

A version of this article originally appeared in *The Dictionary of Caribbean and Afro-Latin American Biography*.

a slave in the Dutch colony of Suriname and companion of John Gabriel Stedman, who wrote of their relationship and their son in his widely read *Narrative of a Five Years' Expedition against the Revolted Negroes of Surinam*. Joanna was born on the Tenburg sugar plantation on the Commewyne River, the daughter of the housemaid and knitter Seerie, and of Anthony Tielenius Kruythoff, the manager and administrator of Tenburg for absentee owners in the Netherlands. Joanna's maternal grandfather Dikie had been seized as a teenager from a Gbe-speaking polity along the Bight of Benin, West Africa, in the late 1720s. Transported to Suriname in a Dutch West Indies Company boat, he had become a sugar boiler and taken a wife from among the enslaved people of Tenburg. Joanna's father, a descendant of Dutch Reformed Church pastors, was the son of a river-toll collector of Tiel in Gelderland. Arriving in Suriname in 1748 at 18, Anthony had risen by 1752 from scribe and driver to manager of Tenburg, and had become father to Seerie's first child, Anthony. Joanna, like Anthony, also a Kruythoff family name, was born next, followed by Jacoba around 1757, and Gerrit and Louisa in the early 1760s.

Joanna grew up familiar with the big house, where her father lived and where her mother presided over the housemaids, being described by a white observer as both "attend[ing to Kruythoff] with the Duties of a Lawful Wife" and as "of some Consequence amongst her own Cast." Joanna's mother tongue, and that of her siblings, was Sranan, the Creole language spoken by the slaves, but they also learned to speak Dutch from their father. Kruythoff taught at least Joanna how to read and write in Dutch, a most unusual skill among slaves of the time. But Seerie kept all her children loyal to Watramama and other Afro-Surinamese gods. Kruythoff never had Seerie or any of their children baptized Christian.

By the late 1760s, Joanna was being trained as a seamstress at Fauquembergue, as the plantation was now called, and her brother Anthony as a mason and cooper. But Seerie had surely counted on Kruythoff to arrange for their freedom. In 1768 he tried to purchase Seerie and her children from the new plantation owner. He became ill soon after, and drew up a will ordering his executor to arrange for emancipation for all of them. The purchase collapsed, however, and in 1769 Kruythoff returned to Tiel, leaving his family enslaved. He died not long after.

Joanna was now sewing and cleaning at the big house, while Seerie had taken a new partner, the Suriname-born Jolicoeur, a leading carpenter at Fauquembergue. By early 1772 the plantation had foundered under the punitive regime of the new manager, the bankrupt owner had returned to the Netherlands, and Jolicoeur had led eight male slaves in an escape to the Boni Maroons, on the Lawa River between Suriname and French Guiana. Seerie and all her children, together with twelve other Fauquembergue slaves, were sent to Paramaribo, the Dutch colonial capital, to be rented out to local

families. Joanna became a maid in the household of the secretary to the Court of Policy, and she got her first look at the small Paramaribo world of free blacks and people of color. In April 1773, Seerie arranged a place for Joanna with Captain John Gabriel Stedman, recently arrived from the Netherlands with the troops sent by the Estates General to help defeat the Boni Maroons. Joanna would keep house and serve as “wife” to Stedman in return for payment to her Fauquembergue owner and a small fee to mother Seerie. Seerie surely hoped that the relationship would enhance Joanna’s chances for emancipation. (Possibly Seerie also hoped her daughter would glean military information to pass on to the Maroon Jolicoeur.)

Stedman was born in the Netherlands in 1744 to a Dutch mother and a Scottish father. An amateur painter and poet, he followed his father into the Scots Brigade of the Dutch military and then, after a string of romantic entanglements, decided to volunteer for the Suriname regiment. Once there, he interspersed his military expeditions and other activities with living with Joanna and the son, John, she bore him in November 1774. Though he was not always faithful to her, he wrote in his journal of “my sweet Joanna,” “my dear Joanna,” and “the girl I love.”

For Joanna and her son, the relationship had its advantages. The three of them lived together as a family when he was in Paramaribo, in a cottage that he built on a plantation that served as a military base. She wrote him letters and sent him provisions when he was leading his soldiers and slaves in the rainforest; he gave her gifts of silver to add to the gold ornaments Seerie had passed on to her from her father. When he came back sick, she used her plantation healing skills to cure him; when she fell ill, he sent to Fauquembergue for its indigenous slave healer. She helped him improve his Sranan, he taught her some English and put her to reading a Reformed catechism—though she was never baptized and continued to give thanks, as he said, to “her god.” He introduced her to his colonel and fellow officers; she introduced him and Johnny to her grandfather and other slaves at Fauquembergue. And she collaborated in a failed effort to obtain her freedom.

In August 1775, Stedman borrowed 1,800 guilders to buy Joanna and Johnny from Fauquembergue’s owner in Amsterdam; the money was lent by Elisabeth Danforth Godefroy, an elderly Christian widow and plantation owner. A year later, he had repaid only half the debt, and the departure of his regiment was looming. Unable (or perhaps unwilling) to put up the bond required by the government for granting manumission to slaves, Stedman sold Joanna to Mrs. Godefroy for the price of his remaining debt to her. In return Mrs. Godefroy promised to give Joanna and Johnny a small house in Paramaribo and to provide for Joanna’s freedom in her will. Stedman managed to obtain Johnny’s freedom without charge before he departed for the Dutch Republic on April 1777.

Joanna lived on in Paramaribo, serving Mrs. Godefroy. She wrote Stedman in the early summer of 1778, but that seems to have been the end of their correspondence. In January 1780 she presented her son John for baptism, with Mrs. Godefroy as godmother, but still did not herself convert. Joanna died in November 1782, aged about 27 and still enslaved, for Mrs. Godefroy outlived her, dying in 1796 at 81. In 1784 Johnny was sent to live with his father.

Stedman had by then married a young Dutch woman, and he soon moved to England, establishing his growing family in the small town of Tiverton in Devonshire. Stedman’s journal reveals that Johnny grew up there treated with much affection by his father, but he was drowned as a young sailor on an English frigate. Stedman’s thoughts circled around his Suriname years for the rest of his life, culminating in the publication in 1796 of his *Narrative of a Five Years’ Expedition against the Revolted*

Negroes of Surinam, illustrated by William Blake. It included a sentimental tale of his intimacy with Joanna, noting that her beauty—which he showed in a portrait—and her virtues “distinguished [her] above all others of her species in the colony.”

Stedman’s account of their relations is often consistent with other evidence, but it omits various details, such as its origin in a rental initiated by Joanna’s mother. In particular, Stedman remade the story of why Joanna remained a slave. In the *Narrative* he announces from the beginning that he intends to bring Joanna back to Europe with him as a free woman and educate her. She refuses such a plan at first, because “the inferiority of her condition must prove [in Europe] greatly to the disadvantage of both herself and her benefactor,” and then “nobly” refuses later when Mrs. Godefroy urges Stedman to take Joanna and Johnny to Europe even with his debt to her not yet fully paid. There is no sign in Stedman’s journal, however, that he ever entertained the idea of taking Joanna to Europe with him, or that Mrs. Godefroy ever urged him to do so. Instead, it seems he fabricated the entire account in the *Narrative* to free himself from the onus of leaving Joanna still in slavery.

Stedman died in 1797 before he could know that his *Narrative* would soon be translated into five European languages. Nor could he know how abolitionist readers would use his text. They overrode Stedman’s defense of slavery so long as it was carried on humanely, while pointing up the cruel punishments he pictured and deplored in Suriname. His story of Joanna also aroused criticism. The Swedish translator of the *Narrative* thought Stedman could have found ways to pay for Joanna’s freedom before he left. The American abolitionist Lydia Maria Child published Joanna’s story in 1834, excerpted from the *Narrative*, and commented “we cannot but feel that [Stedman] might have paid Mrs. Godefroy and sent for [Joanna] to England long before 1783.” As for Stedman’s opposition to abolishing the slave trade, Child exclaimed, “Alas for the inconsistency and selfishness of man.” Joanna’s side of the story is lost, but she would have agreed with the Bermuda-born former slave Mary Prince (2000), who wrote that “All slaves want to be free—to be free is very sweet.” [See also Prince, Mary.]

Bibliography

Prince, Mary. *The History of Mary Prince, a West Indian Slave*. Edited by Sara Salih. London: Penguin, 2000. First published 1831.

Stedman, John Gabriel. *Dagbok öfwer Sina Fälttåg i Surinam*. Translated by Samuel Ödmann. Stockholm: Johann Pfeiffer, 1800.

Stedman, John Gabriel. “Joanna – compiled [by Lydia Maria Child] from Stedman’s Surinam.” In *The Oasis*, edited by Lydia Maria Child, pp. 63–105. Boston: Benjamin Bacon, 1834. <http://www.archive.org/details/narrativejoanna00chilgoog> <<http://www.archive.org/details/narrativejoanna00chilgoog>>.

Stedman, John Gabriel. *The Journal of John Gabriel Stedman, 1744–1797*. Edited by Stanbury Thompson. London: Mitre, 1962.

Stedman, John Gabriel. *Narrative of a Five Years Expedition against the Revolted Negroes of Surinam*. 2 vols. London: J. Johnson, 1796.

Stedman, John Gabriel. *Narrative of a Five Years' Expedition against the Revolted Negroes of Surinam: Transcribed for the First Time from the Original 1790 Manuscript*. Edited by Richard Price and Sally Price. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988.

van Lier, Rudolf A. J. *Frontier Society: A Social Analysis of the History of Surinam*. Translated by M. J. L. van Yperen. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1971. A readable and well-documented introduction to the social history of Suriname.

See also

Prince, Mary <<https://oxfordaasc.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780195301731.001.0001/acref-9780195301731-e-74861>>