

HUMANITY, A WEST INDIAN NEGRO SLAVE, 1758-1818

One of the most frustrating problems for the historian concerned with slavery is the lack of evidence about individual slaves. As with the deprived in any community, slaves were unable to provide written information about themselves, and their owners or overseers only recorded facts which would be useful for their own purposes, giving the minimum of detail. Slave lists were not compiled with any regularity in this period and as the individuals listed usually only had one name - and that often a common one - it is difficult to identify a slave from one list to another. Again, although individual slaves may be mentioned in the plantation accounts if, for example, they were paid for extra work, this was usually an isolated fact and for accounting purposes the sum was the important detail, not the exact identity of the slave involved, nor the precise reason for the entry. The historian can therefore often compile useful statistics from this material, but cannot usually build up a picture of an individual life. The papers relating to the Codrington family's West Indian estates, deposited in the Gloucestershire Records Office and recently catalogued do, however, provide a refreshing exception to this generalisation. In the records relating to the island of Barbuda there are frequent references to a slave with an unusual name and a responsible job - which make it possible to identify him reliably - over the period 1782-1818.

The slave concerned was called Humanity and for the whole of this period (from the date when he was first mentioned, in 1782, to the time of his death in 1818) he seems to have been one of the regular sailors on the island of Barbuda, usually captain of the principal sloop. He is first noted in 1782 as the captain of the sloop 'Forager', and responsible for apprehending a runaway slave called Jetway in St. John's, Antigua. (1). He was suitably rewarded with the sum of £10. Unfortunately he is not mentioned in the slave list for Barbuda compiled in 1785, when only two sailors are listed. (2). It may be that only the slaves actually present on the island were recorded and Humanity and his crew may have been at sea or based on Antigua at the time. This omission is the more unfortunate as this particular list is especially informative, giving interesting comments on the slaves' characters and showing some family relationships. However, in the accounts after this - and in subsequent slave lists - Humanity is mentioned (3).

He appears usually to have had a crew of six to eight negro or coloured sailors. Their principal work was to transport goods between Barbuda and Antigua, and the importance of this cannot be over-estimated. Barbuda relied entirely on Antigua. For the few white men concerned with running the island for the Codringtons, Antigua was the only means of access to the outside world. This applied both to postal communications and to trade. Cargoes from Barbuda included timber, lime, salt, turtles, livestock and various crops raised there. They were either sent to the Codrington sugar

estates on Antigua or for sale there, and included in these would be the produce which the negroes wanted to have sold in the markets. On the return journey they brought necessities for Barbuda - flour, rum, nails, tools and all the miscellaneous supplies needed for an isolated community. They also transported passengers. Negroes went from Barbuda to Antigua for medical attention or to perform some special task. They were also sometimes sent, as a punishment, to work on one of the family's sugar plantations. The Codrington attorneys came occasionally from Antigua to inspect the island and sometimes there were visitors who came ostensibly for health reasons, but more probably for game.

This was the sailors' normal, routine work and the fact that the same slave was kept in such a responsible position for more than thirty years must indicate a very high degree of competence and trustworthiness. Humanity must have been a sailor and navigator of considerable skill, as the twenty-five mile journey from Barbuda to Antigua is considered treacherous by sea even today. Barbuda itself is low-lying and almost entirely surrounded by dangerous rocks (4), and while Antigua has safe harbours the approach to them is not easy. But what made journeys even more hazardous was the weather, especially in the hurricane period. These difficulties frequently caused wrecks off the Barbudan coast and it can probably be assumed that Humanity and his crew would be used to help in the rescue of crew, passengers and cargo. It was not uncommon for wrecks to occur some way off shore which made rescue even more of a hazard (5). In the 18th century there were other dangers too. There were often hostile ships on the look-out for loot or more legitimate attack, and an encounter with such a ship must have been one of the biggest adventures in Humanity's life.

In 1796, on a journey from Barbuda to Antigua in the 'Kennet', Humanity mistook a schooner privateer for the ship of an English naval officer who was due to visit Barbuda for health reasons. He realised his mistake too late; the 'Kennet' was captured and her crew might have been taken to the French island of Guadeloupe. Fortunately however, the privateer was intercepted by an English ship, H.M.S. 'L'Aimable', and Humanity and five other slaves were removed and taken on board (6). A record of 28 September 1796 shows the amount - £800 - paid for the salvage of Humanity, Will, Primus, Jacob, Othello and Simon (7).

Another incident in 1813 also caused expense when the sloop 'Barbuda', carrying wine from a ship wrecked on Barbuda for sale at Antigua, and possibly captained by Humanity, was taken in custody by H.M. Brig 'Spider' (8). Although the sloop was eventually acquitted of evading the customs it was two years before the case was heard and lawyers' fees came to £183. 4s. 8d (9). While in the custody of the 'Spider' the 'Barbuda' sank in a gale in St. John's harbour and although it was raised to the surface and repaired (10) the sloop can hardly have been improved by the accident. This incident reveals not only the dangers caused by the weather but also the vulnerability of the craft involved.

Humanity may not have been captaining the 'Barbuda' at the time of this misadventure but he was concerned with the transport of sugar from the Codrington estates to ocean shipping, which seems to have involved the two bigger vessels belonging to Barbuda for some of their time in the early 19th century (11). This kept one of them so fully engaged that in the first quarter of 1813 the principal sloop only visited Barbuda itself once (12).

Whenever the sloops were working all the sailors were paid a regular weekly allowance of 4s. 1½d., and Humanity and the principal sailors of the other vessels were paid 8s. 3d. In addition they were paid if they worked on a Sunday or at night. Medical care was provided and so was some sort of uniform. This consisted of jackets (sometimes mentioned as being blue), shirts and trousers (13).

Humanity himself seems throughout the period - though not always regularly - to have been given special treatment. He was given a great coat costing £2 9s. 6d. in February 1795, and in November two check shirts costing 14s 3d. each, and two pairs of duck trousers (14). He was well looked after when he was unable to work for medical reasons. He was paid his regular sum of 8s. 3d. a week when he was ill for six weeks in 1798 (15), and in 1805. was given special care when he seems to have been seriously ill. On 2 August 1805, four yards of flannel costing £1 12s. 0d. were provided for him and on 17 November there is an entry of £8 2s. 0d. for "three dozen wine given to Humanity when sick" (16). He seems, too, to have been given his weekly allowance when the crew was not paid for some reason, (17) presumably because the sloop was laid up. Slaves were usually given special provisions at Christmas and the accounts show this to have been usual for Barbuda and for special gifts to be given to the principal slaves. Humanity seems to have been given such presents and to have received them more frequently than other slaves of similar standing on the island. Half a barrel of pork costing between three and four pounds was the most normal gift but there were others (18). In June 1796 a whole barrel of pork costing £8 5s 0d. was provided for Humanity and 'the new negroes' (19), and in December 1805 he was given a barrel of flour (£4 10s. 0d.)(20), and in February 1808 another barrel of flour was bought for the Captain of the 'Barbuda'(21), presumably Humanity. There are occasional money payments in lieu of the pork (22) or for some other specific purpose. On 12 November 1795, for example, he was paid £1 13s. 0d. "for a parcell of old rope picked up at sea ...." (23).

Unfortunately, after the special treatment recorded as being given to Humanity in 1805 there is little further direct evidence of his activities, though as he was still listed as the first sailor in the list of 1814 one must assume he continued his work. We do, however, have the date of his death. A list of slaves was made in 1818 and Humanity as usual heads the list of sailors and is described as male, black, aged 60. In the margin in red ink was noted "Died the 28th April 1818"(24). There is no record of his funeral in the accounts although in a previous year a sailor's funeral was listed in the expenses (25).

We have therefore, so far, a description covering some thirty years in the life of a highly valued slave. His job gave him responsibility over other men's lives and over valuable cargoes, and a chance to exercise considerable maritime skills in varied and sometimes dangerous situations. As captain of a sloop, even though a slave, he had great opportunities for disloyal activities. The records, however, show no sign of his ever having taken advantage of his position in this way and there is every indication of complete loyalty. The facts do show he was highly thought of by his owners or their employees, but we do not know how he was regarded by other slaves, nor whether he ever longed for independence for himself or any family he may have had. We do not know how he acquired his unusual name, nor how he came to Barbuda in the first place. We have a useful number of interesting biographical details, but it would be fascinating to know what kind of person he really was. Though these records provide more information than most on an individual slave, there is still a great deal left unsaid.(26).

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#### REFERENCES

All the references in this article, unless otherwise stated, are to the West Indian records of the Codrington family - prefixed D1610 in the catalogue - deposited in the Gloucestershire Records Office. The general details on Humanity's crew and payments are found regularly in the accounts and have not been listed separately.

1. A54 Dec 9th 1782
2. E.17
3. E.g. in 1805, 1814, 1818 E17.
4. Maps P17 and also one on display at Dodrington.
5. E.g. a letter from J. James, dated 25 Nov 1813, refers to a wreck being a mile and a half off the shore. C24.
6. C16. Letter from S. Athill to Christopher Codrington, 20 Sept 1796.
7. A6/11 Sept 28, 1796.
8. C23. Letter from L. Hodge to C. Codrington, 26 Aug 1813.
9. A56/8
10. C23. Letter from L. Hodge to C. Codrington, 10 Sept 1815.
11. C16. Letter from S. Athill to C. Codrington, 7 June 1799.
12. C24. Letter from J. James to C. Codrington, April 1809.
13. C24. Letter from J. James to C. Codrington, 30 Apr 1813
14. E.g. A 56/4 1807, 1808, 1809, 1811, 1813, 1814.
15. A 6/10.
16. A 6/13 June 12th.
17. A 56/4.
18. E.g. A6/9. In the accounts for the fourth quarter Humanity was paid each week, but not the crew.
19. E.g. A6/4, A6/5, A6/6, A6/7.
20. A6/11.
21. A56/4.
22. A56/4.
23. E.g. A6/12.      23. A6/10.      24. E17.      25. A56/4 1812.
26. The writer has not yet finished reading these records so more may still come to light about Humanity.