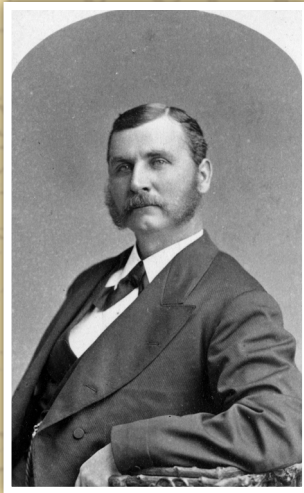


The Search for Thomas Ivinson: Plantation Manager in the Danish West Indies

By SJHS Member Kim Viner



Edward Ivinson, born in the Danish West Indies in 1830, as a young entrepreneur

(The Laramie Plains Museum, Laramie Plains, Wyoming)

In the city of Laramie, on the high plains of southeastern Wyoming stands a wonderful 1892 mansion built by Edward Ivinson. Edward was one of the most prominent men in the community for many years and a noted philanthropist later in his life. The fully restored house is now the home of the Laramie Plains Museum (LPM).

Despite being a fourth generation son of Laramie, I had little awareness of the LPM, the house, or Edward Ivinson. I knew the local hospital, one of the principal

city streets and a "Home for Aged Ladies" were named after him, but that was about it. All that changed about a year ago. Looking for another volunteer opportunity in town, I approached the LPM and they asked if I would consider becoming a docent.

As a docent, I became engrossed in the story of the Ivinsons, where they came from and their role in the city. Much of the extant information came from oral histories given by a great granddaughter that were quite fascinating and full of colorful stories. However, based on other information I learned since volunteering, I found there was a contradiction in the story of how Edward came to settle in Laramie. My background in Naval Intelligence told me that where there was one inconsistency, there were likely to be more. So, I began to track down the family history based on information that was, to the extent possible, based on documentary evidence.

One of the unsettled issues was what had happened to Edward's father, Thomas. All available sources said that he was the manager of a plantation, River Estate, on St. Croix in the Danish West Indies (now the U.S. Virgin Islands), where Edward was born in 1830. All agreed that his wife was named Sarah.

The continuing story was that he had come to the United States around the middle of the 1850s. Eventually, according to the oral history, he settled with his sons in Peoria, Illinois, where they owned a foundry. Sometime after starting the foundry, we had been told, Thomas and one of Edward's brothers perished in a fire at the foundry. However, another

story, based on a profile of Edward in an 1898 local paper, indicated that the foundry fire was in Evansville, Indiana, and no mention was made of Edward's father, Thomas. Yet another version, a short biography published in 1918, stated that Edward's father died in the Virgin Islands in 1850 at age 66.

So began the quest to determine which, if any, of the three stories was correct. Examinations of U.S. census and other data for Peoria did not show a Thomas Ivinson born around 1800 (although Edward was residing there in 1860). However, Evansville city directories and census data from 1858-1873 did show that John Ivinson was a foundry owner there. John, based on other records, was assumed to be a son of Thomas. Thus, the Peoria story was completely discarded. But, there were no records of Thomas in Evansville.

Since I could not find him there, the next step was to determine if there was census data from the former Danish West Indies that might help track him down. In short order I found Thomas and Sarah Ivinson of English birth in the Ancestry.com online census sheet for River Estate in 1841 and 1846. In the former sheet he was listed with Sarah Ivinson and two daughters, Emma and Hannah. In the 1846 sheet he was listed as a widower (no children listed). They were the only Ivinsons that turned up in the Ancestry.com query. As a side note, this comports with other evidence that Edward and his brothers had been sent to England in 1837 to

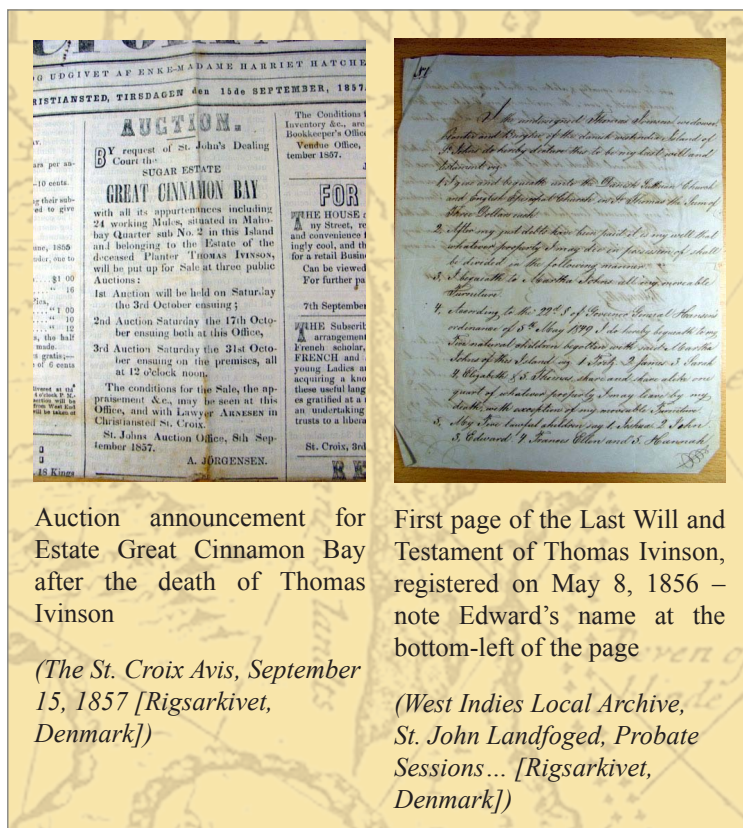


This Portrait of Thomas Ivinson was recently donated to the Laramie Plains Museum by family members. Ivinson was owner of the Cinnamon Bay plantation from 1847 to 1857, a decade marked by both Emancipation and a devastating cholera epidemic.

(The Laramie Plains Museum, Laramie Plains, Wyoming)

be formally schooled, and that Sarah had disappeared at sea during a voyage to visit the boys.

However, the trail was cold in any online census data for Thomas in the Danish West Indies after 1846. Thinking he may have returned to England, I searched the English census of 1851 but again, found nothing conclusive. So, as a final measure, I typed the simple query, “Thomas Iverson Virgin Islands” into my search engine. Down the list was an intriguing listing for A Documentary History of the Cinnamon Bay Plantation 1718-1917, published in 1999. I searched the document and found a Thomas Iverson as one of the owners of Cinnamon Bay on St. John in 1847.



Auction announcement for Estate Great Cinnamon Bay after the death of Thomas Iverson

(The St. Croix Avis, September 15, 1857 [Rigsarkivet, Denmark])

First page of the Last Will and Testament of Thomas Iverson, registered on May 8, 1856 – note Edward’s name at the bottom-left of the page

(West Indies Local Archive, St. John Landfoged, Probate Sessions... [Rigsarkivet, Denmark])

But, as Thomas was living on St. Croix the year before, I still was not certain that I had found Edward’s father. Further searching determined that the organization that had published the document was no longer in existence. But a search for the author, David Knight, led me to the St. John Historical Society web page.

I then emailed the Society and asked if I could contact Mr. Knight. The next day I had my answer; a message was forwarded to him and within another day he indicated he was in Europe and headed to Copenhagen to do some archive sleuthing! Amazingly, he said he would be happy to search for evidence on Thomas Iverson.

While David was searching there, I went back to the Cinnamon Bay publication and noted that one of the co-

owners of the plantation was William Dawson and that Thomas had a common-law wife named Martha Johns and a son named Fritz. That jogged my memory that there was also a William Dawson on the 1846 census sheet for River Estate. I returned to the sheet and found William Dawson and also a formerly enslaved woman named Martha (no last name) with a boy, Fritz; both noted as “supported by Mr. Iverson.” This seemed to be pretty firm evidence that Thomas had indeed moved to St. John with Dawson as a business partner and taken Martha along with him.

Then I received some exciting news from David. In his search of the Danish archives, he found Thomas’ handwritten and signed will. In it, Thomas made provisions for his five “natural children” by Martha Johns, and his five “lawful children” from a previous marriage*. The mother of that latter five was not named, but one of the children was named Edward. This, to me, clearly indicated that Thomas Iverson remained in the West Indies and died there in 1857. Subsequent discoveries by David Knight have confirmed this belief.

In conclusion, I would add that the key to finding the Iversons was the fact that the children almost always indicated that their place of birth was “West Indies.” When searching for Iversons in England or America, one encounters many possibilities. For example, numerous Edward Iversons are encountered, some with birth years the same as Edward. Fortunately, none of the others list their birth place as “West Indies.” This has allowed me to find more information on all but one of Edward’s six siblings.

I cannot thank the St. John Historical Society enough for their assistance in reaching a satisfactory conclusion to my search for Thomas Iverson.

Kim Viner is a retired Naval Officer and a Senior Docent at the Laramie Planes Museum in Laramie, Wyoming. His book, Edward Iverson: A Biography was published in November 2011.

*The other children were Joshua, John, Thomas, Emma, Frances and Hannah. John, Frances and Hannah eventually emigrated to the United States from England. The will cemented the kinship assumed earlier between Edward and John. Emma (not named in the will) likely perished at sea with her mother. No information after 1841 is currently available on Joshua, who was in England in that year in school. Thomas (not named in the will) was in school with his three brothers in 1841. In 1851 he was living with his uncle near Cumrew Cumberland, England, the likely birthplace of his father Thomas and the residence of his living grandfather Joshua. No subsequent information on Thomas is available.

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ATTENTION ALL MEMBERS: The SJHS is pleased to announce that as of the January membership meeting on Tuesday the 10th, we will begin taking reservations for two sailing trips aboard the beautiful wooden sailing schooner Heron. The sails, one a day cruise, the other an afternoon/sunset cruise, will be offered at \$80 per person, and there is a limit of 20 guests per trip. Event details and the first sign-up opportunity will be announced at the January meeting.



Party With a Purpose: To Find the Island's Best Guavaberry

By SJHS Newsletter Editor Andrea Milam

Society members, friends and family mingled under the stars at Estate Lindholm on Friday, December 16, at the holiday party, dubbed "In Quest of Guavaberry Perfection."

As the name of the party might suggest, party-goers sampled seven different guavaberry preparations in search of the island's best.

Entries came from St. John, of course; the British Virgin Islands; and even as far away as the Dominican Republic. Traditional guavaberries included St. John Cultureberry, donated by one of the Society's founding members, Andro Childs.

Vanilla Zimmermanberry offered a new-age twist on the traditional Christmastime liqueur, with red guavaberries from Estate Zimmerman blended with Cruzan Vanilla rum and loads of Caribbean spice.

San Pedro Party-Starterberry, the entry from the Dominican

Republic, was created from a recipe said to date back to 1899.

In the end, the evening's taste-off came down to a tie between the crowd pleaser, BVI Kill Devilberry, made with St. John North Shore guavaberries and Arundel rum from Cane Garden Bay, and the judge's choice, Little Reef Bayberry, an old-world inspired blend of mostly yellow St. John guavaberries and aged St. Croix rum.

Paired with the guavaberry tastings were a wide variety of finger foods, appetizers, and of course, holiday desserts that included two types of guavabery tarts.

The St. John Historical Society would like to thank everyone who helped with the party's preparation, and of course, it wouldn't have been a party without our wonderful guests.

