A Maroon Settlement on St. Croix

Author(s): Polly Pope

Source: *Negro History Bulletin*, November, 1972, Vol. 35, No. 7 (November, 1972), pp. 153-154

Published by: Association for the Study of African American Life and History

Stable URL: https://www.jstor.org/stable/24767173

A Maroon Settlement on St. Croix

by Polly Pope *

The location of Maronberg *on St. Croix in the vicinity of Frederiksted is taken from a map dated 1767 by Oldendorp. The original map which appeared in his* Geschichte der Mission der evangelischen Brüder auf den caraibischen Inseln S. Thomas, S. Croix und S. Jan *(published in 1777) was drawn in detail to show the name and location of the plantations on the island at the time.*

One of the most enduring counters to be set up against the institution of slavery in the New World was the Maroon [1] settlement where runaway blacks often managed to firmly entrench themselves, despite severe hardships. The Cockpit country of Jamaica, the Palmares republic in Brazil, and the Bush Negro society of Surinam are among the notable examples in history.[2]

To this well-known list one more may be added, a Maroon community established on the West Indian island of St. Croix in the 18th century. Although there are no population figures on the size of this group, the fact that the blacks were able to set up such a community on an island only 84 square miles in size, and within five miles of a colonial government's fort, points to the daring and resistance of the Negroes.

St. Croix became a territorial possession of the United States in 1917 along with St. Thomas and St. John. Until then the islands were under the rule of Denmark and often referred to as the Danish West Indies. The Danish West India and Guinea Company purchased St. Croix in 1733 from France at a time when the island was practically deserted of settlers. Because of its flat terrain, St. Croix seemed ideal for the establishment of a plantation type economy. Hence, sugar, cotton, tobacco and indigo were grown; but in time the sugar estate came to dominate the island. The support for this economy rested on the Negro population, the majority of whom were cane field workers.

The description of the Maroon settlement is found in an extensive work titled *Geschichte der Mission der evangelischen Bruder auf den caraibischen Inseln S. Thomas, S. Croix und S. Jan* by Christian G. A. Oldendorp, a Moravian Mission inspector. The book, published in 1777, contains an extensive history of the Moravian Missions in the Danish islands, and, in addition, a great deal of ethnographic material which is often not available in other sources.

Oldendorp in the role of a mission inspector came to the West Indies from Europe on May 22, 1767, and remained until October 23, 1768. In the course of his stay, he also interviewed the slaves on the details of their lives. Melville J. Herskovits in commenting on Oldendorp's report said of him, "A man who lived before the science of ethnology was known, or such a thing as applied anthropology was dreamed of, he produced a model report . . ."[3] Besides the data on slaves, Oldendorp collected material pertaining to the whites of the island, especially on the relationships to their bondsmen.

Oldendorp gives the location for the St. Croix Maroon settlement as the high Maron (sic) mountain, *Maronberg,* towards West End, the latter being an earlier name for the present-day town of Frederiksted, the deep water port situated on the west side of the island. The highest peak on St. Croix is Mt. Eagle at 1165 feet above sea level. However, what is shown as *Maronberg* on Oldendorp's map does not quite reach that elevation. *Maronberg* was located then on what was known as the Nordseite Quartier I, south of Wills Bay (known today as Davis Bay), and was very close (possibly within a mile) of the Tiute plantation of the 18th century.[4]

Such a location seemingly would have offered protection to runaway slaves. On the north there is the Caribbean and if there were no roads into the mountains (the map shows none), then an approach from this direction would have been highly impractical. Oldendorp states that the nearly impenetrable bush evidently offered protection on three sides of the settlement. In addition, the entrance to the Maroon community was protected by small sharp posts of poisoned wood. Trespassers stumbling on these apparently suffered painful injuries.[5]

Freedom in this bush offered no comforts. In fact, at times living conditions were reported to be even more harsh than in the slave quarters on plantations. Fishing was possible at night, the wooded area may have offered some supplements to the diet; but a part of the food had to be stolen from the larger estates. The Maroons could not have been lacking in temerity because they sometimes dared to make an appearance in the West End Negro market in St. Croix.[6] Also the Danish government fort was located on the waterfront in West End.

Privations evidently were considerable since Oldendorp reported that slaves would leave the community to return to former owners, notwithstanding that some of them had run away because of too strict treatment or excessive punishment, and other times because of hunger. Slaves who repeatedly ran away could have chains put on their legs, or could be forced to wear a form of neck brace from which long hooks extended, the latter making it impossible for them to travel through the

* California State College, Dominguez Hills, Calif.

heavy bush. Oldendorp states that when the number of runaways on St. Croix became alarming to owners, regular hunts were organized and "only those who live on the high Maron mountain have no such hunt to fear." [7]

The severity of the punishment extended beyond chains or braces in certain situations for escapees; a runaway could be faced with the loss of a leg. Oldendorp reports the penalty for the individual missing for three months could take this form, the punishment being put into effect by a *Brikkel* or *Brital,* a public justice of the peace. If the same runaway sought his freedom again, the punishment might be the loss of the remaining leg. A deterrent to this extreme punishment was the fact that the slave owner found himself faced with a handicapped worker. Nevertheless, Oldendorp states "Regardless of such severe punishment there are such daring Negroes who through the loss of one leg have not been prevented from *Maronlaufer* as the running away of a Negro is called. I have known such an untameable one who has lost both legs through repeated running away." [8] Further comment follows on the fact that there was also severe punishment for those blacks from different plantations who dared to assemble as a group and for those who possessed guns.

The daily routine from which the St. Croix slave sought escape follows:

4 A.M.	Rising time indicated by a bell or horn sounded by the *Bomba.*
5 A.M.	Movement of the workers to the field, who have within the last hour had their breakfast and also fed the livestock with feed gathered the evening before.
8 A.M.	Rest of one-half hour.
12 noon	Completion of morning work. Rest and the noon meal were to be taken at this time; however, a bundle of grass must be collected for the livestock.
2 to 6 P.M.	Afternoon work begins and after its completion at 6 P.M., two bundles of grass were to be collected. The main meal was eaten sometime after 6 P.M. At this time, the woman of the black household cooked enough for the dinner and the noon meal for the following day.
7 to 10 P.M.	Besides the regular day work, additional night work could be expected for approximately six months every year on the large plantations. At that time the master's yard was cleaned up, fertilizer was tended to, water was carried, and other like chores were done. The greatest time of work took place during the sugar crop harvest.

Such a schedule, as described by Oldendorp, was common to the large, well-organized plantation. Life might be somewhat easier on the smaller estates, but there were some slave owners who gave only an hour and a half at noon and forced their blacks to work beyond 6:30 p.m. or later.[9]

The general work week was five and a half days. There were three major holidays: Christmas, Easter, and Whitsuntide; on these occasions the slaves were allowed two free days for each holiday.

The highly restrictive laws of the Danish colonial government and the ratio of whites to Negroes could only make for a constant period of unrest. Oldendorp reports the population of St. Croix in 1767 as being composed of 20,000 slaves and 2,000 whites, but he does not give any figures for *Maronberg.*[10]

Slaves in the Danish West Indies sought their freedom in other ways. Escape to Puerto Rico, if successful, often meant that the slave could join the Free Negroes there. On St. Croix, blacks stole boats or took them by force on occasion, commanding the crew to take them to Puerto Rico. Oldendorp relates that one slave secretly constructed a boat in which he planned to flee to Puerto Rico with his family, but with the exception of a son the family perished when the boat sank.[11] Records of the Danish West India Company showed that by 1745 ". . . the number of slaves that had escaped from both St. Thomas and St. Croix to Puerto Rico was fixed at three hundred." [12] The possibilities of escaping to Puerto Rico came to an end in 1767 when Denmark and Spain signed an extradition treaty. Danish slave owners were expected to pay costs involved in the extradition process. It is notable that the Danish government did not appear to be plagued by requests to return escapees to Puerto Rico. Westergaard reports that they (Spanish slaves seeking refuge in the Danish islands) were "exceedingly few." [13]

Such data then as were presented here only confirm the thesis that as research in Negro history proceeds, the evidence pointing to resistance to slavery mounts.

[1] Maroon is a generic term for the runaway slave. This is the definition provided by Melville Herskovits, *The Myth of the Negro Past* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1968), p. 91. Clinton Black suggests that "The name Maroon probably derived from the Spanish cimarron meaning 'wild', 'untamed'." *History of Jamaica* (London: Collins Press, 1965, 3rd ed.), p. 83.

[2] This, of course, does not exhaust the list. Runway slaves established themselves in isolated mountain villages in Mexico. See Edgar F. Love, "Negro Resistance to Spanish Rule in Colonial Mexico," *The Journal of Negro History,* LII (April, 1967), pp. 89-103; Gonzalo Aguirre Beltran, *Esbozo etnografico de un Pueblo Negro* (Mexico: Fondo de Cultura Economica, 1958); and Black lists the permanent Maroon settlements in Jamaica which were Accompong, Trelawny Town, Scott's Hall, Charles Town and Moore Town. *History of Jamaica,* p. 84. Also see Herskovits, Chapter IV, "Enslavement and the Reaction to Slave Status", pp. 86-109.

[3] Herskovits, p. 43.

Oldendorp states "Schon seit langer Zeit hat sich eine grosse Unzahal derselbenim Gebirge gegen das Westende, auf dem hohen Maronberg desgesest. . . ." *Geschichte der Mission* (Barby, 1777), p. 394.

[5] Oldendorp, p. 395.

[6] Oldendorp, p. 395.

[7] Oldendorp, p. 395-396.

[8] Oldendorp, p. 390-391, 394.

[9] Oldendorp, p. 381-382.

[10] Oldendorp, pp. 400-401.

[11] Oldendorp, p. 396.

[12] Waldemar Westergaard, *The Danish West Indies Under Company Rule* (New York: Macmillan and Co., 1917), p. 161.

[13] Westergaard, p. 161.