

Emancipation Day 2016

August 1, 2016 is the 178th Anniversary of the Abolition of Slavery. It is disheartening that the majority of Afro-Guyanese have no idea what August 1, 1838, represents in their existence.

Emancipation Day is celebrated on the first of August, and it is appropriate to restore the struggles of our ancestors to the mantle place in our daily lives.

When the campaign for the end of slavery gained momentum in Great Britain it was expected that slaves in the British colonies would soon be set free. Then on August 28, 1833, the House of Commons in England approved the Emancipation Bill which was earlier introduced by Thomas Buxton. The final Act of freedom from slavery would come into effect on August 1, 1834, and that day was declared a public holiday by the Governor. While many slaves celebrated emancipation by making merry, others went to their churches to offer prayers.

The Emancipation Act (of 1833) successfully ended one phase of a long and bitter struggle against a system which transformed people into beasts of labour with absolutely no human rights. Actually, slave society regarded the African slaves as mules and even referred to the offspring of a European and an African female slave as a "*mulatto*", meaning literally a "young mule".

But attached to the Emancipation Act was the condition - an Apprenticeship period - where the freed slaves were compelled by law to serve their old masters just as they had done when they were slaves.

The Act stipulated that the slaves would continue to work on the plantations as "apprentices" for a further period of six years if they were field slaves and for four years if they were house slaves.

Much of this arrangement was not explained to the slaves after the Emancipation Act was passed.

This was a deliberate action to ensure that the plantation owners were provided with free labour even after slavery was abolished.

Based on reports sent to the Colonial Office, it was clear that the "apprentices" continued to endure harsh punishments as they did under slavery. In 1837, a British Parliamentary Committee recommended that certain punishments such as the flogging of women should be halted.

By 1838, the British Government felt that further problems might arise if one group of "apprentices" would continue to provide free labour on the plantations for a further two years after the former house-slave group were finally set free in 1838. It therefore proclaimed the freedom of all "apprentices" on August 1, 1838.

On the occasion of this 176th Anniversary of the Abolition of Slavery, let us pay homage to our African ancestors who were forced to journey to this foreign land-many dying along the way-and their struggle for freedom. The history of Guyana could not be written without recall of the greatest evil ever unleashed on mankind, that of slavery.

We must acknowledge the fortitude of our African ancestors, which saw them through the harsh reality of slavery, and the struggle for freedom.

All Guyanese, regardless of race or colour can learn from the examples of our African ancestors. Under the most severe of conditions they pooled their meagre earnings to purchase plots of land.

One of the greatest entrepreneurial acts by freed Africans in World history was the Village Movement which started in 1839. Freed Africans combined their resources to buy Villages so that they did not have to return to Plantation life and cheap punitive labor.

In November 1839, eighty three ex-slaves from five nearby estates (Douchfour, Ann's Grove, Hope, Paradise and Enmore) pooled their resources and bought Plantation Northbrook for 30,000 guilders or \$10,283.63. Each of the eighty three owned one lot of land. After its purchase it was renamed Victoria, presumably in honor of England's Queen Victoria although some suggest it may have been named as such in honor of the free slaves' victory. Victoria is credited with one of the first codes of local government in Guyana, established in 1845.

Today, we can do well to imitate this lesson of unity and of resolve and the many other lessons they taught us through their courage and endurance.

Years after the abolition of slavery and the subsequent period of apprenticeship, we the descendants must determine whether we have proven worthy of the sacrifices they made.

As we celebrate our freedom, let us remember that it was bought with tears, sweat and blood.