

PETRUS SIMMONS: THE MASON OF ESTATE CANE VALLEY

Enslaved from birth until emancipation, Petrus learned his father's trade and passed it to his freeborn son

By Camilla Marlene Jensen

In November 1828, twenty-six people were listed as enslaved at Estate Cane Valley, located in West End Quarter, but working elsewhere. Five were apprentice boys. Among them was Petrus, twelve years old, described as a “mason apprentice with his father Jorgan.”

Petrus was born enslaved on Cane Valley in 1817. His mother Louise was born into enslavement on the same plantation. Prior to emancipation, she was the plantation midwife. By 1857, she was blind and had given birth to six children, all born on Cane Valley and identified with the surname Simmons* in the emancipation records. Her death record in November 1863 identifies her as Louisa Simmons, a widow who died at eighty-five years of age. Petrus' father Jorgan was born enslaved on Estate Glynn. In 1831, he was recorded as Jorgan Simmons, “free bought,” sixty-two years old, a Moravian, and a master mason living at Cane Valley. It is unknown when or under what circumstances he became free.

What the records do tell us is that Jorgan taught his enslaved son his trade. During the years of Petrus' apprenticeship, the manager of Cane Valley recorded daily activities, including masonry work, in his “Journal of Transactions on the Estate Cane Valley” for the years 1827–31. Masons worked on the aqueduct running through the mill, painted the wall of the water cistern and levelled the mill round. They built the still chimney, worked at the wall of the copper-hole shade, and repaired and built new Negro houses. In June 1828, they were building a lime kiln. Additionally, the masons built a new curing and still house, using stone quarried at Estate Adventure. Although the journal does not specify that Petrus performed any of this particular masonry work, it was carried out during the years that he was learning and practicing his trade with his father.

The journal also records the violence of slavery and, unintentionally, the daily resistance of the enslaved people. They ran away, refused to work, used what the manager called “impertinent” language, were confined, put in the stocks, flogged, and forced back to work—only to sometimes run away again. We know there were other ways of resisting slavery, but these were the forms of resistance recorded in this particular journal.

George repeatedly ran away between 1828 and 1831. His 1828 maroonage lasted nine weeks. After his capture at Estate Annaly, he was flogged and an iron collar was fastened around his neck. In 1829, George and Peter were put in the stocks for “feigning themselves sick.” The following evening, they broke out, went to Dr. Steadman, and returned with a note to the manager before running away again. The last journal entry, dated January 1831, records George as “absent” for the entire week.

Joan also ran away repeatedly. Her 1829 marronage lasted months before she was captured at Estate Good Hope. She was sent to the police office in Frederiksted, flogged, and sent back to Cane Valley. The manager offered her “days to herself” if she promised to return to work, but Joan refused and remained in confinement.

While the journal's record of daily tasks make plantation labor seem routine, Joan, George and others identified as resistant and maroons remind us that quarrying stone, collecting limestone,

*Spelled variously Simmons, Simmonds, Simons

cleaning the gut, repairing structures and working the cane fields took place within a system enforced and sustained by violence.

By 1841, Petrus was twenty-four, still enslaved at Cane Valley and classified as a mason, a trade he would continue through the remaining years of slavery and thereafter. On July 3, 1848, he was emancipated with the other enslaved people of Cane Valley. After becoming free, Petrus moved to Camporico to join his subsequent wife Caty** and her family. Caty, born enslaved in 1817, was emancipated there in 1848 along with her children and her seventy-three-year-old mother, Ancilette. Petrus and Caty had at least five children together, all born at Camporico: Jenny/Jane in 1839, Magdalena in 1844, Sarah in 1846, Cornelius in 1849, and Peter in 1854.

In 1866, the entire family, except Magdalena, moved from Camporico to Frederiksted. That year, Cornelius was identified as a mason apprentice to his father. By 1870, Petrus and Caty were living with their adult children at 37 King Street, a property owned by Petrus, and Cornelius himself had become a skilled mason.

In 1880, Petrus and Caty were still living at 37 King Street with several of their children and grandchildren. Petrus, now in his sixties, and thirty-year-old Cornelius were both identified as masons. Petrus died there on November 9, 1887, at the age of seventy. Caty, recorded at her death as Catherine Simmons, died in 1894. Cornelius passed away in 1916. Both were buried in Frederiksted.

Thirty-eight years separated the apprenticeship records of Petrus and Cornelius. In 1828, twelve-year-old Petrus was enslaved and learning masonry from his father. In the 1860s, Petrus was teaching the trade to a son born free. The records cannot tell us which Cane Valley structures Petrus worked on, but they do document a trade passed from father to son across generations from Jorgan to Petrus to Cornelius, and from slavery into freedom.

**Spelled variously Caty, Katy, Catherine

Sources: Danish National Archives (Rigsarkivet), Copenhagen: Estate Cane Valley work journal, plantation inventories, census records, and burial records; U.S. National Archives and Records Administration (NARA), College Park, Maryland: Record Group 55, 1848 compensation commission, 1831 Free Colored census record, Frederiksted Jurisdiction.

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 archival records:

1827 Cane Valley inventory: Petrus and his mother Louise, recorded among the enslaved people.
<https://arkivalieronline.rigsarkivet.dk/da/billedviser?epid=20200851#295604,60391777>

1828 Cane Valley record: Twelve-year-old Petrus, enslaved on Cane Valley, recorded as a mason apprentice to his father Jorgan. <https://arkivalieronline.rigsarkivet.dk/da/billedviser?epid=20200851#295604,60392082>

1841 Cane Valley census: Petrus, no. 36, recorded as an enslaved mason.
<https://arkivalieronline.rigsarkivet.dk/da/billedviser?epid=17308427#475203,84875356>

1860 Camporico census: Petrus living with his family; Petrus recorded as a mason and his son Cornelius as an apprentice.
<https://arkivalieronline.rigsarkivet.dk/da/billedviser?epid=17318984#216106,40863240>