
Philip, Judith

(c. 1760–1848), plantation owner,

Kit Candlin

<https://doi.org/10.1093/acref/9780195301731.013.74805>

Published in print: 01 June 2016

Published online: 31 May 2017

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

was born on either Petite Martinique or Carriacou, near Grenada, around the year 1760. She was the eldest daughter of Honoré Philip, a white French baker turned planter, and his African wife, Jeannette, who had formerly been his slave. Judith had seven brothers and sisters and was the eldest daughter. Steadily over the course of the 1760s and 1770s, Honore and his wife increased their property holdings in Petite Martinique, Grenada, and Carriacou. By the time of Honore's death in 1779, the family owned several hundred acres spread across Grenada and its dependencies. The family also owned property in Grenada's capital, St. George's, and in the second town of Gouyave as well as Hillsborough, the principal settlement of Carriacou. By the time of her father's passing, the family owned at least eighty slaves and had a fortune estimated at 400,000 livres.

This property in people and in land was divided up between Jeanette and her eight siblings, Judith included. From the start, it would appear that Judith received one of the largest plantations to manage on behalf of the family, that of Grand Ance on Carriacou. On Jeannette's death in 1788, the family could boast several hundred slaves and the ownership of almost the entirety of Petite Martinique and several hundred acres of Carriacou, in addition to substantial urban property elsewhere. Judith continued to own the large property on Carriacou and slowly the property amassed by Honore and Jeannette was divided up among their children. This left Judith the sole owner of Grand Ance, which would remain the mainspring of her wealth into the nineteenth century. Over the next ten years, she bought out her siblings when they died, moved from Grenada, or left the planting business, and by the early part of the nineteenth century, Judith and her older brother J. B. Louis were the principal landowners in the family. Judith now controlled three plantations on Carriacou: Grand Ance, Susannah, and Petite Ance—all mostly producing cotton and coffee. She also owned land elsewhere in Grenada. Her holdings increased in 1793 when J. B. Louis sold her his share of the family inheritance and moved to Trinidad to take possession of free plots of land being given away there by the Spanish government. J. B. Louis's two sons would become prominent in the fight for civil equality, with Jean-Baptiste Philip writing the famous tract "A Free Mulatto" in 1824.

Against the backdrop of all this property accumulation was the continuing struggle for mastery in Grenada between the British and French. By 1783 the British were back in control of the island. As wealthy planters from the French community on Grenada, the Philip family did well to avoid trouble. Trouble threatened in 1795 when Judith's younger brother Joachim fell first into debt and then in with the free colored revolutionary Julien Fédon. The Fédon Rebellion tore through Grenada and did much damage, but the Philips were largely spared from the conflagration by remaining mostly on the outer islands and keeping a low profile. Joachim's involvement with Fédon, however, threatened the

prosperity of the family. In the post-Fédon reprisals, the British naturally targeted prominent free coloreds who were seen as major instigators of the conflict and much property was confiscated. In 1804 Joachim was captured by the British and executed for his part in the rebellion.

Despite being a free colored from the Francophone community and having a sibling directly involved in the insurrection, Judith managed to somehow steer a course between the two sides. In this effort, her longstanding relationship with British business in Grenada and her romantic involvement with the prominent British attorney and estate manager Edmund Thornton served her well. Thornton and Judith had met when they were both in their twenties, with Judith managing her land on Carriacou and Edmund Thornton the estate manager on a nearby property. The couple would remain together for much of the 1780s and 1790s. Judith and Thornton would eventually have five children: Ann Rachel, Louis Edmund, Magdalene, Judith, and Philip. All the children maintained a relationship with their father and kept his last name, even when Thornton left the island a wealthy landowner and married into the Lancashire gentry in 1796. Arguably, his success in Grenada was greatly assisted by Judith Philip, who would have opened opportunities for him with the French community in the colony. His marriage did not end their relationship either. In 1794 Judith had accompanied Thornton to London and bought a house at 33 Great Coram Street to be near him. For the next ten years, she lived in London along with at least three of her children who attended school there. While she was away from the colony, her managers oversaw her extensive property. Whether Thornton's subsequent marriage to an English woman was a marriage of convenience is not known, but Thornton and Judith Philip's two youngest children, Judith and Philip Thornton, were born during this period.

In 1808 Judith returned from London to take direct control of her estates. Once again her astute property management increased her wealth, and by the time of the first slave registers in 1817, her main property Grand Ance was well over 400 acres in size and employed 276 slaves. She also owned slaves in Trinidad, who probably looked after her sister Susannah when she decided to live there in the early nineteenth century.

Up until her death, Judith continued to purchase property for her children, and although they retained the name Thornton, it was Judith who looked out for their finances. This was particularly the case with her eldest child, Ann Rachel, who on more than one occasion had to be bailed out of financial difficulties by her mother. All the children had large sums of money invested in the city of London.

Despite Thornton's remaining in England, Judith Philip maintained her contacts with his circle. James Baillie, the powerful lawyer, looked after her interests and she remained tied to the British interests in Grenada. Despite her being free colored, Judith's estate managers were all Englishmen, as was the estate doctor.

Throughout the 1820s, Judith maintained her position among the top tier of Grenadian planters and she took an active role in the social life of the colony and nearby islands. A single event in 1832 speaks to the respect she had garnered from fellow planters. One of her slaves had become embroiled in a domestic dispute with another man and was sentenced to death for malicious wounding. Judith impressively organized a petition, which was signed by many of the leading planters in Grenada, and successfully appealed to the colonial secretary to have the man's sentence commuted. This was an extraordinary thing for a free colored female planter from the French community to do and is indicative of the regard and esteem in which she was held among elite Grenadian circles.

By the time planters were compensated by the British government for the emancipation of their slaves, Judith received in excess of 6,603 pounds sterling for her property of 275 slaves, which places her among the elite of the island. At her death in 1848, her carefully managed property was divided up among her three surviving daughters and the four children of her deceased son Edmund Thornton. All these descendants moved to Britain permanently over the course of the 1850s.

Judith Philip was a remarkable, enterprising woman who steadily established herself through astute property acquisition and good contacts as one of the leading planters in Grenada. Her success is the more remarkable as she managed to survive the heavy-handed reprisals in the wake of the Fédon Rebellion, in spite of her brother's direct involvement and the fact that she was a free colored woman from the French community on an island ridden with ethnic tensions. Her children and grandchildren all found their place in the burgeoning Victorian middle class in Britain, most of them living within a stone's throw of each other in Mayfair.

[See also Fédon, Julien *and* Philip, Jean-Baptiste .]

Bibliography

Candlin, Kit. *The Last Caribbean Frontier, 1790–1815*. Basingstoke, U.K.: Palgrave, 2012.

Candlin, Kit, and Cassandra Pybus. *Enterprising Women: Gender, Race and Power in the Revolutionary Atlantic, 1760–1840*. Athens, Ga.: University of Georgia Press, 2014.

"Judith Philip." Legacies of British Slave-ownership database. <http://www.ucl.ac.uk/lbs/person/view/11042> <<http://www.ucl.ac.uk/lbs/person/view/11042>>.

See also

Fédon, Julien <<https://oxfordaasc.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780195301731.001.0001/acref-9780195301731-e-73918>>

Philip, Jean-Baptiste <<https://oxfordaasc.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780195301731.001.0001/acref-9780195301731-e-74804>>