

**M1883**

**SELECTED RECORDS OF THE DANISH WEST INDIES,  
1672–1917:  
ESSENTIAL RECORDS CONCERNING SLAVERY AND  
EMANCIPATION**

Paul Rood compiled the records for microfilming  
and prepared the Introduction and Historical Timeline.

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## INTRODUCTION

On the 11 rolls of this microfilm publication, M1883, are reproduced the records most directly concerned with the institution of slavery and the emancipation of the slaves in the Virgin Islands during the period of Danish rule, 1672–1917. This is the first of several planned microfilm publications based on Virgin Island records from the same period in the National Archives of the United States at College Park, Maryland. These records are part of the Records of the Government of the Virgin Islands, Record Group (RG) 55.

### Background of the Records

During the period of Denmark's rule over the Virgin Islands, 1672–1917, the Danes proved to be assiduous recordkeepers. As a result, their documentary legacy is immense, amounting to millions of pages of records. In an era when few governments anywhere kept thorough records, it was unusual that so many records came out of three small islands in the Caribbean Sea with a total land mass of only 151 square miles.

One of the striking characteristics of Denmark's rule was the institution of human slavery. Danes imported slaves from Africa primarily to work in sugarcane plantations on the islands. A major slave revolt erupted in 1848, followed almost immediately by emancipation. The resulting documentation of Virgin Island slavery is thick and multifaceted—unusual among slaveholding societies—including such records as censuses and plantation records. These records are extremely relevant to present-day Virgin Islanders, for about 85 percent of them are descended from slaves.

Following the purchase of the Virgin Islands by the United States in 1917, Denmark left behind records concerning local administration that were deemed necessary to maintain the continuity of government. Most of these records were brought to Washington in 1937, 1954, and 1955. Overseeing this vast transfer was Dr. Harold Larson, an archivist of the National Archives who read Danish. In 1961, a guide was compiled for these records, which was extensively revised in 2001.

In 1959, records of U.S. rule over the Virgin Islands from 1917 to 1950 were transferred to the National Archives. In 1960, a guide to these records was published as Preliminary Inventory (PI) 126, *Records of the Government of the Virgin Islands of the United States*, comp. by H. Donn Hooker. Together, the Danish and U.S. records were organized as Records of the Government of the Virgin Islands, Record Group 55.

In the end, the United States found itself in possession of Danish-language records that filled about 600 meters of shelving and amounted to ca. 2,313 cubic feet or about 4 million pages. The records documenting American rule amounted to about ½ million pages of records (ca. 258 cubic feet).

## **Description of the Records**

The Danish records in U.S. custody arose from local administration. They originated in a number of offices of the Danish colonial administration located on the islands. The majority date from the century before 1917, although there are also significant quantities of records created before that time. The oldest records date from 1672, making them among the oldest in the custody of the National Archives. Many of these records are fragile, brittle, and insect-damaged, the consequences of having lain for many years unprotected in a tropical environment.

The records of RG 55 fill 3,574 boxes and include also 3,007 volumes, some of which are in the boxes. During that era, bound volumes were often a preferred means of recording data systematically and over long periods of time. Nevertheless, there are vast quantities of loose papers in the boxes, of which thousands of pages were laminated by the National Archives.

Most of the records from the Danish era are not only in the Danish language, but are also handwritten in an antiquated Gothic script that only a comparatively small number of people in the world today can read. It is to be hoped that these microfilm publications will bring the valuable contents of these records to a wider audience and lead ultimately to them being transliterated into the Latin alphabet and possibly even translated into English.

The microfilming of these records was, by necessity, a selective process, due to the enormity of the collection. Records were selected for their importance and interest to researchers, organized by subject, and filmed. Ultimately, it is hoped that this approach will preserve the most valuable ½ million pages on over 500 rolls of microfilm.

The records in this publication are grouped into the following subject categories:

General Records	Slave Loans
Censuses	Royal Blacks
Plantations	1848 Slave Revolt
Slave Auctions	Emancipation and Beyond

## **Related Records**

The archival legacy of Danish rule in the West Indies amounts to millions of pages of records. The greatest part of these records lies in the Danish National Archives, Rigsarkivet, in Copenhagen. These records fill approximately 1,500 meters of shelving and include the following major groups: records of central Danish colonial administration, records of the Danish trading companies, and many of the oldest records concerning local administration in the islands. In 2001, the Danish National Archives completed a new, comprehensive guide to these records and published an English translation in 2002.

Among the records of the National Archives of the United States, further documentation about slavery in the Virgin Islands can be found in other records of RG 55, including customs records, property tax records, probate court records, and records of the Royal Debt Commission. Many of those records will be included in the later microfilm publications in this series.

The Danish-language records concerning the Virgin Islands are described in an unpublished National Archives guide entitled, “Records of the Government of the Virgin Islands: Danish West Indies, 1672–1917” (completed in 2001). In the guide, the records are divided into 1,180 entries, which are numbered consecutively, and which provide clear identification of the records. The guide is comprehensive, containing descriptive entries for the records reproduced in this multiseries microfilm project as well as for those records that will not be filmed.

In the Virgin Islands themselves are located some records of pre-1917 local administration and a much larger body of records from the years after 1917, including virtually all of the post-1950 records.

The forthcoming microfilm publications in this project will be based on such topics as important documents of the founding era, genealogical records, records of high-level decision-making, and records of shipping and trade. For information about availability of future microfilm publications in this series, consult the current edition of the National Archives publication *Microfilm Resources for Research: A Comprehensive Catalog*. You can also view the National Archives microfilm locator on our web site at [www.nara.gov](http://www.nara.gov).

## HISTORICAL TIMELINE

### **ca. 300–400 B.C.**

This period marked the probable beginning of human settlement on the Virgin Islands by the first of several Indian tribes.

### **1493**

Christopher Columbus, on his second voyage, became the first European to visit the Virgin Islands.

### **1650s & 1660s**

Danish trading activities in the Virgin Islands began during these years.

### **1665–67**

The Danes first attempted to colonize St. Thomas.

### **1671**

The Danish West India Company was chartered to oversee the colonization and governance of these islands. (In 1674, it absorbed a slave-trading company to become the Danish West India and Guinea Company.)

**1672**

Denmark established a colony on St. Thomas, the beginning of continuous Danish settlement on these islands until 1917. The first African slaves were soon introduced (few Indians remained).

**1718**

Denmark took over the island of St. John and introduced there the plantation system and slavery.

**1733–34**

Denmark purchased the island of St. Croix from France.

**1733–34**

A ferocious slave revolt erupted on St. John, which required the intervention of French troops from Martinique to suppress.

**1754**

The Danish West India and Guinea Company was dissolved, and control of the islands was transferred to the Danish crown.

**1755**

The main seat of government was transferred from St. Thomas to St. Croix. There were two administrative districts: 1) St. Croix; and 2) St. Thomas and St. John together. Each district had an elected burgher council. There was also a General Council, although paramount power was reserved for the King, acting through his ministers and the Governor General.

**1801–02**

Great Britain occupied the Virgin Islands, leaving them after the Treaty of Amiens.

**1803**

Denmark officially abolished the slave trade, becoming the first European slave-trading state to take this step.

**1807–15**

Great Britain occupied the Virgin Islands again. By the Treaty of Paris in 1815, Denmark regained the islands, but at the price of ceding to Great Britain the North Sea island of Helgoland.

**1848**

A slave revolt broke out on St. Croix, which led to the Danish proclamation of emancipation for all of the slaves in the Virgin Islands.

**1852**

A colonial law was promulgated: St. Thomas and St. John were still joined into a single municipality; St. Croix was a separate municipality. A single Colonial Council was created to make laws in cooperation with the King and **Rigsdag** (Danish legislature). Elections were based on an electorate of well-to-do males.

**1853–54**

A cholera epidemic raged in the Virgin Islands, killing hundreds.

**1863**

A new colonial law was promulgated, which lowered the property requirement for males to vote, thus expanding the suffrage. Also, it established basic civil rights for citizens.

**1866–67**

Another cholera epidemic killed hundreds.

**1867**

St. Thomas was devastated by one of the more destructive hurricanes in its history. An earthquake and tidal wave completed the destruction.

**1867**

A Danish-U.S. treaty was signed, by which the U.S. would purchase the islands from Denmark. However, the U.S. Senate refused to ratify it. The islands were an economic liability to Denmark, and many Senators feared that they would be a problematic acquisition.

**1871**

The seat of government was moved from Christiansted on St. Croix to Charlotte Amalie on St. Thomas.

**1878**

The popular uprising on St. Croix known as “The Fireburn” led to widespread destruction on the sugar cane plantations and a deadly blow to a system already in steep decline, owing in part to competition from sugar beets.

**1902**

A second Danish-U.S. treaty was signed to sell the islands to the United States. This time, the treaty was ratified by the U.S. Senate but rejected by the Danish legislature.

**1906**

Another colonial law was promulgated that lowered the property qualifications for males to vote and introduced the secret ballot.

**4 August 1916**

A Danish-U.S. treaty was signed to sell the islands to the United States for \$25 million. It was ratified by both sides.

**31 March 1917**

This date marked the formal transfer of sovereignty of the Virgin Islands from Denmark to the United States. A Governor was appointed by the President to supervise the islands, although the U.S. Navy was the actual governing force.

**1921**

In this year, the last of numerous shipments of Virgin Island records were sent to the Danish National Archives (**Rigsarkivet**) in Copenhagen.

**1927**

The Virgin Islanders were granted U.S. citizenship.

**1931**

The Department of Interior took over the administration of the islands from the U.S. Navy, hoping thereby to stimulate economic development.

**1936**

The Organic Act was passed by the U.S. Congress, establishing basic democratic reforms: adult suffrage; and a Legislative Assembly of the Virgin Islands to initiate and pass legislation.

**1936–37**

Dr. Harold Larson, an archivist from the U.S. National Archives who read Danish, studied the records in the Virgin Islands and initiated their transfer to Washington, DC.

**1954**

The Revised Organic Act was passed by the U.S. Congress, promulgating several reforms and abolishing the 1936 requirement that voters must be able to read English.

**1954–59**

Several more transfers of Virgin Islands records were made to the U.S. National Archives. (The first guides to the records were completed in 1960 and 1961.)

**1968**

The Elective Governor Act was passed by the U.S. Congress, by which the Virgin Islanders were enabled to elect their Governor, who previously had been appointed.

**1973**

The U.S. Virgin Islands obtained a nonvoting member of the U.S. House of Representatives.

**1998**

The Virgin Islands celebrated 150 years since slave emancipation. (The large majority of Virgin Islanders are descended from slaves.)

**1999**

Denmark and the U.S. Virgin Islands signed an agreement to cooperate in making records of the Virgin Islands accessible.



**2000**

The (U.S.) National Archives and Records Administration joined the Danish-Virgin Islands enterprise, and a Tri-Lateral Archival Commission was established.

**2001**

Inventories of Virgin Islands records in their respective repositories were completed by the Danish **Rigsarkivet** and the U.S. National Archives.

**2002**

The **Rigsarkivet** prepared an English-language version of its inventory; and the U.S. National Archives began the microfilming of selected Virgin Islands records.

**BIBLIOGRAPHICAL NOTE:** The above introductory notes and timeline are based on the following two sources: “A Question of Custody: The Colonial Archives of the United States Virgin Islands,” by Jeannette Allis Bastian, in *The American Archivist* (Volume 64, Spring/Summer 2001), pp. 96–114; and *A History of the Virgin Islands of the United States*, by Isaac Dookhan (Kingston: Canoe Press, 1994). An extensive and up-to-date bibliography of works relating to the Virgin Islands is to be found in the English-language guide of the Danish Rigsarkivet mentioned above.

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\* The series or entries in this Table of Contents are described in the unpublished National Archives guide “Records of the Government of the Virgin Islands: Danish West Indies, 1672–1917.” The corresponding entry and box numbers from the guide are provided here for accurate and full identification of the records.

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