



Johnny Stedman in Tiverton

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Note to readers:

Our research files have been compiled by a committed and diligent team of volunteer researchers.

Please be aware that while our volunteers have received training in basic research skills, they are not professional historians.

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Project introduction

Enslaved people are not only connected to Tiverton's history through servitude and financial gain. There is also the story of Johnny Stedman, born in what is now the Republic of Surinam, to his enslaved mother Joanna, and his father John Gabriel Stedman, a Dutch soldier. Johnny was brought to Tiverton to live with his father and new stepmother after his mother, Joanna, died.

Tara discovered Johnny's story through his father's journal, which remains an important record of the 18th century slave trade in Surinam in South America. Johnny's mother, Joanna, was an enslaved person of mixed African/Dutch ancestry. Her relationship with J.G. Stedman is detailed in his book The Narrative of a five years expedition against the Revolted Negroes of Surinam (1796).

Tara's research file unpicks Johnny's story, through a lengthy and careful reading of the diaries of Johnny's father, John Gabriel Stedman.

Research file

In 1784 an 9 year old boy arrived in London after the long journey by sea from Surinam. Johnny Stedman's mother had died of poisoning on the plantation where he grew up. He was sent to London to be reunited with his father John Gabriel Stedman, a Scottish born Dutch soldier who had by then remarried a Dutch wife.

His mother was Joanna, a slave of mixed African/Dutch ancestry and her romance with JG Stedman is detailed in his book *The Narrative of a Five Years Expedition against the Revolted Negroes of Surinam* (1796) which was later used as evidence in support of the abolition of slavery.

The family moved to Henesley House in Tiverton 1785, and subsequently lived on Broad Lane in West Exe.

Johnny was sent to school in Tiverton, tutored by Francis Gloyns, while his step mother was busy with her own growing family. He learned bookkeeping and the violin as well as reading and writing. The apple of his father's eye, they went riding out on horseback to visit friends and sometimes got extremely drunk on rum. But his relationship with his step-mother was stormy: she gave him a black eye on at least one occasion and his father often had to intercede on his behalf.

John Gabriel was proud to be a well travelled man of the world:

April 22nd : " Nibbs gives me a bottle of madeira, and tea, of 5 guineas subscription for my journals, calls Johnny countryman, he being from Antigua, promises him protection, and gives him half a crown."

29th November 1785: "My family consists of 4 people only, yet 4 different nations, viz: Scotch, Dutch, English and American, - who all speak no less than 6 different languages. The people in Devonshire never swear, nor have I heard one speak ill of another during almost 9 months I have lived in it."



John Gabriel sought a post for his son in the British Navy at a very early age, possibly to avoid further family conflict and/or racial hostility at home. Johnny made 5 voyages before gaining a post as Midshipman on the 'Lizard' in 1789 at 20 shillings per month.

Stedman's diaries record:

March 16th : *"dressed in full uniform, and gold laced hat, he goes and takes farewell from his friends in Tiverton."*

March 17th : *"...I ..conduct John as far as Halberton, where he parts with a heavy heart for Miss Hobson"*

This is the last time his adoring father saw him. He was reportedly drowned at sea off the coast of Jamaica aged just 17. There is no trace in the Navy or civil records of the trial of two crew members his father refers to in a letter of the time. A touching Elegy and the letter he wrote to Johnny, should he have succeeded him, were both widely published. JG Stedman was broken-hearted; his health began a slow decline and he died in Tiverton at the age of 52. He is buried in Bickleigh church yard.

Officially, here the tale of Midshipman Johnny Stedman ends.

Except for a little footnote. In the records of The Registrar General, of Spanish Town, Jamaica can be seen the following entry:

"burial of John Stedman, late surgeon HMS York, 1801, Palisades, Port Royal"

Could this be our Johnny Stedman of Tiverton, Devon? Did he survive the attempt to drown him, or had he staged his own death so as to escape his previous life? We can never know what might have driven him to such actions but it seems he chose to let his father believe he was lost at sea.

Notes

Born: Midshipman John Stedman was born in Surinam on 27th November 1774

Died: supposed drowned off the coast of Jamaica February 1792

Mother born: in Surinam on 27th November 1774 His mother, Joanna was a slave, the daughter of a white plantation owner and enslaved African mother.

Mother died: Joanna died November 5th 1782 from the effects of poison in Surinam

Father born: John Gabriel Stedman, Scottish born soldier in the Dutch army.

Father remarried: At Maestricht, February 2nd 1782 Stedman married Adriana



How old was Johnny when he arrived in the UK? 8 or 9?

Schooling: In London, Soho Academy with Mr Baroes (1784), and then tutored by Francis Gloyns, Tiverton.

Notable dates and events as recorded in John Gabriel Stedman's diaries:

In 1776 JG Stedman enters into a loan agreement to buy his wife Joanna and his son Johnny out of slavery. Alas, she died before he was able to raise the funds and in any case his diary and his published account of his time in Surinam do not match exactly. He had left Surinam and re-married before Joanna died.

Johnny drunk with rum 1784 (aged 9).

Stedman records Johnny's 10th birthday and dinner with various people where he has Johnny with him. He swallowed a pin and was very ill.

January 1st 1795 Johnny made George his brother a present of half a crown.

On Jan 31st 1785 Johnny goes to see a play, School for Scandal at Drury Lane.

April 4th 1785 JG Stedman's birthday, having moved to Tiverton to Henseley House they dine at the house for the first time and Johnny is put into boarding school on half pension. He goes every Sunday to church. By May 13th he is on vacation from school. They bake bread at home on May 14th and note 20 houses burned down that day.

September 25th Johnny gave his only penny to a boy... - generous.

On vacation again on 28th September.

On his 11th birthday he rides on horseback with his father and visits friends.

On 29th November 1785 JG Stedman records in his diary: "*My family consists of 4 people only, yet 4 different nations, viz: Scotch, Dutch, English and American, - who all speak no less than 6 different languages. The people in Devonshire never swear, nor have I heard one speak ill of another during almost 9 months I have lived in it.*" (P.269 Diary)

Christmas that year Johnny very drunk.

Jan 3rd 1786 instructs Gloyns to make Johnny read 'letters of all handwriting'.

Jan 27th Johnny "*belongs to the Edgar under Capt. Adam Duncan*".

March 8th Johnny wins a prize at school for the best writing.

March 24th Diary records Johnny being very generous (again).

Telling our stories Finding our roots

April 4th JG's birthday Johnny and his step mother have a row about his schooling, she gives him a black eye, this causes an argument between man and wife. Johnny later begs her pardon and is sent to school crying. JG falls out with his wife over this episode.

"To put it bluntly, he idolized Joanna's boy, and to face facts that attitude displeased Mrs Stedman." (*John Gabriel Stedman – A Study of his Life and Times by Stanbury Thompson, P.55*)

October 1st JG finishes a picture of Johnny.

November 13th Johnny begins book keeping.

November 27th Johnny is 12 year old but his birthday "*not kept, poor fellow, for no reason at all*".

December 4th poor Johnny is complained on to Gloyns for nothing (p.305).

December 1786 Whole family inoculated for small pox.

January 1787 whole family very ill after inoculation.

Jan 14th JG seals up all Johnny's papers including his "*manumission certificate (release from slavery) date of baptism, 3 more papers from the court of Surinam.....and papers attesting he has had 19 months on board Edgar*" and a copy of letter by JG which he reads to Johnny "*when he cried most bitterly indeed, and shall, during my lifetime, never see it again.*" (p.309).

February 8th he has lessons on the violin and is fed a lot of food in preparation for going to sea.

Feb 20th "*Shrove Tuesday, everybody eats pancakes in England – and so do we notwithstanding we 4 are from 4 different nations.....*".

Feb 28th Sent to Tiverton in rain and darkness to buy 2 oranges, "*by the wind blowing up his jacket and frequently showing his white shirt, in the dark, he was absolutely taken for the Devil and drove from the turnpike road 2 men and a woman, who all fled to Tiverton.*" (p.312).

April 22nd "*I visit Mrs Nibbs with Johnny, at Beauchamp. Mr Nibbs gives me a bottle of madeira, and tea, of 5 guineas subscription for my journals, calls Johnny countrymab, he being from Antigua, promises him protection, and gives him half a crown*".

April 28th Johnny's usher came to Henseley and give Johnny an excellent character (Usher was at Blundell's).

July 14th JG makes a hammock for Johnny.



Nov 20th Johnny has measles – another round of arguments with Mrs Stedman in which she is cruel to him according to JG's diary.

1788 Johnny is serving in the British navy, he comes home on leave on 3rd July.

August 13th JG quotes a newspaper article: *"Amidst the many marks of loyalty shewn to their Majesties the King and Queen, it ought not to be buried in obscurity, that at Tiverton, in Devonshire, a half-pay officer, whose only two English-born children, (a fine boy and girl) were christened George William and Sophia Charlotte. This at least; is equal to an illumination."*

11th October Johnny offered to go to Botany Bay and China but JG rejects it on account of there being 300 convicts aboard.

October 31st *"My dear Johnny ends the Bible with me which we read from the beginning to the end. The same day receive a letter from London in which he is offered to go to The Bay of Honduras, Antigua or Jamaica. He chooses the first, with Capt. Young's son, George Young, on board the Amity Hall, a new vessel, and I prepare him immediately to set out tomorrow."*

November 1st Johnny departs by coach to London.

November 27th "we drink Johnny's health" - he is 15 years old.

'Amity Hall' launched on the Thames 1789.

July 9th 1789 Johnny home from Jamaica to Tiverton.

September 26th Johnny appears in full uniform for the first time as midshipman of the 'Southampton'.

March 10th Johnny appointed aboard the 'Lizard'.

March 14th Johnny and JG ride around to take leave of friends.

March 16th *"dressed in full uniform, and gold laced hat, he goes and takes farewell from his friends in Tiverton"*.

March 17th *"he set off for Portsmouth as midshipman aboard the Lizard frigate, of 28 guns, Capt John Hutt, commander. I ..conduct John as far as Halberton, where he parts with a heavy heart for miss Hobson"*.

Johnny is earning 20 shillings a month (P.336).

Jan 22nd 1795 JG records *"In Broad Lane lived 3 travellers lately, who saw the whole world, viz: Tom Davy, America, Botany Bay, Spain, Cape Horn, Cape of Good Hope etc., Pearce, Gibraltar, Mediterranean, Italy, China, all E and W Indies etc., etc, and myself, Guiana in South America, France, Germany, Holland etc., etc, that is to say, only in part."*

13th January 1795 Letter to Gentleman's Magazine from Francis Gloyns:



Sir, if the annexed beautiful letter is worth your attention (as I hope it will prove) you are at liberty to present it to the world in your instructive Weekly Entertainer. It was written by Colonel Stedman (to be delivered only after his death) to his Mulatto son, a charming youth, and a sailor, educated by myself in this town, but who since unfortunately perished at sea, while discharging his duty in commanding a pinnace, at the early age of 17, off the island of Jamaica.

*Francis Gloyns
Tiverton
January 13th 1795*

JG writes Johnny *"absorb'd by the relentless ocean"*

"It appears that a John Stedman, surgeon, became demise in 1801. The Registrar General, of Spanish Town, Jamaica, gives note that: CR Vol1 Folio 199 – burial of John Stedman, late surgeon HMS York, 1801, Palisades, Port Royal"

"Whether this person could have been the hapless midshipman is more than probable."

(John Gabriel Stedman – A Study of his Life and Times by Stanbury Thompson, P128)

Letter sent to JG's brother on 30th August 1792:

*"...I received fatal tidings that my dear Johnny Stedman is no more, who was on his fifth voyage, lost out of the ship's boat at Jamaica, after swimming a considerable time. His death broake my heart as he was of the most amiable disposition, and just entering into life to push his fortune, and perhaps that of his poor brothers. He is, poor lad, universally regretted, his character being without a blemish, while he was allowed to be the first seaman of his age, just 17. There being but two men with him at the time, they are, by all, suspected guilty of his death, and now upon their trail in London before Sir Sampson Wright. Put yourself for a moment in my situation, and judge of my feeling. I am ill ever since, and Mrs Stedman is exceedingly low, but we hope in the course of 14 days to be able to travel; when we set off by London, in order that I may be present at the end of the trial. Oh God! How heavy is my heart at this moment, nor did it ever experience such a fatal stroke. I can write no longer on the subject, that you, my Dear! may never experience the unhappy state of my mind is the sincere wish of your affectionate brother
Stedman"*

There are no civil or navel records of a trial however. Johnny's fate is a complete blank but Stedman's 'An Elegy on My Sailor' seems to suggest that he was the victim of slander and racism:

*"no more thy olive-beauties on the waves
shall be the scorn of such European slaves,*

telling our stories
finding our roots

*whose optics, blind to merit, ne'er could spy,
what sterling worth could bloom beneath a western sky"*