or Death." The sound of our cries echoed out to onlookers who left their houses or stared in awe outside of local businesses. The long march offered a lot of time to reflect and imagine the thoughts and feelings of those who participated in the actual uprising.

The original slave insurrection occurred on the east bank of the Mississippi River in what is now St. John the Baptist, St. Charles and Orleans Parishes. While Charles Deslondes has often credited as the rebellion's leader, other notable names included Gilbert, Kook, Quamana, Jossamine and Maria Rose, along with others. The insurrectionists fought not just for their emancipation, but to end the institution of slavery itself.

On the evening of Jan. 8, 1811, Deslondes led a band of rebels downriver on River Road. Reflected by the morning of Jan. 11, 1811, the rebels and the militia were up in arms.

The rebels fought with pikes, hoes and axes. They carried banners, marched to the beat of drums and were broken into subunits that each had individual leaders on horseback. The slaves had wreaked havoc on the region, setting plantations on fire as they marched towards New Orleans. Along the way, they recruited additional slaves while white residents fled to the city of New Orleans or the backwoods nearer their plantations.

These details were reflected in the reenactment, with groups of reenactors parading along the way, forming an army for the rebellion. The battle was honored at the end of the first day in an open field near the Benoit Carre spillway, muskets firing under the setting sun.

The end of the march through the French Quarter fell almost like a parade. People saw this band of rebels and I could feel that they too had no choice but to acknowledge history. The city that was once one of the most integral trading ports of the United States and a state with one of the largest populations of enslaved people has since had to struggle to maintain its cultural identity. Gentrification has been a growing problem in New Orleans as historical businesses close and Air BnB threaten to displace natives. The march was a grim reminder.

The ending of the reenactment was one of celebration — folks danced, sung and music played in Congo Square. The historical rebels, however, were not as jovial at the end of their attempts. Charles Deslondes was tried at the Destrehan plantation. Many of the rebels were killed during the skirmish and those who survived were killed and dismembered alongside Deslondes. Their heads put on pikes along the river to serve as a warning to potential rebels that might follow suit. The names of the rebels were honored through song instead of a simple solemn reading. Although I was exhausted and ready to be home, I know that I would be walking away from the experience a free man and that I had walked alongside the ancestors who sought it by any means necessary.

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