

Ad forlagt at tilfille fra
Staterne 25 trykte Exemplarer af den af Kongen
forordnede General. Gennemseende i det
Proclamation om de Negeres Emancipation
og de danske Skandinaviske Lande, - samt for
hvorledes man skal være om at lade
den ved alle sine Procenter og
Gadejournaler.
Gennemseende om St. Thomas og St. Peter
St. Thomas den 4. Juli 1848.
F. Oxholm

CAPTION:

Historian and Archives Consultant Poul Erik Olsen holds the original order signed by St. Thomas Governor Fritz Oxholm and dated July 4, 1848, instructing the posting and distribution of 25 copies of the Emancipation Proclamation in St. Thomas. The historic order and what appears to be the only surviving copy of the original St. Thomas handbill printing, were recently discovered by Olsen in the Danish National Archives.

Emancipation on St. Thomas and St. John: The “Other” Proclamation of 1848

by Poul Erik Olsen

The records of the Danish West Indian period are presently held in three major locations: the Territorial Archives of the U.S. Virgin Islands, the federal National Archives and Records Administration Archives II facility at College Park, Maryland (as Record Group 55), and the Danish National Archives (known as the Rigsarkivet) in Copenhagen, Denmark.

Recently I travelled to Denmark to learn more about the Rigsarkivet holdings and meet with Danish archives colleagues. During my visit, Archival Consultant and Historian Poul Erik Olsen of the Danish National Archives shared with me his most recent “find” – original evidence of the announcement on St. Thomas and St. John of the 1848 emancipation of the slaves in the Danish West Indies. The announcement on St. Croix was made by Governor von Scholten on July 3, 1848, but it was not until the following day that his orders reached St. Thomas to post copies of the proclamation in St. Thomas and St. John. The discovery of this information is just one more example of the richness of these archival records and the value to be added by making them more accessible to researchers everywhere, especially in the Virgin Islands. In observance of Emancipation Day 2011, and with his permission, I am pleased to share with you on behalf of the Government of the Virgin Islands and the Danish National Archives, Mr. Olsen’s discovery, in his own words, of The “Other” Proclamation of 1848.

*Susan Laura Lugo, CA
Territorial Coordinator for Archives
St. Thomas, VI*

In general, the year of 1848 was a ripe one for revolutions on the world stage and Denmark had a starring role. The German-speaking duchies of Schleswig and Holstein had revolted in the Spring of 1848 against Danish rule and the resulting weakened condition of the mother country did not go unnoticed in the Danish West Indies. Particularly in St. Thomas, the first port of call for arriving news from Europe, the Danish–German conflict gave rise to grave concerns. Would the local population stay loyal to the old mother country? Would the general unrest spread to St. Thomas?

That same year, Hans Henrik Berg, Police Master, town judge, planter and slave owner, was responsible for keeping the peace in St. Thomas. His actions as Police Master are recorded in the so-called Police Journals of St. Thomas, many of which are preserved in the Danish National Archives. These records describe in detail lesser-known events in St. Thomas and St. John leading up to the emancipation of the slaves in the Danish West Indies.

On May 12, 1848 Police Master H.H. Berg was called to take action, albeit in a minor matter, related to the Danish-German conflict. One of the Barons de Bretton, a resident of St. Thomas, had publicly voiced the hope that “the bloody Danes must get a good thrashing.” Accordingly, Baron Barton de Bretton was summoned to the Police Station where he was seriously admonished not to spread such subversive and inciting opinions.

However, news from the Caribbean about regional unrest proved far more alarming than the European reports. At the end of May 1848, vivid accounts of the revolt on Martinique reached St. Thomas, and Police Master Berg reacted promptly by directing local arms dealers to report any suspicious activity.

On June 2nd, the rumour spread that the Tortolian workers on the Charlotte Amalie Harbor’s coal wharf had declared that in the event of revolt in St. Thomas, they would side with the slaves. After due investigation, Berg decided that no immediate action was needed in this instance, but several

other small incidents took place thereafter that added to the general uneasiness of the St. Thomas authorities and slave owners. On June 26th, St. Thomas Governor Fritz Oxholm reprimanded and sanctioned Berg for allowing the free coloured Mathieu Daniel to get off with a just a warning for the public declaration “that he was sharpening his sabre to cut white throats.”

Then, on July 4, 1848, the following historic entry was made in the journal of the St. Thomas Police Master:

His Highness the Governor [Oxholm] has by letter of this inst. forwarded 25 printed copies of the proclamation of His Excellency the Governor General [von Scholten] on the emancipation of the unfree in the Danish West Indies, to be posted at street corners, which immediately was executed.

According to the journal, the night was calm, but for one Victor Meyer, a Frenchman from Guadeloupe, “who had been singing or rather yelling French liberty songs.” Victor excused himself and explained that he had been in pleasant company at Cross’s (the home of a local St. Thomas resident).

By July 5th, however, Police Master Berg decided to form a company of vigilantes. These men, who were deemed to be respectable inhabitants of Charlotte Amalie, were summoned to meet at the Police Station, where they took an oath to serve as special constables. From that point forward, a night guard of 50 armed men was formed and patrolled in St. Thomas on foot as well as on horseback.

On St. John, Judge and Police Master Hother Hänschell recorded in his journal on July 4, 1848:

Tuesday afternoon at 6½ Captain Mourier arrived from St. Thomas bringing the order of the Governor [Oxholm] of this date for the immediate publishing of the proclamation yesterday by His Excellency Governor General von Scholten. . . . Immediately after sunset the publication took place at Estate Adrian and after that at Rustenberg. The surprise and joy of the emancipated were clearly expressed

The next day, July 5, 1848, Hänschell reported:

The Police Master accompanied by Captain Mourier continued the publication of the proclamation of the emancipation of the unfree. Everywhere the jubilation was great, and the sentiments towards the former owners in general were positive, especially on Annaberg and Leinsterbay; however, on Klein Kancelbay the case is the opposite. . . . Overwhelmed by surprise and joy the emancipated hardly know which leg to stand on. In general they declare themselves willing to work, but some add that they will never dig cane holes; some will go to St. Thomas for some weeks’ holidays. One exclaimed “Now I am just as good as you;” in short, their conception of the word “free” is extreme. . . .

All was relatively quiet on both islands for the next few weeks, the most dramatic incident occurring on July 11, 1848, in St. Thomas when Henry, formerly belonging to the aforementioned Mr. Cross, resisted arrest by the police for an infraction, claiming that he was a free man. He was punished by 27 lashes and jailed in the fort.

That same day a boy formerly belonging to Madame Herbert was reported to have promised to cut the throats of the free, a charge to which he eventually admitted. After further revealing that he had been in the recent town gang that had mock-played Danes versus Germans, he was imprisoned in the fort and punished with 20 lashes for his transgressions

Thus, in St. Thomas and St. John, the actual declaration of emancipation in the Danish West Indies took place peacefully, without a shot being fired. There were no riots, no Spanish troops, no court martials, no executions, no deportations. This does not mean, however, that the slave societies of the two islands were suddenly transformed to a pure idyll.

By the end of July 1848, conflicts between labourers and planters had already broken out both in St. Thomas and in St. John, and it became increasingly clear that the emancipation proclamation was interpreted very differently by the former slaves and the former slave owners. Despite this, the Emancipation Proclamation of 1848 remains to this day – 163 years later – one of the defining documents in the shared history of the U.S. Virgin Islands and Denmark.

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HANS KONGELIGE MAJESTÆTS

til Danmark, de Venders og Gothers, Hertug
til Slesvig, Holsteen, Stormarn, Ditmarsken,
Lauenborg og Oldenburg.

BESTALTER

Excellence, Generalmajor, Kammerherre, Stor-
kors af Dannebrog og Dannebrogsmænd, Stor-
kors af Isabella den Catholskes Orden, Stor-
Officier af Oreslegionen, Commandeur af
Guelphe-Ordenen, Ridder af Ordenen du merite
militaire, General-Gouverneur over de Danske
Vestindiske Oer.

Jeg

**PETER CARL FREDERIK von SCHOL-
TEN,**

GIØR VITTERLIGT:

- 1, Alle Ufris paa de danske Vestindiske
Oer ero fra Dags Dato friegivne.
- 2, Negerne paa Plantagerne beholde i 3
Maaneder fra Dato Brugen af de
Hause og Provisiongrunde hvornaf de
nu ere i Besiddelse.
- 3, Arbeide betales for Fremtiden efter
Overeenskomst, hvorimod Allowance
ophører.
- 4, Underholdningen af Gamle og Svage,
som ere ude af Stand til at arbeide
afholdes indtil nærmere Bestemmelse
af deres forrige Eiere.

MAKETH KNOWN:

- 1, All Unfree in the Danish West India
Islands are from to-day emancipated.
- 2, The estate Negroes retain for three
months from date the use of the
houses and Provision grounds of
which they have hitherto been pos-
sessed.
- 3, Labour is in future to be paid for by
agreement, but allowance is to cease.
- 4, The maintenance of old and infirm,
who are not able to work is until
further determination to be furnished
by the late owners.

**Givet under General-Gouvernementets Segl
og min Haand,**

General-Gouvernementet over de danske vestindiske Oer, den 8die Julii 1848.

P. v. SCHOLTEN.

(L. S.)

CAPTION:

The text of the Danish West Indian Emancipation Proclamation of 1848 was first printed in St. Croix and believed to have been distributed there on July 3, 1848. Recently, Danish National Archives Consultant and Historian Poul Erik Olsen conducted an investigation into the proclamation proceedings in St. Thomas and St. John. His research brought to light a hitherto unknown second handbill printing, seen here, and believed to have been done in St. Thomas on July 4, 1848. In addition to the two known special handbill printings, the proclamation text also appeared in newspapers of the Danish West Indies.