

*Elmina Castle (detail). Gerard van Keulen after Johannes Vingboons (c.1640), watercolour, 1706 (Nationaal Archief, The Hague, collection maps).*



## 'By the ship Diamond, via the West Indies': The captured archive of the Dutch slave forts rediscovered in The National Archives

Erik van der Doe, archivist at the Dutch preservation programme Metamorfoze, unravels how the long-lost records from West Africa ended up in the Prize Papers and highlights their importance.

In 1803 ten years of records of the Dutch slave forts in West Africa were put aboard ship for the Netherlands. The archive never arrived at its destination, the Council of the American Colonies and Territories – a successor of the Dutch West India Company<sup>1</sup> – in The Hague. It turns out that the archive was captured by the British and finally ended up at The National Archives (TNA) in London. Recently it was rediscovered and its conservation and digitisation funded by Metamorfoze. In the Netherlands the news of this rediscovery was covered by the Dutch National Geographic.<sup>2</sup>

Metamorfoze is the national programme for the preservation of the paper heritage of the Netherlands. It is part of the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science and is located at the Royal Library/National Library of the Netherlands<sup>3</sup> in The Hague. Metamorfoze issues subsidies to heritage institutions to carry out projects. Starting by preserving the archives and collections identified as ultimately the most important to the Netherlands, through a thematic approach a coherent conserved and digitised collection will be brought into being. This aim prompted a pilot project to select archives and collections related by their content. The theme Slavery and the Slave Trade selected for that purpose was chosen due to current events and widespread interest amongst the general public. From the sixteenth century to the early part of the nineteenth, a total of around 12 million Africans were transported across the Atlantic as slaves to be put to work on plantations in the Americas. The most important slave traders came from, in order, Portugal, Great

Britain/England (before 1707), Spain and France. In fifth place were the Dutch, with around 600,000 slaves. In 2013, it was 150 years since the Netherlands abolished slavery in Surinam and the Dutch Antilles, and in 2014 it was 200 years since the trans-Atlantic slave trade was banned.

At the start a total of ten archives and collections were identified in project proposals for conservation and digitisation. These were approved by the Metamorfoze Advisory Board in 2013 and 2014. Amongst these, together with the rediscovered archive of the slave forts from Elmina, the archives of the Dutch West India Company (WIC) and the slave trading business Middelburg Commerce Company<sup>4</sup> (MCC) were put on the UNESCO list *Memory of the World* in 2011. The first ten Metamorfoze projects included Dutch records from the Guianas. Although already in the Netherlands, these were handed over at the request of the British in 1818–1819 and are now preserved in the Colonial Office archive at TNA (series CO 116).<sup>5</sup>



HCA 30/770: Pay books of personnel. (Photo by author.)

In 2015 the archive of the colonies Essequibo, Demerara and Berbice, still in Georgetown at the National Archive of Guyana – and known as the ‘Dutch Papers’ – joined as the eleventh and last project of the theme. Around 25 metres of records from the Dutch period were left behind after the British takeover. In 2016 this was moved to the Netherlands to be conserved and digitised, for return afterwards to Georgetown. The Dutch National Archives<sup>6</sup> at The Hague will make the scans of the eleven archives available in due course through APEx, the European archive portal.<sup>7</sup>

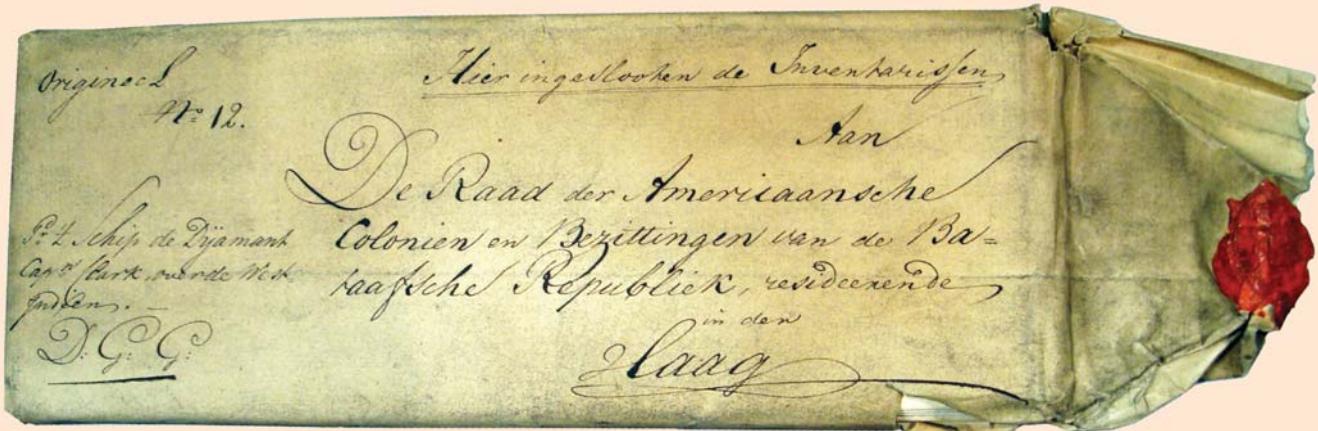
How did ten years of records from Dutch slave forts end up in London? During the Anglo-Dutch Wars of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries ships were captured on an everyday basis and their cargoes seized. Mail and ship’s papers carried aboard the captured ships were kept for centuries, first in the Tower of London, now at TNA at Kew. In the archive of the High Court of Admiralty (HCA), the British court that decided if a capture was legal ‘prize’, there are about 4000 boxes with captured papers. Of these, about 1000 have Dutch material. These HCA sections known as the Prize Papers contain business mail and private letters to and from home, cargo documents, personal papers and colonial administrative papers sent to the Netherlands. Other

official material ranges from Dutch East India Company (VOC), musters and logbooks of navy warships to WIC correspondence.

In the Prize Papers much can also be found on slavery and the slave trade: letters of slave dealers and plantation owners with details of the everyday practice of the trade in and sale of slaves, inventories of plantations, papers of captured MCC ships, and even a unique ship’s log of a private slave trader from Vlissingen in Zeeland, the Netherlands. The archive of the Dutch slave forts in West Africa likewise ended up in TNA. The rediscovered fort administration has been protected by Metamorfoze as one of the Slavery and the Slave Trade theme projects. Meanwhile it is becoming clearer how it came to be in the Prize Papers at all.

In the headquarters of the Dutch slave forts, at Elmina (then in the Gold Coast, now Ghana, and only a few miles west of Cape Coast, the British headquarters), the plan was to send ten years’ worth of records (since 1793) home aboard the brig *Jacobina*, which would arrive at the end of 1802. *Jacobina* was an Amsterdam slaver under captain Matthijs Frederiks. According to his instructions of 13 July 1802, issued by the Council of the American Colonies and Territories at The Hague, the ship lay ready in the road at Texel to sail to West Africa to load slaves, gold and ivory. *Jacobina* arrived at Elmina on 26 November laden with all sorts of merchandise – from cloth and napkins, beer- and wine glasses to potatoes and barley, chickens and pigs. Also on board were six new commissioners for various forts, a bundle of post from the government and some private letters.

But in the end the governing council in Elmina decided not to send the archive aboard *Jacobina*. According to governor-general Bartels there was a better method. Cornelius Ludewich Bartels was from 1798 to his death in 1804 the most senior official at Elmina, at first with the title director-general, then from 1801 governor-general. He was a German soldier from Brunswick (Braunschweig), who had entered service with the Dutch West India Company. Bartels wrote to the American Council on 29 December 1802 that the ship *Onderneming* ('Enterprise') under Captain Steiding had still not arrived, but that the ship had been spoken with



HCA 32/996: Bartels’ letter to the American Council with the inventories of the archive. The envelope is endorsed with the note that the letter is being sent ‘By the ship Diamond, Captain Clark, via the West Indies’. (Translation from the original Dutch.) (Photo by author.)



HCA 30/761: Packets of monthly statements of supplies, receipts and expenditure. (Photo by author.)

in the latitude of Cape Palmas (now in Liberia near the border with Ivory Coast) and they hoped to be able to welcome the ship soon in Elmina. Next, he mentioned that they had 'judged it expedient to send no papers or chest aboard *Jacobina*, on the one hand because we would fain report to your Honours the whole issue of these two ships and cargoes, and on the other hand because we have in mind a much speedier and more secure opportunity'.<sup>8</sup> His better way would prove a failure – the letter did not reach The Hague, it was captured in transit. On 30 December, after bad weather on the voyage, *Onderneming* finally arrived safely, with duplicates of the letters and documents brought from the Netherlands aboard *Jacobina*.

On 27 March 1802, the Peace of Amiens came into force between Great Britain and France. For the Netherlands, under French domination, the war was also over. For the first time in years there was no danger of encountering hostile ships at sea. On 31 December *Jacobina* sailed from Elmina for Surinam with 313 slaves. A number of sick were also aboard. Johannes Jacobus Rijvers had complained to Bartels that he suffered from 'a weakness'. Rijvers was the second commissioner at Fort Komenda and had only just arrived in West Africa (aboard *Jacobina*) and with barely any resistance to his new environment. In the climate he could not recover and would deteriorate further, according to the surgeon. Because the disease (chronic gonorrhea) would soon lead to his death, he was allowed to leave again aboard *Jacobina*, shortly to depart, but he would have to pay his own expenses whilst aboard.

One year after the Peace of Amiens,

in May 1803, the British were again at war with France and therefore also again with the Netherlands. On 27 July 1803, during the voyage home from Paramaribo, Surinam, *Jacobina* was taken by the Guernsey privateer *Friends Goodwill*, Captain John David, which, in its turn, was subsequently captured by the French *L'Aventure* ('Adventure'), Captain Carreaux. The same day these ships were captured by HMS *Rosario* (Captain William Mounsey). And so *Jacobina* fell once more into British hands and was brought into Cork.<sup>9</sup>

The archive finally went away aboard *Diamond*, a British slaver under Captain James Clarke. *Diamond's* owners were William and Thomas Parry, traders from London. Clarke had already made several voyages to West Africa for the Parry brothers. He was well-known at Elmina. A year earlier, when the Dutch and British were still at war, governor Bartels had sent his own son with Clarke aboard *Diamond* to Holland for 'a proper education', as he wrote in his diary at Elmina.<sup>10</sup> And besides, people at Elmina reasoned that, as it was now peacetime, their former enemy was now a friend. As well as slaves, *Diamond* was laden with ivory and palm oil for Cuba. But first mail and the archive had to be delivered at Demerara to Governor-General Anthony Meertens. On the envelopes was noted 'By the ship *Diamond*, captain Clark, via the West Indies', and if the item inside was an original or duplicate.

On 12 February 1803, the archive was stowed aboard *Diamond*. In the second chest also went 75 government and private letters. There were also a number of duplicates of letters that had gone earlier with *Jacobina*, as well as some originals of



HCA 30/756: Minute books of out-letters, Elmina. (Photo by author.)

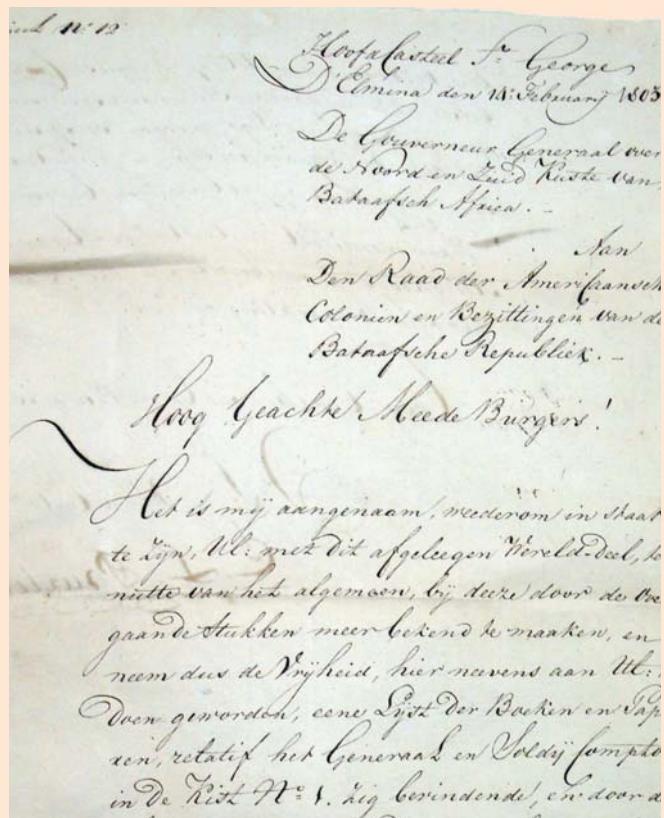
which the duplicates also went with *Diamond*. This was not unusual because it maximised the chance that reports would arrive.

On 14 February 1803 Bartels made a report to the American Council, the letter going along with the archive. He wrote:

'It is my pleasure once more to be able, by means of these transferred papers, the more to acquaint your Honours, for the public interest, with this remote part of the world, and consequently in addition I take the liberty to have made your Honours a list of the books and papers relating to the general and pay office to be found in chest no. 1, and presented to me by the administrator and director-general, besides another of everything to be found in chest no. 2 for the government and private persons for expedition to the respective addresses. I heartily desire that these documents go by the ship *Diamond*, sailed by captain Clarke, via Demerara at the address of governor-general A. Meertens, for the further delivery to your Honours in the most convenient way and by the speediest means of conveyance'.<sup>11</sup>

In 1802-1803 Anthony Meertens was governor-general of Demerara. At that time, following the Peace of Amiens, the colony was once more Dutch – after years of British rule. He would have taken receipt of the archive in the spring of 1803 and subsequently shipped it to the Netherlands in a vessel that remains unknown today.

Just like *Jacobina*, *Diamond* also fell into the hands of predators on the voyage home. On 7 July, the ship left Havana with sugar and dyewood. *Diamond* was first taken by French privateers and afterwards recaptured by the British. From the case files and examination of the master's mate Thomas Finley, details of *Diamond*'s last voyage become clear. On 11 August 1803, at two o'clock in the afternoon, the ship was taken by the French privateer *Bellona*. As with *Jacobina* before, the peace was over. In the late morning of 13 August *Diamond* was



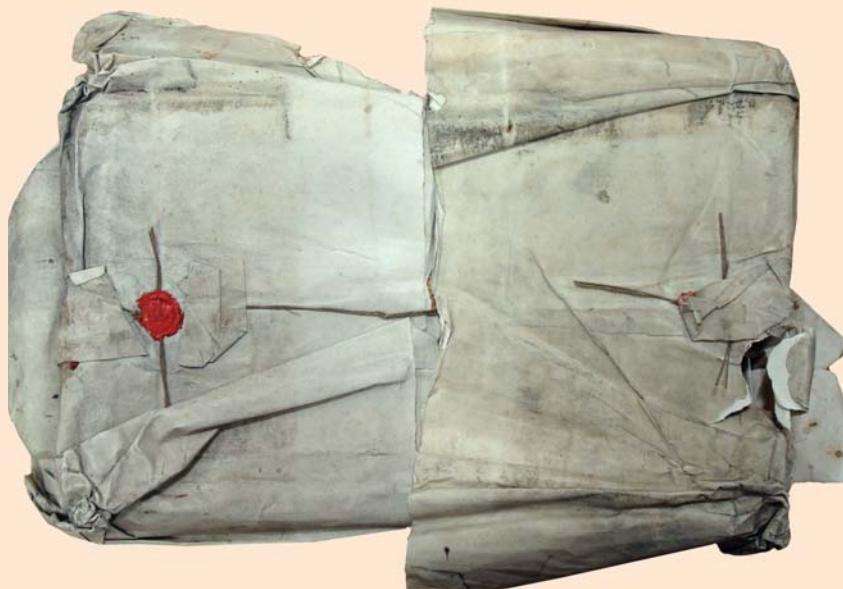
HCA 32/996: Bartels' letter to the American Council, 14 February 1803, with the inventories of archive (see quote opposite).  
(Photo by author.)

retaken by HMS *Goliath* (Captain Charles Brisbane) and brought into the Downs, the major anchorage on the east coast of Kent.<sup>12</sup>

In short, the archive and mail from Elmina on board *Jacobina* and *Diamond* – and even aboard another, still unidentified Dutch ship – now lies in The National Archives at Kew. Even the paper parcel wrappers have been kept. So far just a corner of the veil has been lifted

to glimpse how it came to be there. This might only be completed when the Metamorfoze project of the Huygens Institute of Netherlands History (Huygens ING), approved in 2015, conserves and digitises another hundred boxes of Prize Papers. At any rate, the archive has been saved. For now, the progress of the last leg of the voyage from Demerara to the Netherlands still lacks clarity. It is certain that the unidentified ship was captured by the British. It does not matter whether the archive was actually with *Jacobina* or with *Diamond* for the whole of the voyage to the Netherlands.

The archive covers an interesting period, the last phase of the Dutch slave trade. The number of Dutch slave traders (always primarily from Zeeland and Amsterdam) was in continual decline. Slaves were brought less and less from



HCA 30/769: Original parcel wrapper. (Photo by author.)



HCA 32/997: Correspondence registers of the outlying forts, government and private letters. (Photo by author.)

Angola and proportionally more were bought in Elmina. This was indeed quicker but not so profitable. In their forts, the Dutch began to sell more slaves to foreigners, including the British.

Illustrative of the changing circumstances is the letter to the slave trader Caspar Toll aboard the ship *Planters Wensch* ('Planters' Desire'), written by the Amsterdam firm Couderc, Brants & Changuion on 16 September 1802.<sup>13</sup> Although they suspected that Toll was no longer at Elmina and had already begun his passage across the Atlantic, they still sent him another letter, addressed in English for more certainty: 'upon the Coast of Africa, at or in the neighbourhood of d'Elmina'. They still asked him to go to Surinam to see if the market there was very profitable. They pressed him as a matter of urgency to sail to Demerara as quickly as possible so he would arrive before the British slavers. The latter had recently been permitted to sell slaves in the Guianas, just as had been allowed in Surinam from 1789. A tax had to be paid of 20 guilders per man, 15 per woman and 10 per child. The firm hoped that Toll would still be just in time, before the British could make use of their new privilege. The letter was too late – Toll had already left Elmina with 396 slaves aboard. And on the voyage home Toll and *Planters Wensch* were captured by the British and brought into Plymouth. The British seized the letter to Toll; it is now at TNA along with the Elmina archive.<sup>14</sup>

Initially ten boxes were found, and subsequently another three.<sup>15</sup> The first ten boxes (in series HCA 30) were already conserved and digitised in one of the projects of the Dutch National Archives in the Metamorfoze theme Slavery and the Slave Trade. The

scans of these boxes will be available online shortly. The three boxes found recently (in series HCA 32) are part of the new Metamorfoze project of the Huygens ING.<sup>16</sup> These last three boxes contain amongst much else the registers with 'general' correspondence and those of the outlying offices (Accra, Komenda, Shama, Accoda, Apam, Butre, Senya Beraku, Kormantin, Takoradi, Hollandia, Moree and Sekondi), as well as the 75 government and private letters that were in chest no. 2.

The first ten boxes relate primarily to the financial administration of Fort Elmina and the outlying offices. They give details of the day-to-day business of the forts in the latter years of the Dutch slave trade, when it had already become more of a British and French affair. It also shows the increasingly international character of trade and shipping in the course of the eighteenth century.

The records include overviews of revenue and expenditure, such as muster rolls and pay books of personnel and soldiers, as well as all slaves resident at the forts (with their names, birthplace, age and physical condition: 'old and decrepit', 'blind in one eye', 'lame arm', 'occasional fits', 'bunions under the foot'). There are lists of stocks of merchandise and provisions and of expenditure for goods and services (for example, for rowing out to ships lying off the coast). Also recorded are diverse summaries and inventories, from heavy guns and ammunition to required medicines and instruments, from lists of books and papers to the expenses for meals at New Year and on the birthday of the Crown Prince of Orange.

Also found are 20 packets of inventories of the sale of unclaimed or insolvent estates of persons who died at the West-African forts without leaving a will. These are very detailed with summaries of books, paintings, household goods, clothes and personal slaves. For the less wealthy the lists are short – such as one deceased rifleman who possessed only a pair of shoes, a leather cap, sewing kit, comb, and a knife and fork. The estate inventories illustrate the daily lives of the forts' inhabitants. In 1793 the surgeon at Elmina was Gottlieb Kuhn, a German. When he died he left his bed and other possessions to his female slave, Abba.

If the archive had arrived in the Netherlands and been kept, it would now be in the Dutch National Archives and found under the archives of the successors of the Dutch West India Company. When in 1791 this was dissolved, the territories were transferred to the States-General (the Dutch federal government) and the Colonial Council<sup>17</sup> set up to handle administrative affairs. In 1795 this was combined with the governing sections of the colonies Surinam and Berbice as the Committee for Colonies and Territories on the Guinea



Johannes Blaeu, *Atlas Maior*. (Nationaal Archief, collection atlases.)

#### Notes

1. More properly, in Dutch, respectively: Raad der Americaansche Coloniën en Bezittingen; West-Indische Compagnie.
2. *National Geographic Historia*, 2017, no. 1, p. 7.
3. Respectively: Ministerie van Onderwijs, Cultuur en Wetenschap (OCW); Koninklijke Bibliotheek (KB).
4. Middelburgse Commercie Compagnie.
5. See the Dutch archival periodical *Archievenblad*, year 118, no. 7 (September 2014), pp. 16-20.
6. Nationaal Archief.
7. Archives Portal Europe network of excellence, now Archives Portal Europe Foundation.
8. TNA, HCA 32/996. Translation from the original Dutch.
9. TNA, HCA 32/1506 (no. 3082).
10. TNA, HCA 32/997.
11. TNA, HCA 32/996. Translation from the original Dutch.
12. TNA, HCA 32/1391 (no. 1169).
13. TNA, HCA 32/996.
14. For the fortunes of the ships mentioned here, see also the newspaper section of the website Delpher (maintained by the Dutch Royal Library, the Netherlands) and the database slavevoyages.org.
15. The piece numbers are as follows. In series HCA 30: nos. 756, 761, 767, 769, 770 and 771. In series HCA 32: nos. 996 and 997. NB: a piece number sometimes comprises more than one box (multiple parts). With thanks to Amanda Bevan and Randolph Cock of TNA for identifying the last three boxes.
16. Huygens Instituut voor Nederlandse Geschiedenis, Amsterdam.
17. More properly, in Dutch, respectively: Staten-Generaal; Raad der Koloniën.
18. Comité tot de Zaken van de Koloniën en Bezittingen op de Kust van Guinea en in America; West-Indisch Comité.
19. Raad der Americaansche Coloniën en Bezittingen van de Bataafse Republiek.
20. Parts of this story were presented at the Prize Papers Conference 'All At Sea' at TNA on 8 October 2014. This article is a slightly modified version of that published in the Dutch journal for archives *Archievenblad*, year 120, no. 7 (September 2016), pp. 16-20.

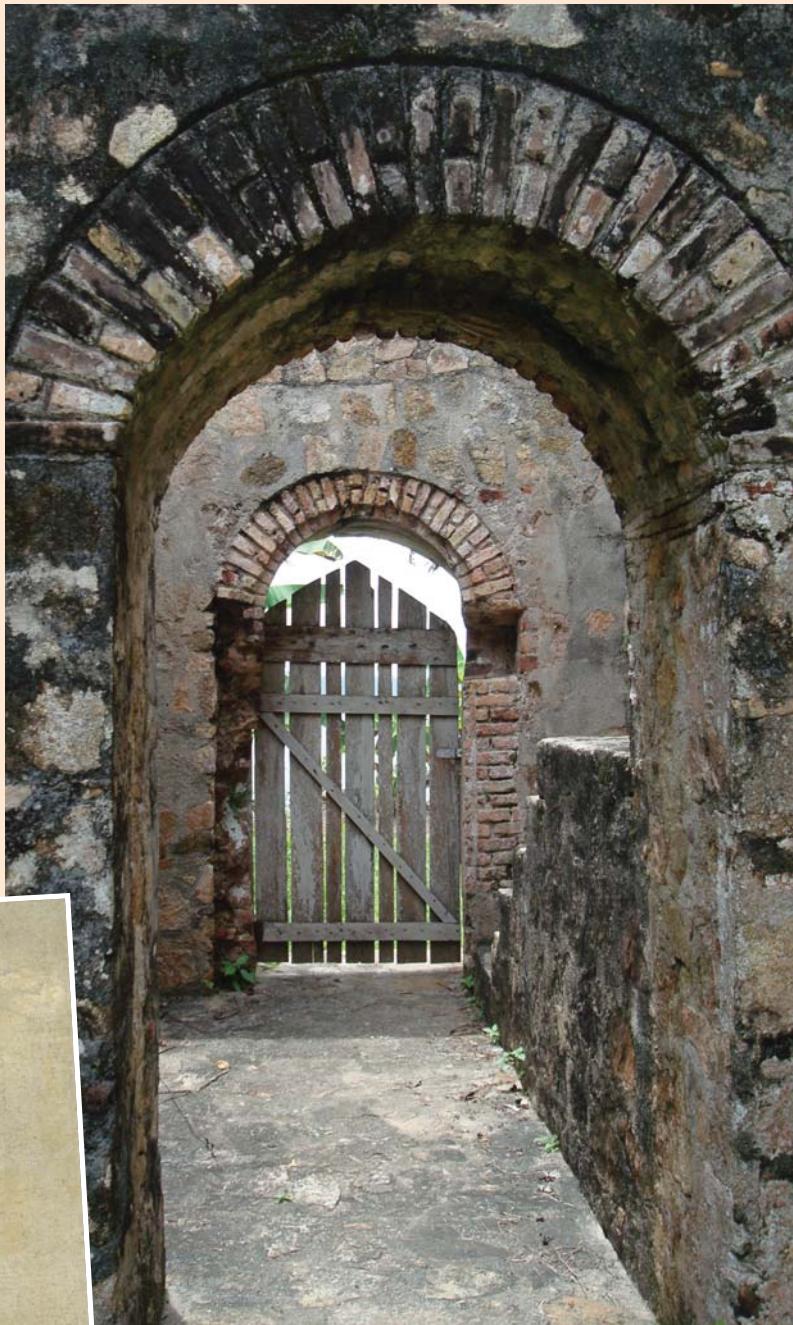
Coast and in America (known as the West India Committee for short).<sup>18</sup> The board sat in The Hague and comprised 21 members.

At the end of 1800 the West India Committee was discontinued and replaced by the Council of American Colonies and Territories of the Batavian Republic,<sup>19</sup> which had to put an end to the administrative disorder. The organisation became smaller and had to be more efficient. The American Council took general charge of the colonies and took care of the preservation and welfare of the colonies in the West Indies and on the Guinea coast, supervising agriculture in, and trade and shipping with the colonies. The five-member board sat in The Hague.

The archives of both the West India Committee and the American Council at the Dutch National Archives are very fragmentary. With the rediscovery of the Elmina archive, a large and unbroken section of great importance can now be added in digital form, due to the work of Metamorfoze. And, in a quirk of fate, this is also thanks to British warfare against seaborne trade and a British judicial system.<sup>20</sup>



Slaver ships of the MCC, Engel Hoogerheyden, oil on canvas, 1767-1780 (detail) (Zeeuws Archief, Middelburg, Collection City Hall).



*The 'door of no return', Fort Gross Friedrichsburg (Fort Hollandia), Princes Town, Ghana. (Photo by author.)*

***This door was the exit African slaves took before their embarkation aboard slaver ships for the ocean voyage. This, and similarly named doors in other slave forts, are today particular symbols of slavery and the slave trade.***

**Author's Note:**

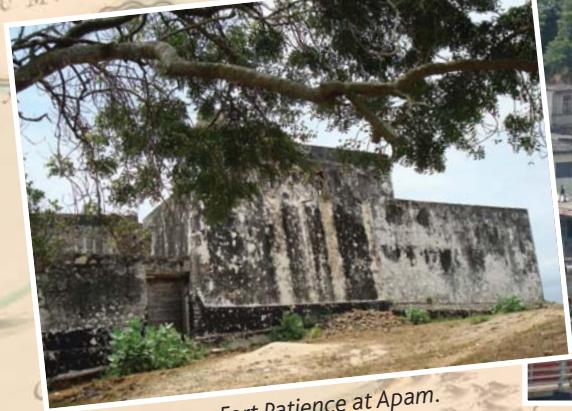
My sincere thanks to Andrew R. Little for his expert translation.

**Editor's Note:**

My sincere thanks to Andrew R. Little for all his help in the production of this article.

# The slave forts today

Photographs taken by  
Erik van der Doe.



Governor's house at Elmina.

Governor's house at Elmina Castle.  
Extreme right: Fort Nassau at Moree.



Fort Metal Cross at Dixcove.



Fort Good Hope at Senya Beraku.