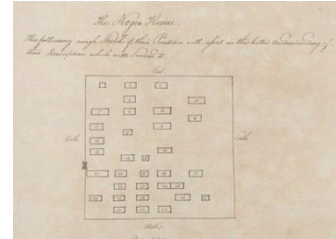


NERO: AN ENSLAVED MASON AT RUST OP TWIST

Labor, Family, and the Built Landscape of Enslavement

By Camilla Marlene Jensen

In September 1838, the Royal West Indian Loan Commission purchased Estate Rust op Twist on the north coast of St. Croix from the estate of the deceased Nicolay Jurgensen on behalf of the King of Denmark. In conjunction with the purchase, an official report and appraisal documented the plantation in remarkable detail: its land, buildings, enslaved population, and the condition of its structures. Andrew Lang, one of the inspectors, included in the report a “rough sketch of the positions” of the “Negro Houses,” along with descriptions of the thirty-three houses that comprised the village.



The houses all had earth and clay floors, described by Lang as “very damp.” Their roofs were either thatched or shingled, while the walls were variously constructed of stone and earth, stone and lime, wattle, or wattle on stone foundations. Lang described their condition as “good,” “comfortable,” “new,” “tolerable,” “indifferent,” “slight,” and “bad.” Of the thirty-three houses, ten needed to be “rebuilt, roofed and shingled,” five needed to be “roofed and shingled,” and two were “condemned.” Aside from the two condemned houses, Lang judged the remaining thirty-one insufficient for 110 enslaved people, and recommended that at least seven more should be built.

The same report identified seven enslaved men as tradesmen. One was Nero, a mason. It does not tell us whether Nero built any of the proposed additional houses or which repairs he personally carried out. Yet the report places him among the skilled enslaved tradesmen living and working at Rust op Twist while documenting a village in need of rebuilding, roofing, shingling, and additional housing.

Nero had lived there for much of his life. Born at Estate Cassava Garden in 1809, he was transferred in 1818 with forty-two other enslaved people to Rust op Twist. He was listed as a child under ten with the notation “applied to a trade.” The record does not tell us who trained him or when he began working with stone, but the child “applied to a trade” became the mason documented in later records.

The material conditions of plantation life appear in a letter written from Rust op Twist on March 16, 1838. It stated that clothing distributed to the enslaved people was of such “inferior a quality” that they were “nearly destitute” and begged for permission to procure “660 yards of osnaburgs” and “14 blankets for the Negro Women having young children.” Together with Lang’s description of the village houses, the letter provides a depressing glimpse of the dismal conditions in which the plantation’s enslaved people lived and worked.

The records from 1838 also introduce Ancilla and her infant son, Christian Isaac, also recorded in some inventories as Isaac Christian, whose lives would later become closely connected to Nero’s. Their legal status at Rust op Twist initially differed from his. Ancilla and Christian Isaac were privately enslaved by plantation owner Nicolay Jurgensen and were listed separately from the enslaved plantation laborers covered by the plantation mortgage. Following Jurgensen’s death, their position

on the estate changed. By September 1839, Rust op Twist belonged to Count Adam Moltke, and Nero was listed as a mason, Ancilla as a field worker, and Christian Isaac as a boy.

Over the following years, the records show the three connected more clearly. By 1846, Nero and Ancilla were recorded as married. Nero remained a mason, Ancilla worked in the estate's "big gang," and Christian Isaac in the "small gang."

The Moravian baptism of Christian Isaac in 1838 identifies "Ana Sophia" of Rust op Twist as his mother and Henry of Negro Bay as his father. Yet plantation records from the same year identify Ancilla as Christian Isaac's mother, and no Ana Sophia has been found among the women recorded at Rust op Twist for 1838. A later record identifies Nero and Ancilla as Christian Isaac's parents. The discrepancy remains unresolved, but the records are clearer about the family Christian Isaac came to belong to. Ancilla appears as his mother and Nero as his father, and Christian Isaac as their son—a family relationship that did not depend upon biological ties.

On emancipation day, July 3, 1848, they were still together at Rust op Twist. By 1850, the family was living at Estate Belvedere, where Nero was recorded as a mason. On October 11, 1851, they moved together to Christiansted. Nero and Ancilla were employed by master carpenter John P. B. Thomas, while Christian Isaac was his carpenter apprentice. The movement record described Nero and Ancilla as husband and wife and Christian Isaac, in this record called Isaac, as Nero's son.

In the 1855 Christiansted census, Isaac appears as "Isick," age seventeen, still an apprentice and living in the household of John P. B. Thomas. Nero and Ancilla could not be found in that census, and after 1855, no further records of the family have been located.

Across St. Croix, remnants of the plantation era remain part of the landscape: stone walls, mills, factory buildings, great houses, village sites, and ruins. Together, they are part of an island-wide enslaved built heritage. We often know the names of the people who owned these properties, while the skilled enslaved people who built and repaired them remain largely unnamed. The 1838 report allows us to recover one of those names—Nero, a mason. We may never know which structures he built or repaired, but his story reminds us, as we look at what remains, to ask not only who owned it, but who built it.

Sources: Danish National Archives (Rigsarkivet), Copenhagen: St. Croix slave lists, census records, movement records, auction books, inventories and appraisals, and records and reports of the West Indian Debt Liquidation Commission concerning Estate Rust op Twist; Moravian Church Archive, Bethlehem, Pennsylvania: Friedensfeld baptism records; U.S. National Archives and Records Administration (NARA), College Park, Maryland: Record Group 55, 1848 Emancipated Enslaved People, Christiansted District.

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:

1838 Rust op Twist Report. "Rough Sketch" of the "Negro house".
<https://arkivalieronline.rigsarkivet.dk/da/billedviser?epid=20204677#295870,60503413>

1838 Inventory for Estate Rust op Twist. Nero, a mason; Ancilla, a privately enslaved fieldworker; and Christian Isaac, son of Ancilla. <https://arkivalieronline.rigsarkivet.dk/da/billedviser?epid=20204677#295870,60503411>

1839 Inventory for Estate Rust op Twist. Nero, a mason; Ancilla, a fieldworker; and Isaac Christian, a child.
<https://arkivalieronline.rigsarkivet.dk/da/billedviser?epid=20200883#289771,57801184>

1852 Movement Record. Nero, Ancilla & Isaac from Estate Belvedere to Christiansted.
<https://arkivalieronline.rigsarkivet.dk/da/billedviser?epid=20193542#285916,56077905>