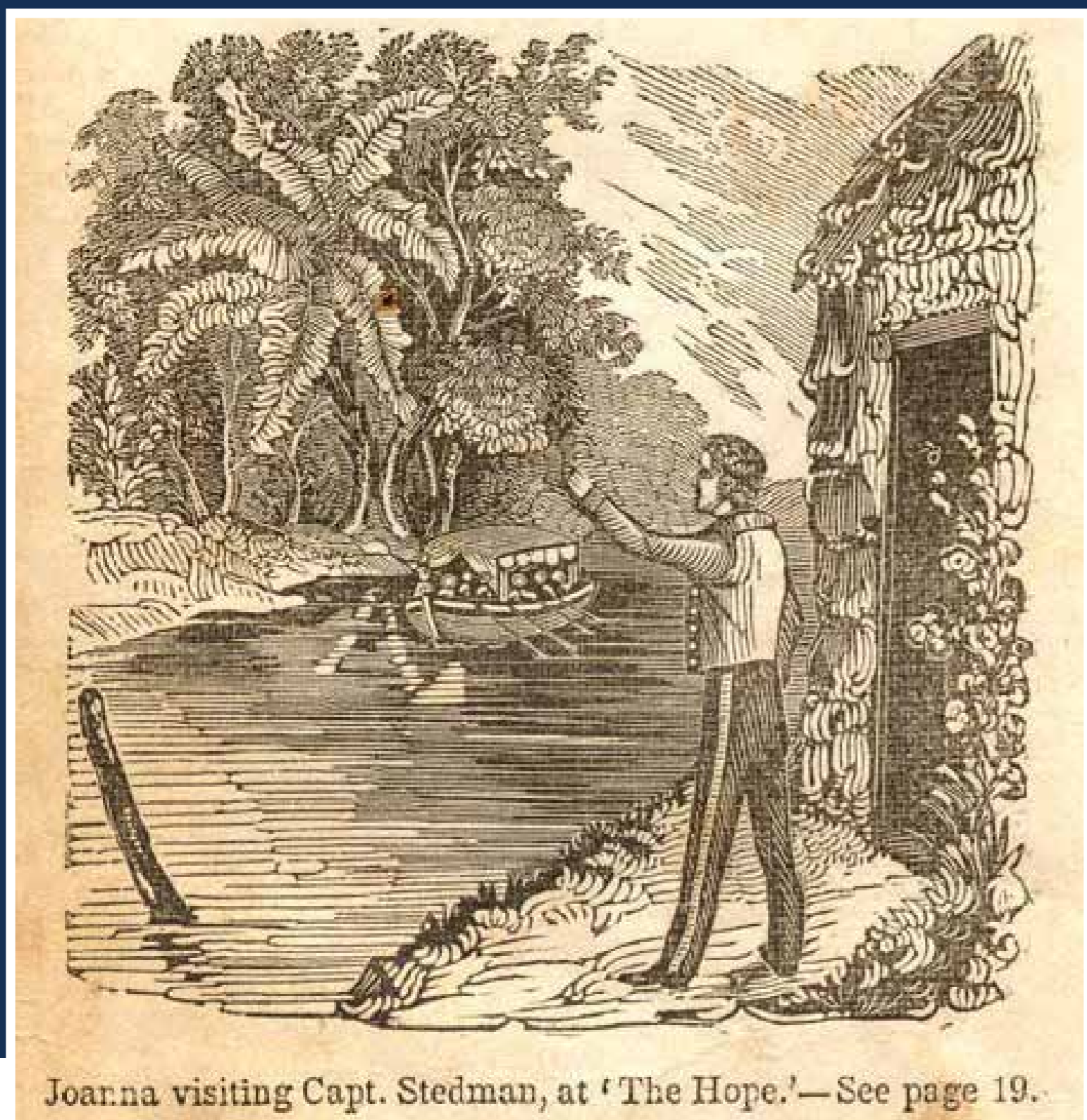


Telling Our Stories, Finding Our Roots



Joanna visiting Capt. Stedman, at 'The Hope.'— See page 19.



From Surinam to Tiverton

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 Suriname, to his enslaved mother Joanna, and his father John Gabriel Stedman, a Dutch soldier.

We discovered Johnny's story through his father's journal, which remains an important record of the 18th century slave trade in Suriname 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).

By the 1780s John Gabriel Stedman had retired to Tiverton, and after Joanna's death in 1782 Johnny was sent for by his father. He was sent to school in Tiverton and learned bookkeeping, the violin, reading and writing. It has been suggested that Johnny was educated at Blundell's, but his name does not appear to be in their registers. Other sources suggest Francis Gloyns' school in Saint Peter Street, but again, no written evidence survives. Stedman's diary documents a close relationship between father and son, who rode together, visited friends and sometimes drank rum together. But Johnny's 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 Stedman sought a post for his son in the British Navy at a very early age, possibly to avoid further family conflict. Johnny made 5 voyages before gaining a post as Midshipman on the *Lizard* in 1789, at a wage of 20 shillings per month. Sadly this is the last time his father saw him. Johnny was reportedly drowned at sea off the coast of Jamaica shortly afterwards, aged just 17. After his death, a touching elegy and a letter written to his son, should he have succeeded him, were both widely published by his father.

However, further research suggests a possible twist in the tale. In the records of the Registrar General of Spanish Town, Jamaica, the following entry can be found:

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

It will likely never be known whether this is the same Johnny Stedman of Tiverton – but it nevertheless remains a possible and intriguing alternative ending to Johnny's story.

