

THE ENSLAVED CARPENTER ON FISHER STREET

A Tradesman, a House on Fisher Street, and an Unusual Record of Enslavement

By Camilla Marlene Jensen

“Here he lives himself and pays tax on himself.”

In the year 1793, those words were written beside “Negro Malachi’s house” located at Fisher Street 14 in the Christiansted land register. At the time, Malachi* was enslaved to the Moravian Brethren at Friedensthal. Yet, he lived in his own house and paid the head tax on himself. Seven years earlier, in 1786, he had paid “Free Negro Woman” Sophia Magdalene Uythendahl 50 rigsdaler in Danish West Indian currency for the lot. This all was rare. Malachi’s ability to purchase land, live in his own house and pay tax on himself was not the normal experience of enslaved people in the Danish West Indies and should not be understood as evidence that slavery on St. Croix was not brutal.

In 1771, when Malachi was received into Friedensthal Moravian Church, he was listed as an adult Creole from St. Thomas. He was a carpenter. In 1776, he married Lydia, who was enslaved to Governor General Clausen. Their sons, Johan Martin and Christian David, were both born into slavery. In 1784, after Clausen’s death, Lydia, described in the auction record as a house servant, and their two sons were sold together for 650 rigsdaler to Skauscirk, a Moravian Missionary. Later, Moravian records show that Malachi’s sons were trained in skilled trades: Johan Martin became a shoemaker, and Christian David, sometimes referred to as David Martin, became a mason.

Lydia died in 1789 and her status at that time is ambiguous. In 1790, Malachi married Johanna a free woman of color. The Moravian records identify her as an African from the Mandingo nation. She was originally called Minerva, but baptized Johanna at Friedensthal in 1767. Johanna, a washer, made occasional payments toward her freedom. By 1790, she had paid the full amount and freed herself from H. A. Henneman.

On February 2, 1796, Malachi, now called Malachi Jan, purchased his own freedom from Moravian missionary Johann Gottlieb Micke for 400 rigsdaler, which he paid in cash. His two sons were freed by a deed from Moth and Moravian missionary Wied on June 11, 1799, and read in the Christiansted town court later that year. Their formal Free Brief, however, became part of another unusual archival story. In 1815, forty-six unclaimed Free Briefs were found in the Government Secretary’s office. Under an 1813 proclamation they “might be deemed forfeited”. Governor Ramsay annulled that proclamation and validated the documents. Thus, Johan Martin and Christian David who were listed together among them, received a Free Brief dated March 10, 1815.

In 1816, the census record shows Malachi, identified as Malachi Martin alias Jan, living with his wife Johanna Martin and his two sons in Christiansted: Malachi as a carpenter, Johan as a shoemaker and Christian David as a master mason. This record lists Malachi as born on St. Croix.

Johan Martin, Malachi’s first-born child, died in 1822 and was buried in the Moravian burial ground in Christiansted. Christian David died of old age in 1855 and was also buried in town. His last archival record lists his full name as “Christian David Malacky”, showing that he had adopted his father’s first name as his surname. According to the burial record he was married to a woman named Cecilie.

On February 15, 1824, “Negro Woman Johanna Mallacky” was found dead in the house at Fisher St. 17**. Officials came to appraise the estate but found “nothing of value”. Her husband, who legally

*The archival records contain several variations of the name—Malachi, Malachie, Maleachi, and Malacky. For consistency, I have used “Malachi” throughout the document when it is in reference to Malachi the carpenter.

** In 1803 street numbers were renumbered by the Danish Government, and Fisher Street 14 became Fisher Street 17.

owned the house, was in St. Thomas at the time, and an unnamed surviving son was not at home. Johanna was buried in town.

Malachi died a free man on July 3, 1829, on St. Croix and was buried in town. His death was reported the following day by his son, David Martin alias Christian David. At the time, the house on Fisher Street 17 was described as “old and dilapidated”. The record named Malachi’s heirs as his surviving son and four grandchildren. In his final archival reference, his name was written as “Malacky Martin”.

Malachi’s life was exceptional, not typical. The records do not soften the institution of slavery. Rather, they show one man navigating it in ways that were rarely available to enslaved people. What survives are fragments from church books, an auction record, land and mortgage registers, appraisals, free-colored census lists, and freedom papers that allow us to discover an enslaved carpenter who, years before becoming legally free, owned a town lot and was recorded with the remarkable words: “Here he lives himself and pays tax on himself”.

Sources: Danish National Archives (Rigsarkivet), Copenhagen: Christiansted land registers, mortgage registers, auction books, inventories and appraisals, the 1816 Free People of Color Census and Free Briefs records; Moravian Church Archive, Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, UMD II 5a: Friedensthal baptisms, receptions, marriages, burials and mission inventory records; U.S. National Archives and Records Administration (NARA), College Park, Maryland: Record Group 55, Freedom Charters, 1815–1830.

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 some referenced archival records:

1793 Land Register <https://arkivalieronline.rigsarkivet.dk/da/billedviser?epid=17226869#206998,39317052>

1797 Malachi Jan’s freedom by self-purchase <https://arkivalieronline.rigsarkivet.dk/da/billedviser?epid=20201411#295068,60143385>

1816 Free Colored Census <https://arkivalieronline.rigsarkivet.dk/da/billedviser?epid=20196424#287636,56821586>

1829 death record for Malachi, named Malacky Martin

<https://arkivalieronline.rigsarkivet.dk/en/billedviser?epid=20200837#291469,58426715>