

The last will and testament of martha downs

Edmundo Gordon

Corn Island

In the name of God Amen.

Martha Downs of the Island of San Andreas now residing in Com Island being of sound mind and memory but being... (unreadable) andina weak state of health do make and declare this my last will and testament in manner and form following. That is to say:

I st I resign my soul into the hands of my God hoping and trusting in the remission of sin by the merits and mediation of Jesus Christ. And my body I commit to the earth to be buried al the discretion of my executors here in after named: And my worldly estate I give and devise as follows.

First I give and bequeath to the child with whom I am pregnant, should it survive, the following slaves Fidelia daughter of old Prue, Charles and Sam sons of Venus, Pricilla daughter of Venus, Susannah daughter of Fidelia and Benjamín son of Fidelia.

Also I give and bequeath to my said child if a girl all my fine wearing apparel and in case of the death of said child I give the said wearing apparel to the disposal of my beloved friend Mr. James Bowden.

Also I give and bequeath to my said child the one Half part of the land left me by my father Herbert Newton Downs and in case of the Death of said Child I give and bequeath the aforementioned slaves Fidelia, Charles, Sam, Pricilla, Susannah and Benjamín together with the aforementioned one half of my land to my beloved friend Mr. James Bowden.

Also I give and bequeath to mywell beloved friend Mr. James Bowden the following slaves. Ben alias Benjamín Waters son of Old Charles, Venus daughter of Old Prue, Rose daughter of Fidelia and John son of Venus. Also Hany Barras and John Gayas.

Also I give and bequeath to my well beloved friend Mr. James Bowden the remaining one Half of my land together with ali the appertinences thereunto belonging, to have and to hold to my said friend Mr. James Downs his heirs and assign forever.

Also I give and bequeath to my said friend Mr. James Bowden all my cattle and Stock of all kinds and in case of the death of the aforementioned friend Mr. James Bowden I give and bequeath the aforementioned slaves, Venus, Rose, John, Harry Barrass and John Gayas to my aforesaid Child.

Also I give and bequeath and it is my sincere request that Ben alias Benjamín Waters son of Old Charles be made free after the demise of my beloved friend Mr. James Bowden

Also I give and bequeath to Old Charles, Old Prue and Old Lucy each three acres of land and their freedom forever.

Also I give to all my female Negroes all my coarse wearing apparel to be divided among them by my beloved friend Mr. James Bowden.

Also I give and bequeath to my beloved Niece Maria Forbes one Negro slave named William and in case of her decease

I give the said slave to my foresaid child and finally I do hereby appoint my trusty friend Capt. N. Humphries executor of this my last will and testament. In witness whereof I have hereinto set my hand and seal this ninth day of March in the year of our Lord One Thousand Eight hundred and Thirty seven.

her

Martha X Downs

mark

signed, sealed, and declared by the said Testation as and for her last Will and Testament in presence of us who at her request in her presence and in the presence of each other have subscribed our names as witnesses thereunto

George Campbell

W. D. Lowder'

I first found this unique document in 1991 CIDCA-Bluefields archives of the Crowdell papers rescued from the old Crowdell hotel in the 1980's. I wrote this short article to commemorate the 140th anniversary of the freeing of the slaves in Corn Island, Bluefields, and Pearl Lagoon by the Miskitu King in 1841. I took it up

again last year in 2001 on the 150th anniversary of that key even in Coast history. It is a reminder of just how rich the history of the Coast is and just how much we as black people have forgotten.

Reading through Martha Downs' will the first time it was amazing to me how much one little document can tell us about the lives and times of our ancestors here on the Coast. For example:

This will reaffirms the fact that after the British and their African slaves left the coast in 1787 it was repopulated by Europeans, Africans and Creoles from the offshore islands of San Andres (as in this case), Providencia, Cayman Islands and later Jamaica and the Bahamas. It shows also how fragile life was in these times, particularly for women and children.

The lives of both Martha Downs, who must have been a young woman maybe even a teenager, and her unborn child are hanging in the balance. It seems however, in this case that Martha Downs survived her pregnancy as she is listed as a major slave holder in the list of slave holders assembled at the time of emancipation. It may be however that she did die as this document was found among papers used by James Bowden to claim Martha's property as an inheritance.

We tend to look at the state of christian morality today on the Coast and lament the seeming loss of morals especially among our youth. However in the mid 19th century even the most important families of the Coast (of which the slave and land owning Downs' certainly were one) also had moral problems.

Martha clearly was not married though she was pregnant. It is not even clear that the father of the child remained involved with the woman he had impregnated and the child she bore for him. However, it is probably the case that Martha's "beloved friend" James Bowden was the father of the child. James is named in the will as the principal heir to both Martha and her child. We know that she had other family members still living, witness the niece. So why would he be the main heir if there were no familial relationship. Friendship is nice but usually not the basis for the bequeathal of all one's earthly belongings.

James Bowden must have been Martha's consort and the father of her child. If he was the father why is this not mentioned in the will and why is there no formal mention of who would take responsibility for the child in case of Martha's death? Could it have been that James was already married to someone else? This is all pure speculation but it is clear that there is something amiss here at least by contemporary standards of Christian morality.

Martha Downs owned sixteen slaves. There was a fairly even distribution between male and female; nine and seven respectively. Some scholars have claimed that slavery eliminated most or all family relations between slaves. However, ten of Martha's slaves belonged to one family, all those who are blood relations of Old Prue. It is probable that some of the seemingly unrelated male slaves are also related to these ten as fathers and husbands though these relationships are not specified in the will.

Three of Martha's slaves seem to be old and at the end of their useful working days. Six seem to be adults at the prime of their economic value and seven are children or teenagers. This age distribution and the familial relationships specified by the will indicate that the slave population, at least that owned by the Downs', was reproducing itself. This means that the conditions of slavery were such that slave parents were allowed to care for their children. They also were able to obtain the nutritional levels necessary to sustain themselves and their children. It also indicates that the work load was not so overwhelming as to be life threatening as was the case elsewhere in the Caribbean.

Added to this, the fact that Old Prue's large extended family remained intact under Martha, the fact that Martha freed some of her slaves at her death providing them with land sufficient to care for themselves, (though it is clear that they were no longer economically viable as slaves) point to a slave regime on Corn Island, at this time, which was paternalistic and capital extensive. In other words, it was a slave regime more similar to that of Colonial Nicaragua or Belize rather than Jamaica or Surinam in the early 19th century.

On the other hand, Martha split families up when she distributed her slaves, in some cases tearing children from mothers. She was able to assign ownership of adult people even to an unborn child. This assumes that even the unborn are more deserving and capable of the right to direct the lives of adults who are slaves than the slaves are themselves.

Martha was able to keep sixteen people enslaved even after slavery had been abolished in all British colonial territories three years previously (slavery was to continue on the coast for another four years before finally abolished in the Mosquitoia). The fact that she could dispose of slaves as she wished in the same way she disposed of her land, her clothes, and her cattle all indicate the inhuman cruelty of the institution of slavery on the Atlantic Coast or any other place it exists.

Finally, the fact that Martha attends to the distribution of her slaves in her will before any other of her belongings and spends so much time on the details of

their distribution that the distribution of her other belongings seems almost an after-thought indicates the high value placed on human merchandise.

Indeed slaves were the most valuable things that a free person could possess on Corn Island in the mid 19th person Century ... could For the possibility slaves it on was Corn their Island freedom