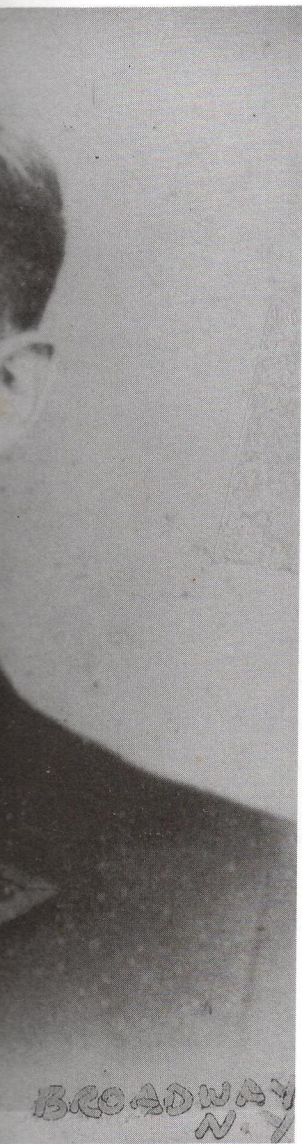


YANKEE TRADER
THE DIARY OF
ROBERT LORIN MERWIN
ST. CROIX, DANISH WEST INDIES
1886

John David Merwin
Compiler and Editor

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thrown into a bottle or calabash with which each worker appeared at the rum cellar door under the works, most religiously each week. This was particularly true during crop season or during planting season when the hardest work was done. This was considered an extra for good work.

This, therefore, was the system in vogue previous to October 1st, 1878 and which, in advancing ideas of the day, were incompatible with other conditions as being near, if not quite, semi-slavery.

In 1876 plans were completed for the erection of a central factory near Christiansted. When they begun work upon the buildings they were required to offer more for labor than the current rate of wages upon the plantations. This was particularly true because they had no houses nor allotment of provision ground to offer their labor and little else than cash money for the short time that the erection of the factory was to take. Therefore, the principals, Mr. Hageman and Mr. Millings, out here from Denmark superintending the work, were necessarily forced to pay more money. This they did by offering the laborers thirty to thirty-five cents per day.

The news of these wages gradually spread abroad among the Estates. All thought of the first of October as the day upon which they too would acquire the new rate of wages, if not from the Factory then from the planter who could not refuse to pay the going price.

Simultaneously with the existence of these conditions, a rather rash step was taken by the Government as a move toward economy of removing the military force from Frederiksted and by reducing the force in Christiansted to only sixty soldiers. This left the island rather poorly protected. A constabulary force was talked of as an alternate protection but nothing definite was done.

In consequence the laborers viewed the Island as they approached the annual liberty day in a rather defenceless position with keen memory of the success of 1848 when, by a coup, they procured their so-called freedom. Times were now considered propitious for a second trial and to break up the allowance and part cash system with restriction of residence by demanding all hard money as the fellows in Bassin were getting from the factory.

Tuesday morning, October 1st many laborers started for town to learn the news, as that was "free" day, though they had not given notice to leave their various employments, at least not in a body. October 1st was to them a day similar to May 1st in New York and had each year been an unsettled day. In Frederiksted there appeared the large "spree crowd" which good

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naturedly paraded the streets until near 3 p.m. when there was the first sign of trouble.

A crowd collected in front of the apothecary at Queen Street and King Cross Street indulging in loud talk with powerful arguments of would-be leaders as to their grievance regarding wages; there had been no sign from the Government or the planters that today their wages were to be raised, as they expected, to equal those being paid to the laborers at the Factory. Reverend DuBois, rector of St. Paul's Church, was sitting in his study at the rectory nearby and hearing a noise came out and went among the crowd. Most of the laborers were Anglicans and a large number Barbadians, who are also Anglicans. He, as their minister and as well as British Vice Consul, held their respect. He inquired "What is the matter?" In reply the leaders complained that they had been ill treated by the police who had beaten a laborer badly for nothing and that altogether they had been taken advantage of. Dr. DuBois tried to persuade them to be quiet, to be reasonable and to quietly leave town and go home to their several Estates. He suggested that tomorrow two or three of them come to him and state their grievances in a proper and orderly manner.

They finally agreed to his proposal and were at the point of moving off when Policemaster R. Petersen and Police Assistant Major Eyllich [sic] drove up to where Dr. DuBois had just finished arranging an armistice. The officials were accompanied by two soldiers on horseback - the entire military force left at the Fort - who went among the crowd with drawn swords swinging them over the laborers' heads and shouting in Danish orders to disperse, which the laborers understood by actions and not by language. This, instead of appeasing the people, undid all the good work that Dr. DuBois had accomplished and caused the crowd to quickly form into a mob.

The crowd, with sticks and stones, started to belabor the soldiers who turned and fled for the refuge of the Fort under full gallop of their horses with the mob following at a full run just behind the fleeing soldiers, the Policemaster and his Assistant, who had galloped their horses at full speed down through Strand Street to the Fort. There they passed through the Fort Gate just in time to close and bolt it before the crowd arrived at the gates.

Dr. DuBois quickly followed the crowd down Queen Street and also to the Fort where he got between the mob and the Fort walls and again resumed his arguments of pacification. He finally persuaded them to follow him and he led them up through King Street and to the entrance of the

town near the corner. Here he stopped and addressed them renewed and a quiet settlement.

Finally, two laborers, DuBois, stated their conditions.

1st The low rate of five cents paid by the laborers for their privileges such as for firewood and grog shared many wintering season, allotment of ground provisions).

2nd The annual allowance for a year, many times the value of the land.

3rd The power to punish certain offences, with fines and imprisonment.

4th The action to leave the Island; the advantage of them according to the law.

Dr. DuBois heard their conditions promising to bring them to the Governor's less assured them that they would be treated peaceably and in conclusion, begged for their conditions.

Just as they were about to leave the crowd shouting and many died in the hospital. Each curious to learn the names of the police, of which one was a Dane man.

As the mob arrived at the building entering the building that one of them had been killed was not dead but died. The incident reported had been a promise to parson I. The crowd then started to leave of their former attack.

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town near the corner of East Street and Queen Cross Street near the well. Here he stopped and, getting up on the bank by the roadside, again addressed them renewing his arguments and pleading for reason and wisdom and a quiet settlement of their grievances under his guidance.

Finally, two laborers came from the crowd and, addressing Dr. DuBois, stated their complaint more definitely. They were:

1st The low rate of wages paid of ten cents as compared with thirty five cents paid by the Central Factory (they forgot, of course, all their privileges such as free houses, daily allowances of herring and cornmeal, grog shared many weeks after work, sweet liquor allowance during grinding season, allotment of provision ground to grow their vegetables and ground provisions).

2nd The annual contract which forces them to remain upon an Estate for a year, many times against their will.

3rd The power given the managers to arbitrarily fine the laborer for certain offences, which authority was greatly abused by some managers, and

4th The actions of the Police Office refusing to grant them passports to leave the Island; this was not required of others and the police took advantage of them accordingly.

Dr. DuBois heard statements with sympathy and, while not definitely promising to bring about the completion of all their wishes, he nevertheless assured them that he would do all in his power to adjust their grievances peaceably and finally to the best of his ability and power. He again, in conclusion, begged them to leave town and to trust in him.

Just as they were about to do so, a woman coming from town ran up to the crowd shouting that a man had been beaten by the police and had just died in the hospital. This started the crowd moving toward the hospital, each curious to learn the news and feeling incensed at the treatment by the police, of which one half of their number were ex-soldiers and despised as Dane men.

As the mob arrived at the hospital, they made a general assault upon the building entering it in search of the dead man and to confirm their idea that one of them had been killed by the police. They found that the man was not dead but dead drunk, which then did not interest them. As the incident reported had started a momentum of passions, they forgot their promise to parson DuBois, now being removed from his good influence. The crowd then started down Strand Street bound for the Fort, the object of their former attack. Here, after an incipient and futile assault upon the

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old structure, with its fifteen foot high walls built over a hundred years ago for just such sort of an attack, they turned toward the town to seek vengeance there upon the inoffensive inhabitants.

The first point of attack was Mr. Keeruff's store on the corner of Queen Street and Hill Street, but just why they had singled it out was not understandable as Mr. Keeruff had been extremely kind to the laboring class, which they fully admitted. Their only excuse was that he was a white man, that blood had been spilled by white men, and that they must have revenge.

Reverend DuBois again appeared upon the scene but they refused to listen to him, telling him to go home that he was safe and that they were going to burn goods to punish the white man. With this in mind they brought the goods from Mr. Keeruff's store into the street, pouring kerosene oil which they had gotten in the store over them and setting them on fire.

Their next point of attack was on Mr. W. B. Woods Store, on the corner of King Street and Market Street where the stock was more inflammable than in the provision stores. This was treated to the same fate as Mr. Keeruff's.

At about this time a crowd of laborers arrived from the North Side estates, people that had had nothing to do with the earlier incidents of the day but now, seeing the game, joined in with a will, shouting, "We want more light", "It's very dark", and similar derisive remarks. Joining in with the work of destruction at the Woods Store, they placed fire on the gallery, which ignited the house and thus started the first building in town to be set on fire. The next point of attack was Mr. John Moore's hardware store in the middle of the block on King Street between Custom House and Market Streets, the main objective being to arm themselves with "bills", a short knife like a hatchet used to cut cane when reaping. Satisfying their desire, they added to their pleasure by deliberately setting fire to the building, although there was little in the shape of stock in trade that was combustible upon the premises.

After this, the conflagration became general and one building caught from the next with no effort to arrest the progress of the flames. This reminds one of the apathy of the citizens of London during their great fire of 1666. There is a helpless feeling of inability created by being prevented by a mob of demons dancing around and howling like maniacs; in this respect the women were by far the worst. They adopted the watchword of "our side" and anyone they met who would not repeat it was maltreated.

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In the meantime, the conditions and happenings were such that a messenger on horseback was sent to the messenger, getting to the town to see the patriots. From Estate Pu Mon Bijou and from the reached the President at previous to the arrival of End of the Island, hastily of the small military force promptly, started with West End shortly before

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In the meantime, the Governor's Guard, who was resident in the office in St. Thomas did not lose no time in getting into the Royal Mail Steam Packet. The latter immediately placed the Governor to move his base out of operation and it was off with the requisite arms from St. Thomas the Governor's base his operation from the then work West. He reached the Island in a state of siege

Meanwhile, two detach

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In the meantime, the Policemaster had dispatched information of the conditions and happenings to the President of the Island in Christiansted by a messenger on horseback who went out over the Northside road. The messenger, getting to Punch Estate, found the road filled with laborers hurrying to town to see the fun, who at once took sides with their compatriots. From Estate Punch another messenger was dispatched to Estate Mon Bijou and from there by relay into Christiansted where the message reached the President at 1 a.m. the following morning. The President who, previous to the arrival of this news was oblivious of conditions in the West End of the Island, hastily summoned Captain Ostermann, the Commander of the small military force stationed in Christiansted. He, with equal promptitude, started with his men for Frederiksted, arriving at the Fort in West End shortly before six o'clock that morning.

He had approached the town from the North, having taken the north-side roads on his way to town to avoid the crowds moving and congregated upon the Center Line road.

After entering the Fort for a hasty conference, Captain Ostermann, with his company, sallied forth into town where he at first attacked the rebels on King Street, who fled in all directions upon the firing of the first volley. This sent the mob out of town while Captain Ostermann returned to occupy the Fort and to disperse his men through town with the object of protecting the citizens while assisting in extinguishing the fires. Thus, dispossessed of their ravages in town, the mob proceeded with similar work setting fire to the dwellings and works on the estates in the country as they proceeded East from their orgies in the West.

In the meantime, the President was unable to get news to Governor Garde, who was resident in St. Thomas, until 7:30 that morning, as the cable office in St. Thomas did not open until 7 a.m. each day. The Governor lost no time in getting into action by applying to the Superintendent of the Royal Mail Steam Packet Company for quick transportation to St. Croix. The latter immediately placed their steamer, the "Arno", at the disposal of the Governor to move his troops. Unfortunately, the ship's furnaces were out of operation and it was after noon before they could get up steam and be off with the requisite assistance for the sister Colony. On the way over from St. Thomas the Governor decided to make for Christiansted and to base his operation from there with the hope of trying to save that town and then work West. He reached Christiansted at 6 p.m. and at once declared the Island in a state of siege.

Meanwhile, two detachments were sent into the country to reconnoiter,

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one down the Northside road with orders to join at Kings Hill. Little could be done as the officers felt it necessary to proceed very cautiously, as the night was dark and the roads shaded with the sugar cane which was quite high at that time of the year and obstructed their view.

However, it was the next morning that the mob was stopped as they were setting fire to the "Great House" at Estate Anna's Hope, and from then, with martial law in force, both innocent and guilty with a black skin were hunted from the road in a most merciless retaliation for all that had been done. Mr. William McEvoy, of Estate Barren Spot, whose place had been burned and who had, in preceding years, suffered so severely from droughts, went through the country upon a yellow buckboard with two rifles accompanied by his overseer, who loaded the rifles as he drove and, upon vision of a negro, he fired upon the object, guilty or not guilty. All were the same to him in his frenzy of despair. Thus, many innocent people suffered, which was afterwards deplored.

With the proclamation of martial law and its rigid enforcement, the whole uprising was quickly quieted, and just as quickly as the blacks arose they dispersed and subsided into very docile inhabitants. It almost appeared as if nothing had happened as far as they were concerned. For those who had committed the depredations were from the country and had lost nothing. Their houses were undisturbed as they had carefully only burned the Great Houses and works. The land was theirs for them to live on and to raise their provisions.

On the fourth a French man-of-war "La Bourdanais" arrived in Christiansted followed by the British man-of-war "Tourmaline" at Frederiksted and later the "USS Plymouth". These vessels had been required to proceed to St. Croix by the Consuls in St. Thomas of the various nations. The Governor of Porto Rico had also cabled his offer of assistance which fortunately could be declined with thanks as, by that time, conditions were well under control.

By October 5th three hundred prisoners had been taken, of which two hundred were quartered in Richmond Jail near Christiansted and the Governor had issued and had officially read on every Estate, by specially constituted constables, a Proclamation ordering all laborers to peacefully return to their respective homes upon the Estates on which they were domiciled. In addition, an Extra-ordinary Court Martial was established to try immediately the crimes that had been committed. The immediate result was the conviction of twelve of the proven principals who were shot.

These rigid measures were followed by more careful investigation of

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the smaller participants in the uprising whose sentences could be appealed to the Supreme Court in Denmark. Thus, gradually, the disgraceful scene that had been enacted owing to the parsimony and the narrow-mindedness of the Governor, were closed and followed by a commission of investigation from Denmark the members of which learned very little, though they professed to be very wise, and returned to Denmark.

The net result, as far as the laborers were concerned, was a new Laborers Act that required all payments to be in money, with allowances when shared to be optional and abolishing the annual contract system, and substituting a system of located labor subject to fourteen days notice upon either side. This is now the present law in force. The laborer is thus free in almost every sense of the word his only responsibility being that, if he voluntarily goes and lives upon a planter's Estate in a house in the village, he automatically binds himself to work upon the Estate of that planter. He is now paid 20 cents per day, working from 7 a.m. until noon and from 2 p.m. until sunset five days a week (work other days or on holidays is optional), a free doctor, medicine when ill and forty square feet of provision ground to work for his own use, if desired.

Mr. McDermott was in to see me today and reprimanded me first for being so undignified as to go to the funeral of Captain Willard as the guest of Mr. McDonald of Little La Grange. Further, he argued that a young man in my position should have gone alone as the representative of the honorable firm that I represented and not dining with colored people who have no social standing in the Island. Then, with that severe lecture not being enough, he also told me that it had been reported that yesterday I had driven through the town with Reverend Branch in his buggy with my feet on the dash board and that I ought to be ashamed to exhibit myself in public by such behavior. However, after blowing me up with considerable gusto, which is his prerogative, and the frequent application of much snuff and sneezing, he sold me the crop of molasses from Estate Diamond for twelve cents per gallon which I had been authorized to pay.

Mr. William Armstrong, while here, had bought the crop of molasses from the estates of Mr. James Latimer at Whim, Good Hope, Mon Bijou and Williams for ten cents per gallon. The molasses market has stiffened up considerably since Armstrong was here. I presume Mr. Latimer will be mad. Armstrong tried to buy Hewitt's molasses but he would not sell unless he got more money than Phipps would pay, therefore he sold his molasses to Phipps as usual. Hewitt had argued that to change from an old friend he must be offered a better price. That, I must admit, is perfectly