

John William Hoystруп: A Mason Who Bought Freedom Twice

Sold as a Mason in 1818, He Later Bought Freedom for Himself and His Son

By Camilla Marlene Jensen

On Monday, November 18, 1833, the St. Croix Burgher Council considered the case of John W. Hoystруп, recorded elsewhere as John William, alias Hoystруп. He was a free Black man who had purchased the freedom of his son, William, from Captain J. L. Rohdes. A letter submitted on John William's behalf included the bill of sale for William, who was about ten years old and, according to the record, "at present put to school." John William intended for his son eventually to learn and follow the masonry trade.

The letter described him as an "industrious" young man and an "excellent mason" who, through his own industry, had purchased freedom first for himself and then for his child. He was asking to be exempt from making a deposit in the Land Treasury for William's freedom. Because William was in school and intended to learn his father's trade, the petition argued, there was little reason to believe he would become a burden on the community before reaching adulthood. Two months later, on December 16, 1833, the St. Croix Burgher Council granted his request.

The language of the colonial record is administrative; the reality it documents is not. John William had already secured his own freedom, but his ten-year-old son remained enslaved and still had to be purchased from another man.

John William knew what it meant to be enslaved. In 1817, a Lutheran Church register recorded him as an adult enslaved to Peter Hoystруп, a white master mason from Denmark. After Hoystруп died in 1818, John William and the others he had enslaved became part of the settlement of his estate.

At 11:30 on the morning of May 8, 1818, an auction was held at the late Peter Hoystруп's house at No. 22 Prince Street in Christiansted. John William, listed as "John, Negro, Mason" was sold to Chamberlain Lammers for 500 rix-daler. He was sold alongside other enslaved tradesmen: Coffy, a carpenter; Henrick, George, Peter and Simon, all masons; and Benjamin, an assistant. Lammers purchased all seven men.

Eleven years later, John William was still enslaved by Lammers. On April 13, 1829, he purchased his own freedom from him for 500 pieces of eight, an amount to be paid gradually in installments of no less than ten rix-daler at a time. Only after the full sum had been paid would he receive his Free Brief.

By the time John William appeared in the 1831-1832 Christiansted register of free Black men, he had completed the purchase of his own freedom. Recorded there as John Wm. Hoystруп, he was listed as thirty-six years old, Black, Lutheran, unmarried, born on St. Croix, living in

Christiansted, and working as a mason. His status was given as “free-bought,” and he held the Free Brief that formally documented his freedom.

John William’s skill as a mason did not protect him from enslavement. He could be owned, punished, appraised, transferred after an owner's death, and sold at public auction. Yet being a skilled tradesman could provide a narrow path toward freedom through economic opportunities largely unavailable to enslaved people labouring on St. Croix's plantations. His ability to purchase his own freedom was exceptional.

He continued to be identified by his trade after becoming free. In 1838, he appeared in Christiansted as John Williams, alias Hoystруп, a mason and member of the Free Coloured Lutheran Mission Congregation. Three years later, in February 1841, another record listed him as John William, alias John Hoystруп, identified him again as a mason, and noted that he was "currently in St. Thomas."

Whether John William returned to St. Croix and whether his son, William, eventually became a mason, remains to be discovered. Neither has yet been found in census records from 1846 onward. The surviving Danish West Indian archives are vast, and his life may appear again in records that have not yet been located. For now, the 1841 record leaves him "currently in St. Thomas," still identified by the trade that had followed him from slavery into freedom.

Sources: Danish National Archives (Rigsarkivet), Copenhagen: Christiansted mortgage registers, auction books, Lutheran Church registers, St. Croix Burgher Council records and Government-General correspondence; U.S. National Archives and Records Administration (NARA), College Park, Maryland: Record Group 55, Christiansted Commission for Registration of Free Black Men.

Link to the “Registry: Sources in the Danish National Archives on the history of the Danish West Indies (U.S. Virgin Islands)”
<https://www.rigsarkivet.dk/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/Registratur-Dansk-Vestindien.pdf>

Links to selected referenced archival records:

1818 Auction at Prince St. 22: Chamberlain Lammers purchased John, aka John William Hoystруп, from the estate of the late Peter Hoystруп.

<https://arkivalieronline.rigsarkivet.dk/da/billedviser?epid=20201429#291405,58408448>

1829 purchase of freedom: John Hoystруп, aka John William Hoystруп, purchased his freedom from Chamberlain Lammers.

<https://arkivalieronline.rigsarkivet.dk/en/billedviser?epid=20201411#291333,58388358>

1833 Petition: John W. Hoystруп requested deposit exemption after buying William’s freedom.

<https://arkivalieronline.rigsarkivet.dk/da/billedviser?epid=20200971#291722,58549097>

1838 Christiansted Free Coloured Lutheran Mission: John Williams, alias Hoystруп, appears as a mason and member of the congregation.

<https://arkivalieronline.rigsarkivet.dk/da/billedviser?epid=20193542#285865,56048121>