REMARKS BY FRED MITCHELL MP

FOX HILL ON EMANCIPATION DAY

2nd AUGUST 2010

Good morning

Your Excellency, Senator Dudley Thompson and Mrs. Thompson of Jamaica, the Chairman and Members of the Fox Hill Festival Committee, the Fox Hill Community, ladies and gentlemen.

We are back here again this year for the 176th version of the observance of the freeing of the slaves which came into effect on 1st August 1834.

This is a momentous day in our history and it is a day which marks the time in history when the establishment began to accept the full humanity of the African people that they had plucked from the continent far away on the other side of the earth and brought them here as chattel.

I am proud to be one of the descendants of those slaves who fought for freedom. I know that I am here because they fought for me and all the generations after them to be free. From the bottom of my heart, I thank all the ancestors what they have done for us.

My task this morning is both a thank you and a welcome. It is also time to walk down memory lane.

We remember this morning our late friends Charles Johnson and Eric Wilmott and former Chairman William Rahming, all of whom now past fought so hard to keep this Festival alive. We pause to pay tribute to them. We pay tribute to the late George Mackey and to Lionel Davis, who was the founder of the modern Fox Hill Festival.

I want to welcome back again with us this year all the pastors and all the Fox Hill elders. One of them is of course our former representative Frank Edgecombe. We stand on the shoulders of these giants.

I add my words of welcome to our Governor General Sir Arthur Foulkes who is here for the first time in this capacity. Last year we were joined by another of his generation Arthur Dion Hanna, another Bahamian son of Africa, who was a freedom fighter.

I add words of welcome to Senator Dudley Thompson and his wife, a freedom fighter from Jamaica—a founder of the Pan African Movement, a defence lawyer for the ale founding President of Kenya Jomo Kenyatta when he was tried by the British for a revolt against their rule. He is a former attorney for members of the PLP when they challenged in the establishment in 1967 and he is a former Senator and Minister of Foreign Affairs of Jamaica. Welcome sir and I hope that you might feel move to address us at some convenient point.

I say to you that the South African government under Thabo Mbeki had revived the modern Pan African movement and a conference was underway to support the work of the Diaspora and the continent around the world. Sadly with his leaving the Presidency, the project has fallen flat. Having heard your words sir at Government House last Friday evening, I determined that I will write a letter to the now President of South African urging him to renew their government’s commitment to the enterprise of Pan Africanism. It is an important project as we build the self esteem of our people and your young people.

Sadly and perhaps it is our fault, the generation today is free even to refuse to rush in Junkanoo because the prize money is not right or the judging is not what they want, but how many know the cost that others paid so that they could have that freedom to choose. The ancestors though would have been proud of the drums and cowbells and horns that rang out this morning through the streets of Fox Hill this morning. Happy! Happy! Africa.

I pay tribute to Africa this morning because speaking its name and our race has become one of these inconvenient truths in our time. We dare not speak its name. And yet all around us is Africa and the results of the work which the sons and daughters of Africa did to make us what we are today.

Indeed our Governor General will tell you that when he and the freedom fighters, the young Turks of his era decided to take power, they looked to Africa and Kwame Nkrumah of Africa to found the National Committee For Positive Action (NCPA) which became the intellectual driving force behind the PLP’s fight for majority rule.

Fox Hill stands as the sole community left in The Bahamas who after 176 years dedicates this time and effort to ensuring that the work if our ancestors is remembered.

I do not think that the nation provides nearly enough resources to mark this occasion. I say again this year that when I am in position to do so again, I will ensure that every year some head of an African state comes to pay an official visit to our country and this community, so our children can see the stuff of which we are made.

I believe that a permanent trust ought to be established to fund these activities.

I am imploring the Junkanoo groups , all of them next year the Valley and the Saxons, the Music Makers, Roots, One Family and all the B groups like One Love Soldiers, the Original Fox Hill Congoes, Fancy Dancers to put Fox Hill permanently on their calendars the ancestors would expect it of you.

I thank all the members of the Fox Hill community and the leadership of the Fox Hill Festival Maurice Tynes and the entire committee for keeping up this tradition.

Gail Saunders writes in her book Slavery in The Bahamas 1648 to 1838:

“There was also evidence of collective resistance in the form of slave revolts in The Bahamas in the years immediately before emancipation… At least nine revolts occurred which included five among the Rolle slaves, one at Eleuthera, one at Watlings Island (now San Salvador), and some disturbances at New Providence… In 1833, the Governor James Carmichael Smith sent a detachment of fifty men from Nassau to pacify the slaves in Exuma. Firelocks, a small quantity of powder and shot were found in the slave huts at Stephen Town. Before the troops could reach Rolleville, a slave called Pompey, escaped ad warned the slaves there of an impending visit… The slaves reluctantly returned to work after Pompey had been punished. However, troops had to be sent to Exuma three times in 1834. ”

Sean McWeeney writing in his essay Not Far From The Madding Crowd: Bahamian Reaction To The Revolutionary Upheaval In Haiti And The Intensification of Racial Control wrote:

“When the slaves of Saint Domingue rose up in 1791 on a scale wholly without precedent, slave-owners [In The Bahamas] everywhere trembled in fear that insurrectionism of similarly apocalyptic tendency might prove contagious…

In 1788, for example, the Grand Jury for the town of Nassau had expressed outrage and alarm over “the settlement of free negroes behind Government House”, describing it as “an enormous nuisance” and a particular menace to white slave-owners who ventured there in search of runaway slaves.[[1]](#endnote-1) Elaborating upon this complaint, Attorney-General William Wylly had explained at the time that:

“*a considerable village has been built by freed and runaway Negroes behind Government House and no white Person dares make his appearance within it, but at the risk of his life*. *Many have been assaulted, and nearly destroyed there.[[2]](#endnote-2)*

The “Blue Hills” area, lying farther south, was thought to harbour runaway slaves in even larger numbers. What these delinquents might one day do was causing considerable worry…

In 1795, an alleged plot by “French Negroes” to burn down the Town of Nassau and kill off all the whites was nipped in the bud.[[3]](#endnote-3) Still, it was enough of a scare to bring the non-white community under close surveillance and curtailment. A Night Patrol Act was introduced, obliging all persons of colour, on pain of arrest, to immediately retire from the streets once the town bell was sounded at 9:00 PM, the better to guard against:

*“.... mischief by fire, murder, burglaries, robberies, breaches of the King’s peace, riots, and other outrages and disorders and all tumultuous meetings of negroes and people of colour”.[[4]](#endnote-4)*

The limited deterrent value of such measures, however, was exposed when a conspiracy of far more menacing tendency was uncovered just two years later…

On the 27th August, 1797, the Commanding Officer of the Volunteer Company of Engineers of the New Providence Militia advised Acting Governor Hunt that one of his subordinate officers, Joseph Montell, had just been informed by "a negro man of importance" that (as Hunt told the story):

*"...the French negroes (most of whom were captured by the privateers of this port and brought to this Island in the commencement of the war) had entered into a conspiracy, immediately to seize the ordnance stores, to put the sentries to death, and after providing themselves with a sufficient quantity of arms and ammunition to attack Fort Charlotte and set fire to the East end of the town in order to divert the attention of the inhabitants".[[5]](#endnote-5)*

The Acting Governor received the report with grave alarm. It was widely known in the town (and thus presumably to the conspirators as well) that Nassau's internal defences were then in a wretched state…

[Later intelligence office Francis Montell, in the company of Alexander Wildgoos, the slave owner and others, raided a house "hired by a mulatto fidler (sic), named Stephen" in the Western suburbs where they surprised seven men and a woman sitting quietly around a candle-lit table. A search of the premises turned up a fuse for explosives, a musket and a sword under the bed and a powder horn as well. The occupants were thereupon put under arrest and bundled off to jail.

The upshot of the ensuing investigation was that five persons were put on trial for the high crimes of treason and sedition, particulars being that the defendants, Baptiste Perpall, Baptiste Tucker, Police Edgecombe, Tom Bethune and Tom Lockhart, had held unlawful assemblies aimed at "the Destruction of His Majesty's subjects, the white inhabitants of these Islands".[[6]](#endnote-6)

According to the evidence given in the case by other slaves (who had the sagacity to testify that they had not only refused to join the plot but had sought to discourage it), the defendants, feeling that "the work was too hard", had resolved to "fight and take the country from the white people".[[7]](#endnote-7)

The conspirators, it was claimed, had been relying on the support of three hundred men not counting a group of runaway negroes who were said to have a small cache of arms hidden in the woods. Their plan called for some thirty men (as many as a hundred according to one account) to break into the ordnance stores for guns and ammunition whereupon the leader of the conspirators, Baptiste Perpall (code-named "Swallow"), was to lead an attack on Fort Charlotte while his second-in-command, Baptiste Tucker, along with Tom Bethune and others would simultaneously mount an assault on Fort Fincastle. Once command of these two Forts was secured, "possession of the town" was to be taken and lawful authority overthrown. The insurgency, it was alleged, had been scheduled to begin on the very night the conspirators were taken into custody.

Upon hearing the evidence for the prosecution, the jury wasted little time in returning a verdict of guilty on all counts. The defendants were thereupon sentenced to be hanged with a further decree that following execution, the bodies of Baptiste Perpall and Baptiste Tucker were to be cut down and hung in chains at the point commonly called "Hog Island Point" - a spectacle doubtless intended to forewarn the living of the fate they might expect should they dare to act out their fantasies of freedom.

Within days, the sentence of death was, in fact, carried out "without any tumult or commotion whatever" against the French negroes, Baptiste Perpall, Baptiste Tucker and Police Edgecombe, all of whom, it was observed, "died sullenly and refused to make any confession".[[8]](#endnote-8)

As fate would have it, though, the other two convicts, Tom Bethune and Tom Lockhart, were given respite for a week to allow for renewed interrogation under terror of imminent death. Apart from confirming their own involvement and that of the executed men, however, no information of any consequence was "drawn". In the result, they were reprieved from sentence of death but ordered to be transported to "some foreign plantation, not to return again under pain of death" - a show of mercy the Governor-in-Council felt justified in making as:

*"...the designs of the conspirators have been happily frustrated and it appeared that the conspiracy was confined solely to the French negroes, and the public tranquility is happily re-established".[[9]](#endnote-9)*

The 1797 conspiracy, however, would lead to an intensification of social control of the nonwhite population. A proto-police force would now be cobbled together to secure the observance of the stricter curfews and vagrancy laws, with power to break up all manner of “disorderly” coloured assemblies, whether “civil or religious”[[10]](#endnote-10).

1. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Fast forward now to 10th January 1967 when the descendants of the slaves became the masters of their fate. Fast forward again to 10th July 1973 when the descendants of the slaves became the masters of the country.

   So I say that which is obvious this morning. 10th January 1967 and 10th July 1973 was made possible because of 1st August 1834.

   We also not forget the role which Haiti played int eh freedom in this hemisphere for African people. After the successful slave revolt of 1st January 1804, Haiti paid a price which it is still paying today. Even the American so called freedom fighter Thomas Jefferson refused to acknowledge the existence of the Black republic. Haiti was made to pay the equivalent of 21 billion US dollars in 1994 money to the French to obtain recognition as a state. This was a debt that they did not finish paying until the 1940s and which consumed 80 per cent of its annual budget in order to do so. They paid a price so all of us could be free.

   We must never forget. We must always remember. We must continue every year to tell the story of our humanity and of the resistance to oppression.

   My God continue to bless us all! [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. End [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)