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ACCOUNT OF THE NEGRO REBELLION ON ST. CROIX, DANISH WEST INDIES, 1759

INTRODUCTION

The account of the attempted Negro uprising on the Danish island of St. Croix which is herewith printed was written by one of the judges at the trial," Engelbret Hesselberg, and was apparently written for the purpose of justifying to the Copenhagen authorities the frightfully severe measures taken. In all its fearful details, Hesselberg's account presents a situation that could beyond doubt have been duplicated on English, French, Dutch, and possibly Spanish islands on a number of occasions both before and after the episode here described.

The opening statements of the author reflect the period of "Enlightenment," the era of Rousseau, Voltaire, and Beccaria, but his subsequent narrative harks back rather to the days of the witchcraft trials, where the ordinarily accepted rules of evidence were quite ignored, where idle rumor or chance remarks from the lips of desperately frightened Negro witnesses are solemnly treated as evidence, and where torture is a recognized mode of bringing forth the truth. It was surely a strange society and a curious social psychology that would accept the quoted remarks arising from an altercation between a couple of low class whites and a voluble and angry Negro slave as presumptive evidence of an imminent slave insurrection. The utter worthlessness of the confession of the free Negro Davis seems not to have struck the court. which secured the evidence" on the promise that at worst he would merely be banished. At any rate, Davis retracted

For a detailed description of the St. John insurrection, see Westergaard: *The Danish West Indies under Company Rule*, pp. 166-178. Reference to the threatened outbreak of 1746 is made in *ibid.*, 246, and to the 1759 episode, pp. 246-247.

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all that he had previously confessed" while enduring the keenest sufferings.

The most merciful death that Negroes declared guilty conspiracy could look forward to, appears to have been burning at the stake, where the agony seems not to have been prolonged beyond a quarter of an hour at most. The wheel and the gibbet were reserved for the supposed ring leaders." Not one of them confessed, even after enduring the most excruciating pain.

It deserves to be said, in conclusion, that the insurrection on the Danish island of St. John in the year 1733 had left a profound impression on the minds of the Danish planters and that a number of the St. John planter had moved to St. Croix shortly after its acquisition by the Danish crown in the year of the insurrection. It is more than likely that others of the planters, many of whom bore English and Irish names, had come to St. Croix from Antigua and other of the English Sugar Islands that had had similar experiences with their servile population. On St. Croix itself, in 1746, a threatened rising had been frustrated by the prompt work of a free Negro.

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The desire for liberty, which is so inseparable from human nature, and the unreasonable conduct of a number of masters towards their slaves, has always led, and will necessarily always lead, to rebellion; and especially is to be feared the resistance of the most intelligent among those Negroes who have been property owners in their native land. For the owner of 100 such slaves to direct them properly and in such a fashion that he will not expose himself to resentment on their part, it is necessary to be possessed of a higher degree of common sense than is required of the professor of the Hebrew, the Greek, or the Latin language. Those imperfections of Nature with which we are born, do not appear nearly so unendurable as those that are brought out by some event or other. The greater part of the slaves on colonies as recently developed as St. Croix are free-born, and have therefore just as good claim to

their freedom as we have to ours. One or other fateful occurrence has brought them out of that natural quality which a birth enjoyed with us, and made those persons our slaves who by a contrary event might have become our masters. What wonder then that such persons seek their freedom when they are provoked by the unreasonable conduct of unwise masters, and when they believe that the enterprise is not impossible: And why should it be less possible here than on the islands of our neighbors?

At the census taken in 1758, there were found to be on St. Croix 1,690 whites and 11,807 blacks, or seven to one. The fort of Christiansvern is in fair condition, and the fort of Frederichsvern has not yet been built (opbygget).

The Government here, as those will bear witness who realize most keenly the improvements that are needed to hold the honor of his Majesty and the security of the land, has not the power to involve his Majesty's treasury in as much as 4 shillings of expense until after 3 or 4 years of correspondence, unless they are willing to risk having to pay it out of their own purse.

We see that insurrection on our neighboring islands, where the Government has had freer hands in making the needed expenditures, has indeed been quite common (har været gandske almindeligt). The island of Barbados, the first sugar island that the English cultivated in America, had a Negro rebellion as early as 1649, and at that time it was estimated that there were 11,000 white men on the island. In the year 1687, when the number of whites was still very large, a new plot was discovered, as a result of which a score were executed. In the year 1692, still another conspiracy was uncovered, which was all the more dangerous for the whites in that the pest had raged among them during the years immediately preceding, so that instead of there being as in 1676, some 20,000, on this little island, which is only 1/400 as large as England, there were in 1692 scarcely 7,000 (whites), and on the other hand 70,000 Negroes.

When the English took Jamaica from the Spanish in 1655, and the Spanish slaves learned that their masters could not defend

Translated from a copy in the Library of Congress of Verlauff MS, no. 22. entitled Detailed description of the negro insurrection planned on the island of St. Croix in the year 1759, written in accordance with orders issued to him, by Byfoged Engelbret Hesselberg." The copy in the Royal Library, Copenhagen, Denmark, bears every evidence of genuineness, though unfortunately the original has not thus far come to light, so far as the present writer is aware.

The paragraphing is that of the translator. The writer's spelling of proper names has generally been preserved.

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themselves, the latter cut the threat of the Spanish governor and put a Negro in his place. Some of these Spanish slaves and the runaway slaves of the English themselves, got together in the mountains of Jamaica, where they built a fort from which they made raids on their former masters. The English fought against them in vain, and in 1720 brought Mosquito Indians over from the mainland to attack them. The Negroes preserved the freedom that they had gained for themselves and passed it on to their children, so that after they had made the island unsafe for a period of 60 years, the English governor Trelowney (Trelawney found himself obliged in 1738 not only to guarantee them their liberty, but also to permit them to have their own Negro governor, who was however to be subordinate to the governor of Jamaica.

Besides the perpetual attacks of these Negroes, which Jamaica was obliged to endure from time to time, there was another uprising in 1690 in Jamaica of 200 Negroes belonging to a single plantation. In 1736 the big rebellion was discovered on Antigua. The Negroes had planned their dessein many years before, and had placed many kegs of powder under the Assembly house for the purpose of setting it on fire when all the leading citizens of the island were gathered there.

A conspiracy was found in the Bermudas in 1730, and at Cape François in 1759; in both cases they attacked their masters with poison. At Cape François they had poisoned a public spring. Such has been the fate of our neighbor islands; such a fate have we suffered once on St. John, and now on St. Croix.

The history of the rebellion on St. Croix, which I have taken from the trials, is as follows: It was in the month of December, 1759, that 2 white men, Matthias and Benjamin Bear, were molding bullets on Sr. Søren Bagges plantation. A Negro slave by the name of Cudio, working at that time on Bagges plantation, asked Benjamin Bear to give him some of the bullets as a present, but as he was unable to give a proper account of what he was going to do with them, Bear gave him one. But Matthias, who did not think so far ahead, gave Cudio a dozen bullets while Bear had stepped aside. Bear learned about it, and in the afternoon of the same day, he said to Cudio, in the presence of a white man, Peter Hyde and of a number of other Negroes, that he had heard that Matthias had given im some bullets, but he, Cudio, had better look out, or his head might some day be found lying at his feet. To this, Cudio replied, addressing himself to the 2 white men, Benjamin

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Bear and Peter Hyde, "You look out that some of your heads lie at your feet pretty soon. Peter Hyde then asked, "whom will you the kill and Cudo replied, "You shall be the first that I shall kill.

The day before this conversation took place between Bear Hyde and Cudio, the Cudio aforementioned had said concerning Mr. Bagges plantation house, "Maybe that house will be min in a short time," to which one of Bagges Negroes, namely will, replied God dann you, you can't keep a secret." The same day Cudjo had asked B. Bear how long it would be until Christmas, and when Bear asked Cudio why he wanted to know this, he answered, "I am asking about it, as I hope by that time to be a little Petit Maitre.

The openness of this man Cudio was the first beginning of the whole decouverte, inasmuch as the two white men, Bear and Hyde, who came to entertain a reasonable suspicion that some trouble or other must be brewing, reported what had taken place to the burgher lieutenant in the Quarter, Merrich Turnbull, who re-ported it to the captain of the town, de Nulli (de Nully), the captain in his turn to the governor general, who ordered Cudjo arrested and the matter investigated. Thereupon, in accordance with the orders of the governor general, an inquiry was begun in my house, the first meeting being held on December 11, 1759.

When Cudio flatly denied all that the two white men, Peter Hyde and Benjamin Bear, as well as the Negroes who were present at the time of the above mentioned conversation, had testified against him, and especially when Cudjo's own blood brother Quamina voluntarily and without compulsion gave testimony against him to the effect that he (Cudio) had proposed an uprising in his presence, then Cudio confessed and admitted that a free Negro by the name of Wr. Davis had proposed rebellion to him some days before, at the same time naming a number of Negroes said to be implicated. Immediately arrangements were made for the arrest of Wm.

Davis and the other Negroes named by Cudio, before they should learn of Cudios confession. W. Davis was actually brought in and examined on December 12. At first he denied everything, but when he was promised that he would only be banished at worst, in case he would make a frank confession, he then exposed the whole dessein, and gave the names of quite a number of Negroes, some of whom have been found guilty and others acquitted. In order to encourage him to make as full a confession as possible, he was not

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put in irons, but only his hands were bound. Nevertheless, he managed to cut his throat in the morning of December 13, while in the fort. The wound was not considered dangerous by the surgeon and he was immediately bound. He made various confessions after that time, but on the following night, he tore the bandage from his neck, cursed and scolded those who approached him, and swore that if they cut him up piece by piece, and roasted him on the fire, he would nevertheless confess nothing. On the following morning, December 14, he died, and he was made an example of as indicated in the appended list.

It is impossible from the hearings that have been held to learn with full certainty who was the first author of this plot, or in what way he had inveiled others into it, since no one would acknowledge having started it. Of this much I am certain, that either the free Negro W. Davis, Heyliger's Negro Sam Hector, or 'Donnell's Negro Michel, has been the prime instigator of the plot. And although the testimony of most of the Negroes is to the effect that Wm. Davis was to be governor general, Michel second in command, and Sam Hector captain of the town, I feel almost certain that Sam Hector was the drive wheel which directed William Davis, Michel, and the whole plot. For he had a good deal of native ability, could both read and write, had higher sentiments than are ordinarily found in a Negro, and an ambition that led him as he has himself said and other Negroes in the plot have testified to be ashamed to associate with others of his own color. Besides, he was always practiced in the art, inasmuch as when the rising against the whites of Antigua was discovered in 1736, this same Sam Hector who was then known as Qvau, was found to have been interested. His father was hanged on Antigua, and this Qvau or Sam Hector, at that time a boy of from 18 to 20 years old, gave testimony against his own father, by virtue of the English law regarding King evidence, saved his own life, and was merely banished from the island.

Michel was apparently also a Negro of good intelligence, but had not the theory that Sam Hector had, and no practice. W. Davis on the other hand appeared to be a Negro of no especial ability or conduite, but since he was freeborn, it was perhaps rather his birth than his brains that gave him the right to first place. This, I must admit, is simply a guess, as Sam Hector has never once admitted that he was at any time implicated. It is at any rate certain from what all the rebels have said, that Sam Hector was to

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have the direction and supreme command (during the time of rebellion on the West-End, and his Majesty's Negro Qvakoe in the Christianstad district, but not until the land was taken, was Wm. Davis to become governor. As to the immediate plans, I can write with more certainty, since there those who have confessed are somewhat in agreement. First, it appears to have been generally understood that each Negro, was if possible to say his master or foreman; next, those whose masters plantations lay in the Christianstad district, were to gather on Coleman's (Coleman's plantation, which belonged to the West-End and which is situated a couple of gun-shots from the town of Christianstad; and those Negroes who belonged to the West-End, were to assemble at the West-End fort, and first take possession of Fort Friderichswarn and of all the ammunition there to be found. Thereupon all those who had procured weapons were to march to Christianstad, setting the plantations on fire on the way, and killing or burning all whites who collected to put out the fires, and finally to storm Christiansvorn, partly with the ammunition which each of the rebels had themselves secured, and partly with the ammunition they secured in taking the West-End fort.

W. Davis has himself said in the course of the hearings that he considered it an easy matter to take the West-End fort, which indeed at that time it was with 10 (men, to say nothing of a couple of hundred; since there was no gate to the fort. There were, to be sure, cannon, but no Rappenter. The soldiers were half demoralized and entirely starved, and the fort not half built. As to the time at which the rising was to take place, the testimony of all pointed to Christmas, 1759. No one was able to name the day, but the greater number said that when the whites began their Christmas celebration in earnest, and thought of nothing but a good time, then it should take place, when they would ostensibly go out and shoot white-headed pigeons.

I suppose, therefore, that the plot was either not ready to be launched or else the day appointed for its breaking out was a secret known only to Sam Hector, W. Davis, or Michel, who would not, for fear of the consequences, wish to reveal it until a day or two before the event.

From the list of confessions that follows, we see that many of the conspirators have refused to confess anything at all, although there has been sufficient evidence against them, insofar as it may be called evidence at all, where rogues have plotted and been the sole wit-

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nesses. This must necessarily be due, according to their way of thinking, to the solemn oath that they have taken, His Majestys Negro, Prince Qvako, has described the oath as follows: He says that free Negro French and free Negro. Wm. Davis called him into an inn here in the town, where French and Davis cut themselves in the finger in his presence, mixed the blood with earth and water, and drank it with the assurance (to each other that they would not confess to the conspiracy no matter what pain they were subjected to.

James Hugh's Negro, George, explained it in the following way: Bradshous (Bradshaw) Negro, Gomas (Gomez, asked him and other Negroes present if they would promise to maintain silence and reveal nothing, no matter what the pain, whereupon George and each of the others put a piece of earth in the mouth, meantime Whether the earth which was saying to Gomas, By Jesus, I will. with water and was ordinary earth, I cannot say; for after all of the Negroes who had explained about the path had been executed, a negress was taken up on suspicion, she had been m. Davis's wife, and she explained among other things that the most binding oath that a Negro could take, was one taken when he took earth from a dead Negro's grave, mixed it with water, and drank it.

One would have supposed that all the Negroes who took the oath, swearing, "By Jesus, I will," would have been Christians, or at least such as mixed their heathen superstitions with the Christian religion, but such was not the case.

I do not find it necessary at this time to write more in detail about this plot, since additional information will be found in the accompanying list. The only information I am adding is the means which were employed to bring out the facts and to encourage the Negroes to confess.

When W. Davis had cut his throat, and I realized that the hearings were going to amount to something, I sent a request to the Governor-General, asking him to relieve me of the disagreeable duty of judging alone in so important cases, and recommending Landstings Assessorerne Moth and Cretz since the judge (Lands Dommeren) was then sick abed together with myself to examine and pass judgment on these cases, which otherwise in *prima et ultima instantia* is judged by the town magistrate (Byfogden), and is confirmed, intensified, or changed by the Governor-General. This request of mine was granted by the Governor-General, and Messrs. Moth and

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Cretz have since assisted me in judging all the cases arising out of the conspiracy. It would most certainly be desirable that the under judges here on the islands be deprived of the right of being sole judges in Negro cases where life is at stake, and that the regular justice (Lands-Dommeren), the assessors of the council (Landstings-Assessorerne), and the town magistrate all be ordered to examine and judge such cases.

The Negro Qvamina, who was the first to confess anything, was bought by the island treasury. His letter of freedom and 50 rixdollars were presented to him publicly in the presence of the prisoners and many other Negroes.

And inasmuch as serious disorders are usually the occasion for new laws, so we have taken this opportunity to issue a new mandate concerning Negro economy, Said mandate is very good, but issued in a time of emergency, in haste, and is consequently not as complete as might be desired. Could the Negro codes of the French, English, and Dutch islands, be collected by a competent man, and then worked over not only by the burgher councils on St. Croix and St. Thomas, but also by the wisest of the planters, it would be possible in my opinion to produce in that way a permanent law.

LIST OF THE NEGROES ACCUSED OF PARTICIPATION IN THE REBELLION AND THE JUDGMENT IMPOSED UPON EACH

1. W. Davis, free negro, convicted by testimony of witnesses, and confessed.

He cut his own throat. His dead body was dragged through the streets by a horse, by one leg; thereafter hanged on a gallows by a leg, and finally taken down and burned at the stake.

2. Franch (or French), free negro, convicted by testimony of witnesses, but confessed nothing himself.

He was broken on the wheel with an iron crowbar, laid alive on the wheel, where he survived 12 hours. The head was then set on a stake, and the hand fastened on the gallows.

3. Prince Qvakoe, belonging to his Majesty, convicted by testimony of witnesses, and has confessed being implicated.

Was executed in the same way as Franch and lived 2 hours.

4. Cudio, belonging to Doran, is convicted by testimony of witnesses, and has himself confessed.

Was burned alive on a pyre, lived in the fire 4 1/2 minutes.

5. Gomas, belonging to John Bradshou, is convicted and has confessed.

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6. George, belonging to James Hughes, has confessed and in convicted.

Both these negros (and 6) were first pinched with hot tongs, then hanged by the legs in a gallows, and a dog likewise by the neck, between them. Gomas lived an hour and was strangled; George lived 3 hours and was strangled.

7. London, belonging to Thomas Lacke, is convicted and has himself confessed.

He was first pinched with, glowing tongs, then hanged up by the legs, lived 12 hours and was strangled.

8. Sam Hector, belonging to Pieter Heyliger, Senior, is convicted by testimony of witnesses, but has confessed nothing himself.

He was set up in a gibbet or iron cage and lived 42 hours.

9. Michel, belonging to Hugh O'Donnell, is convicted by testimony of witnesses, but confessed nothing.

Got the same punishment as Sam Hector, lived 91 hours.

10. Will, belonging to Søren Bagge, is convicted by testimony of witnesses, but made no confession.

Was burned alive, lived in the fire 14 minutes.

11. George, belonging to John Cookly, confessed and was convicted by testimony of witnesses.

He was pinched with glowing tongs and hanged by the neck.

12. Name not given, belonging to Manan Rogers, is convicted by testimony of witnesses, and made a partial confession.

Was set up in a gibbet from January 18, at 3:30 P.M. to Jan. 27, 8:30 A.M.

13. Sylvester, belonging to James Conningham, has confessed and been convicted by testimony of witnesses.

He was burned alive, and lived in the fire 44 minutes.

14. Jupiter, belonging to W. Burnet, has confessed and been convicted by testimony of witnesses.

He was burned alive, and lived in the fire for 14 minutes.

15. Harry, belonging to Salomon Rumbly.

16. Neptune, belonging to John Bladevill.

17. Josse, belonging to Adrian v. Beverhoudt.

18. Jach (sic), belonging to Marlenborg.

19. Pompe, belonging to John Cookly.

20. Coffe, belonging to Thomas Callenan.

21. Simon, belonging to his Majesty. Against all these (15-21) there is so great a suspicion that they are condemned to be

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sold out of the land, and are not to return to the Danish islands under pain of death. Their masters must accompany them. They are to remain in the fort until they are sent away from the land.

22. Coffe Mulaet, a servant of Mad. Hall; he is under suspicion. He is condemned to be sold as a slave, the proceeds to go into the treasury of the land. He is to be sent out of the country, and is not to return to the Danish islands in America, under penalty of death.

23. Qvaso Withe, belonging to W. Daniel. He confessed voluntarily, without compulsion, and was promised pardon. Condemned to be sold out of the land.

24. George Foot, belonging to Burnet. He was intimidated by his father Jupiter to join the plot, and he declared that the latter had punished him more severely for not entering into the plot than his master had punished him during his whole lifetime. The Jupiter entered under no. 14 as having been burned, was his father.

Condemned to be sold out of the land.

25. Qvamina, belonging to Doran. He was the first to confess, and that without compulsion, since he was brought in, not as an accomplice, but as a witness.

He was given his letter of freedom, which the treasury of the land paid to his master at an assessed value of 333 rixdollars, 2 marks. Besides, he was presented with 50 rixdollars from the treasury as a gift.

26.

Roe Jah, belonging to Manan Rogers.

27.

Jasper, belonging to the same.

28.

Harry, belonging to the same.

29.

Hans, belonging to Henning Lindberg,

30. Joh, belonging to Robbert Mevort. (Nos. 26-30 are free as birds and not yet captured. For each one seized alive, the captor will receive 50 rixdollars; 25 rd, will be paid for each one killed.

31.

Will, belonging to Wilkok.

Cupido, M.Dougall's.

32.

33.

Turun, Turnbulls.

34. Jach, Madame Seeberg's.

35. Sue, James Meade's.

36. Johanna, Botkin's.

37. Qvako, James Hughess.

38. John, ditos.

39. Dorinda, Moirs.

40. Tham, W. Thomas's.

41. Sam, Thebald Tofts.
42. Jonathan, L. Uyttendahl's
43. Pelot, Ruan's.
44. Cesar, Nicolaj Tuckers.

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45. Johns, Edmann Medonnin's.
46. Belli, Tucker's.
47. Peru, Braschougs.
48. Lorgent, Cretz's.
49. Pieter, John Connely's.
50. Merckel, A. Lindberg's.
51. Wano, Søren Bagges.
52. Cudio, Wm. Iles's.
53. Doblin, W. Gebles's.
54. Jach, ditos.
55. Coffe, Mey Dougell's.
56. Frantz, Th. Lacke's.
57. Marina, P. Heyliger's.
58. Pedro, Cornel. Henrichsens.
59. Tham, ditto's.
60. Jach, Jakob Giers's.
61. Sam, W. Williamsons.
62. Seimon, ditto's.
63. Jupiter, Tuites.
64. Abraham, Bradschous.
65. Paris, John Cookly's.
66. Colla, ditto's.
67. John, Th. Bourkes.
- All of these (nos. 31-80
acquitted.
68. Decbr., Cretis.
69. Will, de Kully (Nulâ-
70. Marianna, Bratschon
71. Phoenix, P. Heyliger.
72. Sylvia, Th. Hughess.
73. Laurentia, Thuites.
74. Tony, Kongens.
75. W. Seimon, Meades.
76. John Saby, P. Heyliger's.
77. Lena, Bourke's.
78. Schous, the King's.
79. Perupey, Stevarts.
80. Pody, ditto's.
81. Sylvester, P. Ruans.
82. Sara, A. Pintenys.
83. Nicol, J. Wades.
84. Samson, Conningham's.
85. Andrias, Tham Smidt's.
86. Wenus, Bagges.
87. Abel, Boffroms.
88. Gall, B. Uyttendales.
89. Maria, the King's.