

The 1725 'Slave Uprising' on Nevis: Frank's Story

For several years Nevis had experienced a prolonged period of particularly harsh weather that had caused food shortages, illnesses and deaths. The adverse conditions started in 1717 with drought, continued with another drought and a hurricane in 1718¹ and further drought in 1721. There followed four storms in 1723 (one of which was very severe) and then more drought in 1724. Sugar cane and food crops spoiled;² supplies became scarce. Provisions became scarcer still when caterpillars and worms attacked a 'great part' of the harvest that had survived the bad weather. Malnourished, many people fell ill with fevers and colds and 'a great many Negroes ... died for want of provision as well as by Sickness'.³

Such were the conditions when the enslaved people were said to have planned their rebellion. But their scheme was discovered. The alleged ringleaders were put on trial and, although they did not confess, two of them were sentenced to be burnt alive.⁴ About a dozen people were suspected of being involved in the conspiracy and, on thin evidence, imprisoned.⁵ Among those jailed was Frank.

Details of Frank's life after his arrest are known and his story warrants telling in full. It is a remarkable tale that illuminates the political climate in Nevis at the time and also bears witness to one man's pride and determination. Frank's life was saved through the intervention and support of several white people, but he always strove to shape his own destiny and eventually succeeded in doing so.

¹ A description of that hurricane is in Revd Smith's *Natural History of Nevis* pp240-42

² John Rylands Library, University of Manchester (Rylands), Stapleton MSS 4.11.8: Timothy Tyrrell, 2 October 1723

Even the absentee plantation owners got to feel the shortages. Instead of the usual gifts of oranges or shaddocks Timothy Tyrrell sent some seashells to Britain; there had been 'but very few' fruit since the last storm. As to the guinea hens, they had almost all been destroyed except for a few young ones but, no doubt, the starving people had helped themselves to these (Rylands Stapleton MSS 4.11.2: April 1724). In August 1724 another storm in Nevis caused damage in the mountain land but not in the lower estates (Rylands Stapleton MSS 7.1: Timothy Tyrrell to Lady Stapleton, 25 May 1725). The enslaved people's provision grounds were in the mountain areas, and it is therefore very likely that their crops were, once again, destroyed. Certainly Governor Hart had earlier taken the unusual step of requesting 'a shipload of beans to be sent from England to feed starving slaves in Nevis' (Vincent K Hubbard 'NHCS Newsletter' February 1996 p9 and February 2000 p10, and Sir Alan Burns *History of the British West Indies* p460 quoting CSP 1726-1727 No 1). See also David Barry Gaspar *Bondmen and Rebels: A Study of Master-Slave Relations in Antigua* The Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1985 (1999 ed) p141

³ Rylands, Stapleton MSS 7.1: Timothy Tyrrell, Nevis, to Lady Frances Stapleton, 3 February 1725

⁴ VK Hubbard *Swords, Ships and Sugar* 5th ed p127

The historian Natalie Zacek has raised the possibility that, because none of the alleged conspirators confessed to the conspiracy, 'It is entirely possible that the Nevis plot of 1725 existed only in the paranoid mind-set of the slaveholders, or in the bondspeople's dreams of revenge and liberty'. This is unlikely. Firstly, those who were tried may have strenuously denied any involvement to save others who were implicated, and secondly, the conditions in the island had been so appalling for so long that the enslaved people may well have planned an uprising (Zacek, Natalie 'Reading the rebels: currents of slave resistance in the eighteenth-century British West Indies' published by the Institute of Historical Research on website <http://www.history.ac.uk/ihr/Focus/Slavery/articles/zacek.html>, quoting CO 186/1 Depositions of Sarah Lytton and Mary Combs; accessed 28 August 2007). Additional supporting evidence comes from an article in the *Felix Farley's Bristol News* which reported on 20 November 1725 that 'There is Advice from Nevis, by the *Charming Sally*, Capt. Richardson, that the Negroe Slaves in that Island, rose against their masters, and that some forces were sent from St Christopher to assist the latter; and 'twas believ'd the Mutineers would be obliged to submit very soon.' Assuming an Atlantic crossing of about six to eight weeks with a further delay in getting the news printed, the timing may suggest that Richardson's ship would have left Nevis at around the time when the plot was supposed to have been discovered. Although ship's captains were often reliable informants, in this instance Robinson appears to have added information that is not substantiated elsewhere: that the conspiracy progressed to an actual uprising that needed the support of the St Kitts forces (<http://discoveringbristol.org.uk/browse/slavery/st-james-fair-bristol/P2750/> Copyright BCC Library Service; accessed 20 August 2015). The *London Journal* also carried Richardson's report (John Richardson *Slavery and Augustan Literature: Swift, Pope and Gay* p119).

⁵ Rylands, Stapleton MSS 4.3: Thomas Butler, 21 November 1725; also Bangor University, Stapleton-Cotton MSS 20: Timothy Tyrrell, 10 September 1725, with a PS added on 25 September 1725, and Harvard College Library, Stapleton MSS: Timothy Tyrrell, 6 November 1725



At Frank's trial on 17 September 1725⁶ the most damning statement was made by a woman called Mary Combs. She claimed that she had overheard a conversation between Soco, an enslaved man, and Mrs Symonds, in which Soco alleged that Frank was 'to be our Captain [i.e. leader]'.⁷ Joseph Herbert, the manager on the Stapleton plantation, did not believe the accusations. Although he found Frank to be an 'extraordinary Negro' who clearly had qualities befitting a good leader, at the trial Herbert spoke on Frank's behalf and testified to his loyalty and steadfastness. Frank had recently been made overseer,⁸ and his supporters claimed that the allegation against him arose from a quarrel,⁹ or from someone with a grudge against him – a rival for the post perhaps. Despite Herbert's support and the lack of evidence, Frank was banished from Nevis. He had to leave the island within twenty days. Word had it that several whites were outraged at him having been set free and, so convinced were they of his involvement in the plot, that they swore to kill him if he ever returned to Nevis.¹⁰

The manager, Joseph Herbert, and the attorney, Timothy Tyrrell, agreed to move Frank to the Stapleton plantation in St Kitts, but Governor Hart, fearing for his safety, would not allow him to live in the island. Safe neither in St Kitts nor in Nevis, Herbert and Tyrrell planned to send Frank to England instead.¹¹ But, believing he was to be sold to a ship's captain, Frank escaped and went underground. Once he realised that, instead of enslaving him, Captain Condy would provide safe passage,¹² he gave himself up and, leaving wives and children behind, sailed on Condy's ship to England.

Frank's case was taken up by Sir William Stapleton who planned to get 'a pardon & a protection for him', have him baptised and then return him to Nevis.¹³ It is likely that Frank learnt to read and write while he was in England; he certainly was baptised¹⁴ and then married a woman who 'belonged' to a gentleman from St Kitts.¹⁵ In the summer of 1727 husband and wife left England for the West Indies. On board ship was David Stalker, a man indentured to work on the Stapleton plantation in Nevis, and a Mr Smith,¹⁶ who almost certainly had instructions from Stapleton to assist Frank's homecoming.

Two years had passed since he had been banished and, although Joseph Herbert had promised he would do his utmost to protect him on his return,¹⁷ Frank's safety could not be guaranteed. He needed a public pardon. Mr Smith went to see the Governor while Frank remained aboard ship, out of harm's way. But the Governor did

⁶ Stapleton-Cotton MSS 20: Timothy Tyrrell to Lady Frances, 10 September 1725

⁷ UKNA, CO 186/1: Deposition by Mary Coombes

⁸ Rylands, Stapleton MSS 4.5: Joseph Herbert, 27 July 1725

⁹ Harvard College Library, Stapleton MSS: Timothy Tyrrell, 6 November 1725

¹⁰ Rylands, Stapleton MSS 4.11: Timothy Tyrrell, 1 June 1726

¹¹ Harvard College Library, Stapleton MSS: Timothy Tyrrell, 6 November 1725 and Rylands, Stapleton MSS

7.1: James Milliken, St Christopher, 8 November 1725

¹² Harvard College Library, Stapleton MSS: James Milliken, 3 Dec 1725

¹³ Rylands, Stapleton MSS 4.11: Timothy Tyrrell to Sir William Stapleton, 1 June 1726

¹⁴ The 'Negro Francis', a servant to Sir William Stapleton, Bart, was baptised on 11 December 1726 (Pers. comm.,

Brian Littlewood, 18 May 2009, quoting Bray Church Register).

¹⁵ Rylands, Stapleton MSS 4.5: Joseph Herbert, 1 August 1729

¹⁶ Mr Smith may well have been either William or Daniel, one of the sons of Daniel Smith, the Lieutenant-Governor of Nevis who had died recently (VL Oliver *Caribbeana* vol 4 p289). He had property in Antigua (Acts of the Privy Council (Colonial) 1680-1720 No 1272).

¹⁷ Rylands, Stapleton MSS 4.5: Joseph Herbert, 12 and 24 June 1726

not receive Frank's fellow passenger – he 'gave him no answer' - and so Mr Smith took Frank and his wife to Antigua.¹⁸

Although kept safe by Mr Smith, the man exploited him. Frank wrote to Joseph Herbert and to his other fellow passenger, David Stalker, complaining of ill usage by Smith and of being deprived 'of the necessities of life'.¹⁹ Herbert, who had looked after Frank's house and stock during his absence in England,²⁰ sent him some money, as did David Stalker. In addition, Stalker appealed on his behalf to Sir William Stapleton: 'He wants shoes and stockings and 2 hatts and fustin to make vests and breeches'.²¹ At a time when enslaved people tended to walk barefoot and bareheaded and when slaveholders in Nevis were not legally obliged to provide a minimum of clothing, this request for a new outfit shows that Frank belonged to the elite who dressed very much like white folk.

Meanwhile, efforts were being made to get Frank pardoned. Governor Hart had considered the judgment against Frank illegal and initially Hart's successor, the Earl of Londonderry, had promised to grant him a pardon.²² Londonderry then hesitated; he wanted legal opinion before making a decision.²³ Over a private dinner Joseph Herbert petitioned Londonderry and his Lordship agreed to issue the pardon in a week's time. This was to happen before Londonderry left for Antigua at the end of December 1728.²⁴ Once again the plan was for Frank to work on the Stapleton plantation in St Kitts.²⁵ But then Londonderry sailed to Antigua without having issued the pardon.

Frank, meanwhile, left Antigua. Dissatisfied with life in the island,²⁶ he travelled to St Kitts to plead his case with the Governor in person. Almost certainly he took with him his wife, the woman he had married in England.

Rumours spread that he was in St Kitts and, when he kept a low profile to avoid trouble, people thought he had left for England.²⁷ Instead, he travelled to Antigua. He managed to make contact with Londonderry and for several weeks remained under his Lordship's protection²⁸ until they returned to Nevis.²⁹ Convinced of Frank's innocence, Londonderry publicly read the pardon.³⁰

Having been exonerated, Frank went to work on the Stapleton plantation in Nevis and became a distiller.³¹ He could work quite independently and was no longer supervising others, thereby removing him from possible sources of conflict. But his heart was not in it - 'he never was satisfy'd all the time' - ³² and among the locals the return of this by now well-travelled and well-connected man caused 'a prodigious

¹⁸ Rylands, Stapleton MSS 4.10: David Stalker, 17 January 1728

¹⁹ Rylands, Stapleton MSS 4.10: Joseph Herbert, 25 May 1728

²⁰ Rylands, Stapleton MSS 4.5: Joseph Herbert, 12 and 24 June 1726

²¹ Rylands, Stapleton MSS 4.10: David Stalker, 24 May 1728 and Harvard College Library, Stapleton MSS: David Stalker, 7 August 1728 and Rylands, Stapleton MSS 4.5: Joseph Herbert, 25 May 1728

When Frank was appointed to the post of overseer, Joseph Herbert had suggested that Sir William Stapleton 'send him a hatt (sic) or something for his encouragement'. For Frank's predecessor, the old 'very tender footed' overseer, Herbert ordered a couple of pairs of shoes (Rylands, Stapleton MSS 4.5: Joseph Herbert, 27 July 1725).

²² Rylands, Stapleton MSS 4.5: Joseph Herbert, 13 September 1728 and Harvard College Library, Stapleton MSS: Joseph Herbert, 13 September 1728

²³ Rylands, Stapleton MSS 4.5: Joseph Herbert, 20 December 1728

²⁴ Rylands, Stapleton MSS 4.5: Joseph Herbert, 23 December 1728

²⁵ Rylands, Stapleton MSS 4.5: Joseph Herbert, 20 December 1728

²⁶ Rylands, Stapleton MSS 4.10: David Stalker, 7 August 1728

²⁷ Rylands, Stapleton MSS 4.5: Joseph Herbert, 26 January 1729

²⁸ Rylands, Stapleton MSS 4.5: Joseph Herbert, 17 March 1728/9

²⁹ Rylands, Stapleton MSS 4.5: Joseph Herbert, 2 April 1729

³⁰ ECSCRN, CR 1728-1746 unnumbered

³¹ Rylands, Stapleton MSS 4.10: David Stalker, 27 June 1729

³² Harvard College Library, Stapleton MSS: David Stalker, 1 August 1729

discontent'.³³ Opinion was divided as to whether his life was in danger. Joseph Herbert,³⁴ David Stalker,³⁵ and the attorney, Timothy Tyrrell, dismissed the idea³⁶ but Frank was convinced that someone on the plantation might be bribed to kill him. Forever watchful, he remained 'under the greatest uneasiness imaginable' and eventually convinced the attorney of the dangers: 'there are some ill minded people here that would not shrink at doing such a thing'. Finally Herbert and Tyrrell decided that he should transfer to the Stapleton plantation in St Kitts but before they could arrange this,³⁷ once again Frank was one step ahead of everybody. Secretly, he sold his remaining 19 sheep, (he had already asked Herbert to give seven of his sheep to his Nevis wives and children), sent his St Kitts wife 'for England again',³⁸ and, after ten unhappy weeks on the plantation,³⁹ he left behind his families and, once more, escaped from the island.⁴⁰

Joseph Herbert understood that Frank intended to return to England 'in order to be free' but felt betrayed by this 'ungrateful rogue'. He had done so much for Frank. He had put his reputation in jeopardy when he spoke up for him at the trial and he had saved his life: Herbert could have let him be killed and then, according to Nevis law, claimed financial compensation from the Legislature. He had secured Londonderry's pardon, looked after Frank's property when he was abroad, had sent him money – in short, he had always protected and supported him. Herbert thought that Frank had got ideas above his station: 'extraordinary privileges induce some negroes to think they are above their fellow slaves'.⁴¹ David Stalker, the indentured servant, understood Frank's ultimate goal: to live as a free man in a free country. He knew 'that he Desires no longer to be A Slave but that he wants to Get home to England'.⁴²

Attempts were made to find him in St Kitts but Herbert, Tyrrell and Stalker believed that he had made his way back to England.⁴³ Frank was last seen in 1730 when Captain Condy spotted him in Jamaica.⁴⁴



The details of Frank's story are known from collections of Stapleton Papers held in the universities of Manchester and Bangor. The late Brian Littlewood from Powys in the UK had transcribed many of these documents and also made available copies of correspondence from the Harvard College Library. I am most grateful to Brian for bringing Frank to my attention and for supplying me with the material.

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³³ Rylands, Stapleton MSS 4.5: Joseph Herbert, 29 April 1729

³⁴ Rylands, Stapleton MSS 4.5: Joseph Herbert, 1 August 1729

³⁵ Harvard College Library, Stapleton MSS: David Stalker, 1 August 1729

³⁶ Rylands, Stapleton MSS 4.11.4: Timothy Tyrrell, 7 May 1729

³⁷ Rylands, Stapleton MSS 4.11.5: Timothy Tyrrell, 28 July 1729

³⁸ Rylands, Stapleton MSS 4.5: Joseph Herbert, 1 August 1729

³⁹ Harvard College Library, Stapleton MSS: David Stalker, 1 August 1729

⁴⁰ Rylands, Stapleton MSS 4.11.5: Timothy Tyrrell, 28 July 1729

⁴¹ Rylands, Stapleton MSS 4.5: Joseph Herbert, 1 August 1729

⁴² Rylands, Stapleton MSS 4.10: David Stalker, 1 August 1729

⁴³ Rylands, Stapleton MSS 4.11.5: Timothy Tyrrell, 28 July 1729, MSS 4.5: Joseph Herbert, 25 August 1729 and MSS 4.10: David Stalker, 5 May 1730

⁴⁴ Rylands, Stapleton MSS 4.5: Joseph Herbert, 20 June 1730