

The Abolition of Slavery in the Danish West Indies and the Governor's Mulatto Mistress

by Norman Berdichevsky (May 2016)



Anna Heergaard and Governor Peter von Scholten

The Virgin Islands is a favorite tourist spot for Caribbean cruises. January 2017 will mark the 100th anniversary of the sale of what was the Danish West Indies to the United States. Alone among the Nordic countries, Denmark aspired to become a great maritime power with a colonial empire extending into the tropics. The three islands, of what today are known as the American Virgin Islands, St. Thomas, St. Croix and St. John were acquired by a Denmark anxious to obtain precious metals, spices, sugar, tobacco, rum, cotton, indigo, ginger, cacao and coffee. The prosperity of the islands during the period of sailing ships rested on slavery, yet the story of its development and its abolition is a remarkable one that differs from the other European colonial possessions in the region and from that of the United States.

In 1987, a Danish feature film "von Scholten" told this stranger than fiction story of the Governor General (1827-1848) Peter von Scholten and his mulatto mistress who defied the white planter class and the King in Copenhagen. The Danish experience repulsed many Europeans, even more so among the tiny slave owning elite due to the open liaison of the governor of the Danish West Indies with a "mixed race." beautiful mistress. She was accomplished, fluent in Danish and English, and a talented pianist who herself owned 15 slaves. She eventually granted them freedom and profoundly influenced von Scholten to take the lead in overcoming the deep seated opposition of the planter class, the King and the colonial bureaucracy.

Few Danes had been enticed to settle in the West Indies voluntarily. The Danish colonies were handicapped in spite of a well-developed merchant fleet, by the

scarcity of manpower at its disposal. Settlers to farm new lands or even administrators to manage the colonies were in short supply. Danish rule was limited to a few forts, plantations and trading posts. Similar footholds in Africa and off the coast of India were given up as simply too remote, dangerous and unpromising.

King Frederik III gave his approval for a permanent Danish settlement on Saint Thomas in 1655. The Danes managed to make their few acquisitions due to the already heated rivalry between France, England, Spain and Holland, all of which were over-extended. The Spaniards regarded the Danish intrusion as illegal since they had claimed the entire region for themselves, while the North European powers saw the arrival of the Danes primarily as a diversion that might further distract the Spaniards.

Jewish contribution to island prosperity

A good deal of the technical expertise for the establishment of the sugar industry was due to Sephardi Jews of Spanish and Portuguese origin who had been driven out of Northeastern Brazil when the Portuguese retook the area from the Dutch. Eventually the sugar industry became quite important in Denmark where distilleries turned it into rum. In 1755, all three islands came under direct Danish rule instead of through the offices of the West India Company and were treated as overseas colonies. Many Sephardi Jews who had already been granted full equality by the Dutch were active in establishing the sugar industry and served as administrators, bankers, merchants and helped established markets for the products of the Danish and Dutch controlled islands.

By 1820, the islands' population totaled 40,000, about 10% white, 20% "free coloreds" and 70% black slaves. It is estimated that the Jewish population of the islands constituted almost a third of the white population of Sankt Thomas in the period 1820-30 when the community established a beautiful synagogue with a sand-covered floor (the renowned Beraka veShalom veGemilut Hasadim). The free white population was divided among English, Scottish, Irish, Danish, Dutch, French and Sephardi settlers.

By 1837, the port of Charlotte Amalie on Sankt Thomas had become the second largest city in the Danish "Empire," after Copenhagen. This was largely due to its important crossroads position as a transit harbor. This role was gradually

reduced with the construction of larger and faster ships sailing on established routes between Europe, Latin America, the Caribbean ports or Southern United States. Jewish prominence in the Dutch and Danish islands was due to their linguistic abilities and expertise in the cultivation of sugar and in the distilling of rum. The lure of the powerful United States and the growth of its own shipping, sugar industry, relations with Cuba and the promise of building a Panama Canal for the newer much larger and faster steamships, all pointed to economic decline for the Danish West Indies and the eventual drift away from the islands of the Sephardi merchant element.

A.G. Drachman's Report and the Appointment of Governor General Peter von Scholten

Ship's doctor A.G. Drachmann visited the islands in 1830 and wrote a revealing and scathing report that indicted the institution of slavery as a crime against Christianity and humanity while at the same time contrasting the conditions of slaves as better than among many landless Danish tenant farmers, hired day laborers and urban workers. He also excoriated the luxurious existence of the small white planter class on the islands. From the 1670s to the cessation of the slave trade by royal edict in 1792 (the same year as Great Britain), it is estimated that Denmark bought and otherwise acquired 200,000 slaves in Africa and transported them to the colonial possessions in the islands. Nearly half of these died on the voyage to their new homes under Danish rule. A movement by present day inhabitants of the American Virgin Islands still holds Denmark accountable for this and have demanded "reparations," a proposal that the Danish government and most Danes reject.

In response to criticism, the Danish government introduced reform acts requiring slave owners to lighten the burden upon slaves, forbidding the break-up of families, requiring acceptance of slaves' testimony in criminal trials and banning the excessive use of corporal punishment during the period 1830-1842, but it was the appointment of the new administration of General-Governor Peter von Scholten in 1827 that paved the way to a confrontation with the planter class. Peter's father had been commandant of the Danish fort on the island of St. Croix.

The growth of the mixed free mulatto (steadily increasing due to the paucity of white Danish women on the islands) and free Negro population led to granting of

formal equal status with the white population in 1834, but it was observed only rarely in practice. The British decision to abolish slavery in their possessions in 1834 further encouraged von Scholten to urge King Frederik VI to follow suit rather than wait for an eventual confrontation. Although the King was generally conservative in most matters and almost an absolute monarch, he favored von Scholten's liberal ideas for the colonies.

In 1838, von Scholten returned from Copenhagen with a new royal order demanding the planters to provide for obligatory educational instruction for the slave population. During this time, the Governor's open relationship with the mulatto, Anna Heegaard, became a cause celebre.

Anna Heegaard

Ending slavery under the threat of a general uprising would have necessitated the sending of a major expeditionary force had it not been for the far-seeing governor, Peter von Scholten. He convinced the white planters they could not expect Copenhagen to save their estates nor depend on the slow moving Danish king. The islands were becoming more of a handicap than an asset and their importance as a port for the transshipment and re-supply of sailing ships entered a period of steep decline starting in the 1820s.

Anna Elizabeth Ulricka Heegaard, the future mistress and consort of Peter von Scholten, was born in St. Croix January, 1790. Baptismal records list her father as Jacob Heegaard, a Danish merchant, born in Copenhagen in 1761 and the mother as Susanna Ulytendahl, born in St. Croix, in 1774, listed as a "free mulatto woman," Jacob worked his way up the Colonial bureaucracy eventually obtaining the position of Treasurer of Customs for Christiansted, the largest town on St. Croix. Two weeks before Anna's christening, he blatantly ignored his relationship with the mother and married a local white woman. Anna was raised by her mother and at the age of 14 she was confirmed in the Lutheran Church, Christiansted. She was listed as a "one-fourth colored person."

Anna's mother lived with a retired sea captain and bore him two daughters before he died in 1798. She then had a long term relationship with a Danish shopkeeper and widower and bore him a son. In all these relationships, Anna was reared and accepted as a full member of the family and she grew up as a confident, refined and highly educated person, accepted as an individual and not defined solely by

racial categories.

At the age of nineteen she drew the attention of a 26-year old unmarried Danish attorney and became his mistress. Like so many other Danish officials in the islands, including those married with wives in Denmark (as von Scholten), inter-racial informal relationships were common even though an affront to the white planter class.

Anna Heegaard eventually became wealthy in her own right and purchased a house, in Christiansted. Although the laws and regulations issued as far back as 1755, had guaranteed the "free-colored" population equality with whites, these measures were often avoided or simply neglected. Attractive free-colored women with good manners often associated with white civil servants, planters, merchants or sea captains but most of the time, these European men took these women into their homes as housekeepers, but everybody knew that they would live together.

In 1827, when Peter von Scholten first came to St. Croix as Governor-General, he attended many gala events in his honor: sumptuous dinners, garden parties and balls staged by the slave owning planters who were keen to influence the new governor. They attempted to outdo each other in trying to impress him. Anna Heegaard attended many of these events and made an effort to attract his attention. She was aware from her many contacts that von Scholten was sympathetic to the cause of elevating the colored people and improving the lot of the slaves. She not only won his heart but also his mind and pressed upon him the urgent need for reforms. She was especially aware of the humiliation caused by the freedom-letter, a document that every "free-colored" person had to carry to show that he or she was not a slave.

Anna made Von Scholten aware of the widespread and officially sanctioned discriminatory employment policies; how talented and able colored people were denied the right to work in any but the most menial jobs. Von Scholten was impressed with her sincerity, intelligence and dedication. He resolved to consult with her and soon fell in love. He asked her advice on how he should cope with the many problems that arose daily between planters and their slaves as well as the status of the "free-colored." This was the beginning of a relationship between the two that deepened with the years.

On an official visit back to Denmark in April 17, 1829, he carried with him a list of social conditions and desired reforms, prepared together with Anna Heegaard to show the Danish King. He also had promised Anna that when he returned, she would come to live with him and share his life (although he left behind a wife and children in Copenhagen). All his family, friends and acquaintances in Denmark were aware that von Scholten arrived a much changed man, now optimistic, exhilarated with life and anxious to get his work done so he could return to the islands.

In January, 1830, von Scholten explained to the King in detail the problems of the "free-colored" issue and the need for an urgent reform covering their basic rights. These regulations, to be truly effective, should come from the King himself. Beginning with abolition of the "freedom letter," von Scholten listed in detail far reaching plans for social reform in the islands which were approved in their entirety by the Danish King on April 10, 1830. Returning to the islands in the summer of 1832, von Scholten published the King's orders to the dismay of the planters who now feared the worst.

Anna Heegaard moved in with von Scholten as he had promised her and they lived together for two years at William Newton's plantation, "The Castle." In 1834, they moved to their own estate, "Bulowsminde," outside Christiansted. At the time, von Scholten was 50 years of age and Anna Heegaard, 44.

The 1848 Events, Abolition of Slavery; A new constitution and new King in Denmark.

A new King, Christian VIII, ascended the throne in 1839 and was not on such close and friendly terms with von Scholten as was the previous monarch. Although sensitive to demands for the abolition of slavery proposed in the early 1840s by many leading Danish intellectuals and clergymen critical of slavery, the new king was reluctant to do anything too radical as he was also aware of the deep resentment of the planters towards von Scholten and his colored mistress.

As a result, the king ordered van Scholten to report on how abolition with a modest compensation to owners had affected the British Caribbean colonies in 1833. The Governor proposed what he believed would be a compromise solution that the planters could accept under the warning that the Danish military forces in the islands would not be sufficient to put down a slave revolt. He suggested a

16 year "transition" ending in liberation of the slaves without any compensation for the owners. The king put forward his own unrealistic proposal that all the children born during this period would be declared "free."

By the time von Scholten returned to the islands in 1847 after one of his many trips to consult with authorities in Copenhagen, the slave population was on the verge of full scale revolt, believing that if the Governor and his influential colored mistress were unable to secure their freedom, they would have to resort to violence. The King reduced the transition period to 12 years, a meaningless step given the practical difficulties and von Scholten prepared for the worst.

The declaration prepared by the king was announced by von Scholten on September 18, 1847 (the king's birthday). Shortly thereafter, King Christian VIII died and Denmark and other European nations were beset with revolution and/or demands for a new liberal constitution. The end of the absolute monarchy in Denmark in February 1848 stirred revolutionary spirits among the slaves throughout the Caribbean and in French Martinique and Guadeloupe where they were in open rebellion. The new king, Frederik VII, was under serious pressure to grant a new democratic constitution ending the last remnants of serfdom at home and slavery in the West Indian colonies.

Although the planters were furious and threatened to issue a formal complaint to the government and new king in Copenhagen, von Scholten's successful appeal to the Spanish authorities in nearby Puerto Rico (where slavery still prevailed) enabled him to "borrow" 600 Spanish troops to keep order and convince the white planters that he had sufficient military strength to both put down a slave rebellion or enforce his will against the planters.

For his efforts, von Scholten suffered a minor stroke while addressing angry plantation owners and was recalled to Denmark, charged with disobeying orders, defying the King's proclamation about a 12 year transition, showing weakness and indecision in the face of the incipient rebellion and deprived of his pension for many years' service. Seen from today's standpoint, Peter von Scholten had prevented chaos and a bloody uprising on the scale of the worst violence in the Caribbean similar to the simultaneous uprisings in the French colonies.

The Danish experience differed substantially in several ways from the other European colonial regimes, most notably in the fact that it was almost entirely

free from bloodshed and was successful against a resentful hostile planter class and unsympathetic government in Europe which had been stampeded into recognizing a *fait accompli*. This was achieved by a charismatic local figure in alliance with a free woman of color at a time when women had few rights in either Europe or the United States.

Such an unlikely constellation of events was simply unbelievable in the eyes of the wealthy slave owning planter class in the American South and, like the gruesome Haitian uprising, convinced many of them that their way of life would crumble with the end of slavery leading to miscegenation, “racial defilement” and an aggressive North enlisting the service of “tyrants such as Lincoln,” and military adventurers and carpetbaggers such as von Scholten who had upset the established order.

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