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Analysis: Rothschild Francis and the Fight for Democracy – Part 1

This is the first of a four-part series on Rothschild Francis and his legacy. The remaining installments will appear on the Source in the coming weeks.

Rothschild Francis was a civil rights leader in the Virgin Islands after the 1917 transfer from Danish to United States sovereignty. His foray into politics was born from a need to address the causes of the economic, social and political disparities that created undue hardships for Virgin Islanders.

To address those needs Francis considered the sociological and government ideals in the philosophy of prominent individuals as diverse as Abraham Lincoln, Frederick Douglas and Karl Marx. Francis determined that civilian government and true democracy would best resolve the issues of social oppression inherent in the colonial systems.

His activities included informative public speeches, publishing articles locally and nationally, the formation of a labor union, colonial council membership, collaboration with the American Civil Liberties Union, and testifying before the Congress of the United States for citizenship and a civilian democracy for the natives. The model of government Francis proposed was designed to minimize autocratic political powers in order to maximize the social and economic well-being of the people.

For 30 years after the 1848 emancipation, freedom was limited to freedom from being enslaved. It did not establish political representation or principles of justice and equality. The planters continued to exploit and control the people through restrictive employment and travel laws. The onerous restrictions were the basis for the Oct. 1, 1878, Fireburn. From then until 1936, despite the 1917 transfer, the ruling class continued to control the government by using wealth qualifications to exclude the working class people from participation in the political process.

In the period between 1917 and 1928, Rothschild Francis contested the ruling class operational systems and took action to advance the society. His knowledge of the comprehensive functions of government and vision of equality and justice set a leadership standard that should be a benchmark for government officials in the Virgin Islands.

As a child, Rothschild (Polly) Francis experienced verbal taunting from his white and near-white classmates based on their differences in appearance. People in that era were highly class and color conscious. However, the incidents likely strengthened Francis' self-esteem for similar challenges he would face as a civic leader. Despite the unfavorable experience in school, Polly had a passion for books and read history, psychology, anthropology, philosophy, English and American literature. This helped to develop the great intellect with which Francis addressed the people, the Colonial Council and the U.S. Congress.

Like his father, Polly shared his knowledge. He instilled in his black history students that deportment, tolerance, and compassion would triumph and negate the prejudicial claims of white supremacy.

When the United States acquired the islands in 1917, it was inexperienced in owning territories. As a temporary measure its Navy was appointed to govern. With a declining economy and decreasing population due to emigration, there was economic regression under Navy rule. No considerable effort was taken to vitalize the economy. Neither were there initiatives for the political empowerment of the people. The Navy reform focused on social services, such as public health, water, sanitation, streets and roads, fire protection and public education. Expectations fell short in other aspects of Navy rule and its coexistence with the natives. According to Francis, navy officers had political amnesty while citizens were “political peons.”

The Navy persisted with its Americanization and the natives waited for justice.

The Congressional Act of March 3, 1917, stipulated that all the powers acquired from Denmark, including civil, military and judicial, should be vested in the governor, who was appointed and directed by the president. The president was given authority to assign a military officer to govern pending confirmation by the Senate. At that time, Colonial Council members were also appointed by the president. Although laws could be repealed, altered or amended by the respective colonial councils, they were subject to approval by the president. Two municipalities were established: the St. Thomas/St. John and the St. Croix districts. Education and sanitation improvements were immediately implemented by the colonial administration. This raised the natives’ quality of life.

On the other hand, the natives then relegated to a status of inhabitants or refugees were denied many rights, including U.S. citizenship and voting. Congress did not pass the citizenship act until Feb. 15, 1927. The tough qualifications for voting included property yielding \$60 a year or \$300 in annual income. At that time, salaries were only 40 to 60 cents a day. Only 2 percent of the natives could vote in a community run by outsiders, the Navy. The islanders likely expected to take part in a U.S. system of democracy.

The Calling

Many locals gathered at Polly’s shoe shop and complained about the living conditions. Francis empathized and used his voice to protest the intrusions on the civil liberties of the citizens by the ruling class.

He encountered stiff criticism from most of the seven Navy governors, council members and members of the judicial branch of government. The criticism did not deter his fight for justice. Francis continued to make speeches at the Market Square, Barnaba well in Savan and around the field.

He organized longshoremen and others to form the Virgin Islands Federation of Labor, union No. 17261. By April, one month after receiving the certificate of affiliation Francis called a walk-out to protest a local shipping agent’s boycott of the longshoremen. In a ruling class attempt to intimidate labor leaders, the Navy assisted planters and merchants with importing cheap labor from nearby British islands. Francis opposed the workers’ erection of two oil tanks at the West Indian company dock.

Francis spoke at mass gatherings, published his views in local papers and forwarded his articles to papers in New York to inform and garner support from Virgin Islanders who migrated there to work. His published views were also a source for conflicts with the military

government. In addition, some local newspaper such as *The Bulleting*, *The St. Thomas Tidende*, and *Mail Notes*, upheld Danish policy and rejected Francis' hardline charges which they branded inflammatory. There was a need for a printing press for the working class; the natives of Savan, Coal Wharf, Buckhole and Up Street. His help came from Harlem.

Roger Baldwin, founder and director of the American Civil Liberties Union, saw an article by Francis in *The Messenger* of Asa Philip Randolph. His article highlighted the riotous conduct of the Marines, the supremacist attitude of naval officers, and the exodus of the natives. Baldwin told Randolph he wanted to meet Francis.

When they met at a luncheon in New York City's Civic Club, Francis was assured half of the money for a printing press if he raised the other half. With this press, he intended to eradicate "ignorance and superstition." Elizabeth Hendrickson of the Virgin Islands protective league called on Virgin Islanders to attend a mass meeting organized by Francis in July 1920 at St. Marks Hall in Charlotte Amalie. From that gathering, the fundraising was successful and Francis became editor and publisher of *The Emancipator*.

Conflicts and Opposition Begin

At the time of transfer, the doctrine of incorporation was presumed. However, in 1921 the Federal Court declared that the Constitution did not extend to the islands. In effect, the Danish colonial law of 1906 remained in force. This made it easy for Gov. Henry Hough to deport the substitute editor of the *Emancipator*, Thomas Fitzhugh Morenga-Bonaparte, in November 1922 by declaring him to be an undesirable alien.

In response, Francis insisted that the governor understand that "we are not subjects of the United States, but form a part of it." As a council member, Francis subsequently passed a resolution with unanimous support in favor of free speech and free press. The following evening at a massive meeting at Market Square, he severely criticized the governor's action and annual report critical of the native leaders. Holding the report above his head, Francis exclaimed:

"Who are the real malcontents, who are the race mongers, who are the ones that are trampling the rights of the people? How much longer, I ask you, will they keep their heels on the necks of the people? Are we going to lay down and play dead?"

In 1923 Francis wrote a letter to the *New York Times* exposing the poor economic condition. Years later, Herbert D. Brown, chief of the U.S. Bureau of Efficiency, reported that economic conditions have grown "constantly worse" since 1917. He noted that the seven Navy governors over 14 years did not take "the initiative in developing a program of either political or economic reform and development," although governors had autocratic power.

Brown's statement affirmed the accuracy of Francis' views that political reform and development was needed, and that the governors' autocratic power was not beneficial to the people of the Virgin Islands.

However, Francis' social, political and economic views, as well as his fearless stance against the disparities, attracted criticism. Main Street merchants, government officials and some of his own people considered him a "braggart." Francis was bombarded with criticism and labeled an agitator. As a member of the Colonial Council, opposition persisted from all sides.

His presence was not welcomed among his own ethnic group on the council. So his reelection was challenged by opponents, including some of his constituents. Despite the opposition on the council, Francis exemplified unselfish dedication to resolving the controversial issues.

After introducing a resolution to the council for a ways and means committee, Francis concluded that:

“As for me, I serve no selfish purpose. I desire no undue adulation. All I desire and I am endeavoring to do is to show my constituents, the government, and the world that I have done my part as a man – yes, a man without a party. I adjure you, gentlemen, if you should unnecessarily block this resolution, in any way, shape or form, you and you alone will answer at the bar of our islands’ history and suffer the opprobrium and censure which you would so justly merit and deserve.”

Rothschild Francis Moves Ahead

Francis was the first to introduce a bill for a permanent form of civilian government. His plan was to correct the defects of the military, civil and judicial systems and to limit and control the power of the executive branch. Being aware that he would lack support from his colleagues, Francis relayed his plan to the American Civil Liberties Union in New York. He was informed of a competent New York lawyer, Adolph A. Berle, who was familiar with Virgin Islands conditions, and advised to wait until they could meet.

In the interim, Gov. Sumner Kittelle dissolved the council. That created a good opportunity for attorney Berle to enter into island politics. The ACLU, through Berle, advised Francis to continue his mass meetings and press for backing from Virgin Islanders in New York for the economic and civil rights of the natives.

Berle and Francis, as counsel and chairman of the Virgin Islands Committee, drafted and submitted a memorandum in support of legislation that would be introduced into Congress by U.S. Sen. George P. McLean. Berle testified on behalf of the Virgin Islands Committee in a hearing of the Committee on Territories and Insular Possessions on March 5, 1924, to consider the legislation for a civil government drafted by Francis.

Berle referred to the 98 percent literacy rate in the Virgin Islands and stated that the natives had some experience with organized government. Subsequently, he made comparisons showing that the Jibaros of Puerto Rico and the Moro of the Philippines had high illiteracy rates but were citizens of the U.S. and the Philippines respectively. Virgin Islanders voted for the islands to be sold to the U.S. with the understanding that they would be citizens, but “at present they have the anomalous status of citizens of no man's land,” he said.

Francis referred to Section 2 of the March 3, 1917, congressional act stating that the government of the Virgin Islands is temporary until Congress shall otherwise provide. Then he referred to Article 6 of the Danish-American treaty that said Congress should determine the political status of the people in the islands. His proposal provided for rights and government representation equal to those enjoyed by U.S. citizens on the mainland. Unfortunately on April 3 and 4, 1924, the colonial councils of St. Thomas and St. Croix adopted a joint resolution in opposition to Bill S. 2786.

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Local news

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