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St. John's Other Revolt: The Desertions of 1840

By David W. Knight © 2001

On the night of May 24, 1840, estates Annaberg and Leinster Bay were the scenes of one of the largest mass desertions of enslaved laborers on St. John since the outbreak of the 1733 slave insurrection more than a century before. In all, eight men (Charles Bryan, James Jacob, Adam [alias Cato], Big David, Henry Law, Paulus, John Curay), and three women (Kitty, Polly, and Katurah) were involved. The group made their escape by stealing the estates' boat, the Kitty Berg, and rowing the vessel to nearby Tortola under the cover of darkness. Ten of the individuals were from Leinster Bay, while only one was from Annaberg [SJPR, 1840; SOFS, 1854].

According to police reports of the incident, the runaways had carefully planned their escape. One of their numbers, Big David, was the watchman at the Leinster Bay plantation on the night of the desertions; another, Charles Bryan, was a carpenter, and it was believed that he had secretly fashioned oars and hidden them for the occasion. In preparation for leaving, members of the group had sold their "pigs and small animals on St. Thomas." Their houses were found empty of belongings after their departure [SJPR, 1840].

The incident was first reported to authorities at 10 o'clock on Sunday morning, May 25. Upon notification of the escape, Police Master Brahde immediately made his way from his home in Coral Bay to Annaberg, where he found the estate overseer, Mr. Davis, in a state of great consternation. Davis, who expressed complete bewilderment over the incident, claimed that he "knew no reason for the Negroes' desertion," and explained that upon his evening inspection at 8 o'clock he had found "everything as it should be" on both the Annaberg and Leinster Bay plantations [SJPR, 1840].

After inquiries on the estates proved largely uninformative, Brahde concluded that, beyond determining that the group had fled to Tortola, no further pertinent details of the case would be forthcoming. In an effort to resolve the matter as quickly as possible, he decided that his first course of action should be to immediately send the local Moravian missionary, Brother Schmitz, to Tortola to plead with the deserters to return home. After sending word to Schmitz to prepare for the journey, Brahde hastily set out for St. Thomas to secure the governor's formal pardon for the runaways in the event they consented to come back to St. John [SJPR, 1840].

Late Sunday night Brahde returned to St. John with assurance that none of the group would be prosecuted, and early the next morning Brother Schmitz set out in a hired boat for Tortola to negotiate. Upon his arrival in the British colony the missionary went directly to the local magistrate, Mr. Lewis, who called a gathering of the runaways at his home to discuss the issue. According to Schmitz, the house was soon crowded with not only the refugees from St. John, but also a number of local “free farmers” who had come to voice their support for the group. Once assembled the deserters expressed in no uncertain terms that they were “the utmost embittered” towards overseers Davis and Wallace, and that none of them would return as long as either of those men remained on the estates. The most vocal of the group, Charles Bryan, stated that the cause for their dislike of those individuals was that they could never “work enough” to please them, and “for each trivial matter were locked up or punished.” To each account offered as to how they had suffered at the hands of the overseers, the free Tortola people in the crowd responded with hearty cries of “Hear! Hear!” [SJPR, 1840].

Convinced of the groups’ resolve, Brother Schmitz returned to the Emmaus Mission Station on St. John where he penned a report to Police Master Brahde. In his report, Schmitz stated that he had been well treated by the people on Tortola, but held out little hope that any of the refugees would ever return [SJPR, 1840].

In fact, some of the group did return, but not until well after overseers Davis and Wallace had left the estates. During a hearing held in connection with claims for compensation due to the former owners of emancipated slaves on January 16, 1854, Charles Bryan recounted what had become of each of the eleven members of the group. In his testimony Bryan stated that he, along with his wife Katurah and James Jacobs, had all returned to work at Leinster Bay and were currently residing there. Of the others, Kitty, Paulus, David, and Adam had been recently seen on St. Thomas, while Henry Law, Petrus, and Polly -- who on at least one occasion had visited her family at Leinster Bay -- were still living on Tortola. As for John Curry, he had left Tortola bound for Trinidad soon after the meeting with Brother Schmitz in 1840. Bryan added that as recently as two years ago he had heard from a Tortola boat captain that Curry was “still on Trinidad and was well” [SOFS, 1854].

No record was found of any punitive actions ever having been taken against any member of the group.

Source: <http://www.stjohnhistoricalsociety.org/Articles/StJohn-OtherRevolt.htm>