

# From Serfdom to Fireburn and Strike



The History of Black Labor  
in the Danish West Indies  
1848–1916

Peter Hoxcer Jensen

That is, Section 5 stipulated that before the loan could become payable, an ordinance was to be issued which, as soon as the central factory had started operations, would allow laborers to freely dispose of their labor capacity on Saturdays. That is, wages and hours for work done on Saturdays could be individually negotiated. Besides, at the "latest three years afterward [from the time of the establishment of the central factory], the provisional Ordinance of the 26th of January, 1849, and the later supplementary ordinances concerning the relations between the owners of landed properties and the free rural laborers, shall be abolished."

On St. Croix, a busy time now followed, in drawing up an ordinance that would meet the stipulated conditions, for much was at stake. As compared with normal conditions, the Colonial Council read a draft for an ordinance relating to these matters with lightning speed,<sup>128</sup> and on June 16, 1876, the King was able to give his assent to an Ordinance Concerning the Establishment of Central Factories and Alterations of the Regulations Defining the Relations between Owners of Landed Properties and the Rural Laborers in St. Croix.<sup>129</sup> At long last, extensive reform of the labor legislation was within reach.

The labor insurrection (Fireburn) of 1878 has been a popular subject for writers and readers ever since, and the course of events has been described in a great number of works.<sup>130</sup> Less, however, has been done to relate the insurrection to the social and economic conditions at the time.

There is little disagreement as to the causes of the Fireburn. In the report prepared by the 1878 Commission, three points in particular were singled out: the planters' abuse of the penalty system,<sup>131</sup> the vexation caused by the very short term of notice allowed for annulling annual contracts and the attempts made by the authorities to put obstacles in the way of laborers who wanted to leave the island.<sup>132</sup> At any rate, these items constituted at least some of the causes of the insurrection, which,

<sup>128</sup> *St. Croix Colonial Council*, Apr. 3, and 18, 1876, columns 303-16.

<sup>129</sup> The Ordinance is available in *Lov T.* 1876, in the supplement pp. 61-62.

<sup>130</sup> A few will only be mentioned here: see, for example, Skrubbeltrang, pp. 189-200; Larsen, pp. 305-11; Lewisohn, pp. 308-22; and Degn, pp. 510-11.

<sup>131</sup> The labor regulations allowed the planters to fine the laborers for a number of petty offenses, and the system was often abused by plantation owners or managers for reasons of personal economic gain.

<sup>132</sup> The report of the 1878 Commission, column 1449-50 (the *Rigsdagstidende* 1879-80, supplement A).

summing up, must be characterized in terms of profound dissatisfaction, long harbored by the laborers, with labor conditions on St. Croix. The Rev. Herman Lawaetz in 1915 characterized the 1849 Regulations as a "compromise in a retrogressive direction" (as compared to slavery).<sup>133</sup> Similar comparisons between the period 1849-78 and the time before Emancipation have been made by James Green<sup>134</sup> and Andreas Jørgensen<sup>135</sup>—to the advantage of slavery! In some degree, things are put in perspective when, in his memoirs, an old planter like Robert Skeoch argues that, for his opinion, part of the cause of the 1878 Fireburn was that, for the laborers, it must have been worse to work as forced serfs under the 1849 Regulations than to be slaves, in which situation they had, after all, others on whom they might rely.<sup>136</sup> It was no coincidence that the laborers called 1848 "the first free" and 1878 "the second free."<sup>137</sup>

The explanations given of the immediate causes for the insurrection are all marked by the lack of any findings connecting labor reform with the legislation relating to the establishment of the central factory. The Danish historian Fridlev Skrubbeltrang suggests that the probable spark for the insurrection was the recent start of the central factory,<sup>138</sup> which to the plantation laborers was like a red flag to a bull, because wages were higher in the factory than on the plantations. In part, this explanation is quite correct, but, beyond this, reasons are scarce in the various accounts of the insurrection. It is only remarked that the insurrection arose spontaneously and unexpectedly. The explanation that presents the establishment of the central factory as the direct or, at any rate, most important cause is strangely illogical, since the factory was located near Christiansted and, as is well known, the insurrection began in Frederiksted and actually never spread to Christiansted. Also, it is questionable whether the insurrection did in fact arise as spontaneously as is often argued. True, during the interrogations after the revolt, only a third of the people questioned thought that plans of insurrection, distur-

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 533.

<sup>134</sup> James Green, "The British West Indian Alien Labor Problem," p. 58.

<sup>135</sup> Jørgeson, "Et dansk imperialistisk eksperiment....," pp. 59-60.

<sup>136</sup> Robert Skeoch, *Cruzan Planter* (St. Croix, 1971), pp. 22-23.

<sup>137</sup> The Report of the 1878 Commission, p. 534.

<sup>138</sup> Skrubbeltrang, p. 186. A basically identical account, with more details, however, is given in Degn (pp. 509-10).

bances or the like had been laid in advance. However, those questioned who doubted that planning had been done merely argued that the rumors of planning were "unfounded," while the adherents of the theory of a plan laid in advance had far better arguments at hand. Thus, during the interrogations and in the Colonial Council immediately after the insurrection, a number of the island's planters mentioned that, for some time previously, the laborers had stopped tilling their provision grounds and that they had expected, perhaps not an insurrection proper, but a sort of strike.<sup>139</sup> Accordingly, the possibility cannot be ruled out that, to a certain extent, some planning or preparation did take place, though the spread of spontaneous actions, especially at the start of the revolt, that became important to the course of events should by no means be underestimated.

The question of why the insurrection came about in 1878 is not particularly difficult to answer when it is remembered that a labor-legislation reform was in preparation. As previously mentioned, the Ordinance of June 16, 1876, linked a reform of the labor legislation closely with the start of the central factory. Naturally, the laborers knew this.<sup>140</sup> However, what they may not have known, or may have found difficult to understand, was that the expected reform would not be due until three years from then. As in 1848, there was a great impatience to see the projected reforms carried out. What would be more logical than to assume that, since the expected reforms were connected with the start of the central factory, they would be implemented on the first reasonable date after the factory started operations—in this case, on the removal day of October 1, 1878.<sup>141</sup> When, contrary to all expectations, nothing happened on October 1, the

---

<sup>139</sup> *KC* (p. 104). The Commission of Dec. 28, 1878, on the insurrection on St. Croix. The interrogations register, as well as *St. Croix Colonial Council*, Nov. 6, 1878, columns 149–50.

<sup>140</sup> The 1878 Commission stated in its report that the planters ought to have brought about a speedier implementation of new labor regulations, because they might have foreseen that "agitation" would easily crop up among the laborers (the *Rigsdagstidende* 1879–80, supplement A, columns 1453–56).

<sup>141</sup> The Central Factory started operations in March 1878 (*St. Croix Colonial Council*, Aug. 18, 1879, columns 223ss). The explanation as to why the Fireburn started on October 1, 1878, is supported by a letter from the Crucian planter Eliza W. Moore, dated Feb. 17, 1879 (*KC*, p. 104, Archives of the 1878 Commission).

bitter rage experienced by the disappointed laborers was naturally turned against the planters, who were suspected of wanting to cheat the laborers by not repealing the detested 1849 Regulations.

By and large, it is not correct to characterize the 1878 insurrection as a very impulsive and in fact incomprehensible phenomenon, as has so often been done. On the contrary, it is possible to find quite satisfactory explanations for the reasons behind the revolt, which offers parallels to both the revolt of 1848 and to insurrections in other parts of the West Indies—for instance, the insurrection on St. Vincent in 1862,<sup>142</sup> and the notorious Morant Bay Riot in Jamaica in 1865.<sup>143</sup>

The 1878 Fireburn lasted from October 1 through October 5 and was suppressed ruthlessly. A month later, on November 6, a Colonial Council meeting was held whose main subject, naturally enough, was the insurrection.<sup>144</sup> During the discussion, the member nominated by the Crown—Mr. Branch—put forward the view that the real cause of the insurrection was that the planters had exploited (abused) the laborers to the utmost and that, as was only reasonable, the laborers had refused to put up with it anymore. To argue, as the planters did, that the laborers were “well fed” and “well housed” was not sufficient—they must also be treated decently! Branch’s utterances were countered in sharp terms by the planters, who were unwilling to recognize that they themselves bore a large part of the blame. In the end, however, the planters had to yield. The outcome of the meeting can be summed up in a statement made by Governor Garde: “If we wish to obtain the sympathy of the outer world, we must try to meet its opinions.”

#### REFORMS AT LENGTH

On December 28, 1878, the Danish government appointed a commission which was enjoined to assess the damage wrought by the Fireburn and to propose immediate relief measures, as well as to prepare a report on the causes of the insurrection and the means of preventing recurrences. Thus, the Commis-

<sup>142</sup> See Alan Burns, *History of the British West Indies* (London, 1954), p. 681.

<sup>143</sup> See, for example, E.B. Underhill, *The Tragedy of Morant Bay* (London, 1895), Chapter VI, pp. 55–66.

<sup>144</sup> *St. Croix Colonial Council*, Aug. 6, 1878, columns 149–50.

<sup>145</sup> The mandate of the 1879 Commission was printed in *Min. T. A.*, 1878, p. 161.