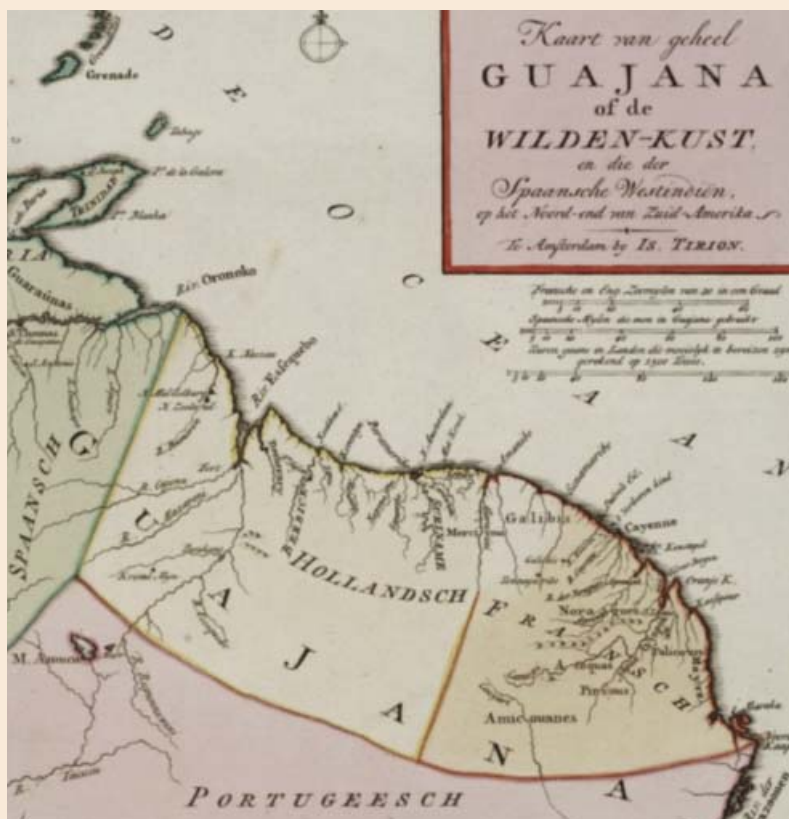


## Sent Later and Recorded: The history of slavery and plantations in the Dutch West Indies hidden in the Colonial Office archive

Erik van der Doe, archivist with the Dutch heritage programme *Metamorfoze*, describes hidden history of the Dutch West Indies from the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century in the Colonial Office archive and how it ended up there.



Map of the 'Wild Coast' with the Dutch colonies Essequibo, Demerara and Berbice, now in Guyana, from: Thomas Salmon, *Hedendaagsche Historie of Tegenwoordige Staat van Amerika* (vol. 2, Amsterdam, 1767).

Through funding by *Metamorfoze*, since 2013 almost two million scans have been made of archival documents on the theme Slavery and the Slave Trade. The theme was inspired by current events and widespread public interest. In 2013, 150 years had passed since the Netherlands ended slavery in Surinam and the Dutch Antilles, and 2014 marked 200 years since the abolition of the Dutch trans-Atlantic slave trade. It is evident that much Dutch West Indies slavery and colonial history was hidden until now in The National Archives; this makes a fine complement to the archives and collections extant in the Netherlands. A part of the TNA material is now even UNESCO World Heritage.

*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 in The Hague. The programme issues subsidies for the conservation and digitisation of archives and collections of (inter)national importance.

### Left Behind and Captured

Meanwhile 11 projects within the theme Slavery and the Slave Trade have been completed and a twelfth, final project, is ongoing. The earlier projects include the archives of the Dutch West India Company (WIC, in the Dutch National Archives at The Hague) and the slave trading business Middelburg Commerce Company (MCC, in the Zeeland Archives at Middelburg); in 2011, both were placed on the UNESCO list *Memory of the World*. Other archives of great historical significance are those of the colonial authorities Society of Berbice, Society of Surinam, and that of the board of Dutch Possessions on the Coast of Guinea (West Africa). Even the archive left behind in Guyana (also UNESCO World Heritage) was

shipped to the Netherlands to be conserved and digitised and has now been returned to Georgetown. This archive, severely affected by tropical circumstances (ink corrosion, termites) contains more than 20 metres of the government and judicial archive of the old Dutch colonies Essequibo, Demerara and Berbice from the period 1735-1819.



HCA 32/996, no. 11: Letter of J. Spruijt at Elmina to G. J. Ceijman in The Hague, with a sample of glass beads, 1803. (Photo by author.)

Within the Prize Papers (part of the High Court Admiralty archive) in London, it is especially the rediscovered archives from Elmina in West Africa that speak to the imagination. In 1803, ten years of the archive of the Dutch slave forts in West Africa was shipped to the Netherlands with the friendly English captain of the London slaver ship *Diamond*. However the archive never arrived in The Hague. The ship was captured by the French privateer *Bellona*, recaptured by HMS *Goliath* and everything ended up finally in The National Archives (TNA) instead of in the Dutch National Archives.<sup>1</sup>

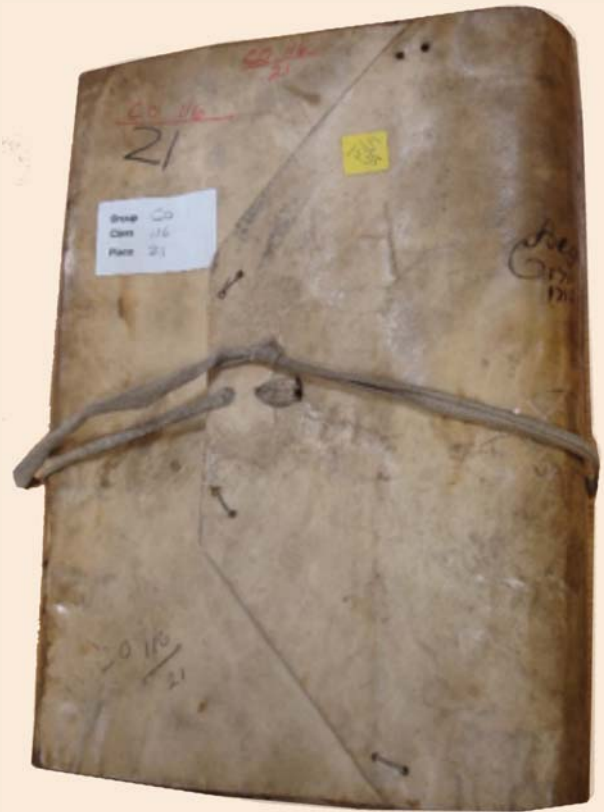
Recently it turned out that sent away with this archive was a package of letters which contained glass beads and gold rings. Dutch glass beads played an important role in the slave trade. Gold dust from the Gold Coast (now Ghana) was the product much sought after in return. But above all the glass beads are exceptional not only because they are beautiful and undamaged, but because the letters give information about the bead traders in the Netherlands.<sup>2</sup>

### Sent Later and Recorded

But there is more unexpected and unknown material coming to the surface. There is also Dutch history of slavery and plantation economy lying hidden in the Colonial Office archive (CO) at TNA.<sup>3</sup> (The Dutch provinces of Holland and Zeeland were mostly concerned in this history.) During the end of the eighteenth century and beginning of the nineteenth, the old colonies in the West Indies went back and forth between Dutch and British rule. Saint Eustatius was British in 1781, 1801-1802 and 1810-1816. Essequibo, Demerara and Berbice



CO 116: Three of the original parchment-bound volumes of the Zeeland regional department of the Dutch West India Company. (Photo by author.)



CO 116: One of the Zeeland parchment-bound volumes, with closing flap and leather tie. (Photo by author.)

were British from 1796 to 1802; in 1803 they were recaptured and in 1814 formally handed over by the new Kingdom of the Netherlands to Great Britain. Surinam was British in 1799-1802 and again in 1804-1816.

### Essequibo, Demerara, Berbice, 1681-1795

There is a substantial amount of Dutch archival material on the so-called Wild Coast in what is now Guyana (a former British colony independent since 1966). And this, just as the captured fort administration, by its very nature belongs in the Dutch National Archives in The Hague. In the 1960s it was all described by archivist M.A.P. Meilink-Roelofz of The Hague.<sup>4</sup> In the wake of the designation of the WIC archive as UNESCO World Heritage, this part of the Colonial Office archive was also placed in the *Memory of the World* register. It concerns two components. The first is a series, beautifully bound in parchment with a closing flap, of letters from Essequibo and Demerara to the Zeeland regional department of the WIC, covering 1686-1792 (50 volumes, CO 116/18-67). Zeeland had primary responsibility for these territories.

The second, a part of the Society of Berbice archive from the period 1681-1795 (69 volumes, CO 116/68-136), consists of a series of administration, minutes and petitions, proclamations and announcements, land grants and mortgages, financial administration, decisions of the Court of Justice and notarial archive. Striking is an atlas of Berbice (of which, also, there is no copy in the Netherlands) by the surveyor C.F.T. Cederkreutz, who

surveyed the whole country once again after D.W.C. Hattinga from 1766 (CO 116/77). This contains around 100 hand-drawn maps in colour. He did not work purely 'business-like' but also artistically with all kinds of beautifying details such as a swan on the Lutheran church and trompe l'oeils (visual illusions) in the curling borders to a map. Sometimes his captions are actually in rhyme.

Berbice has also become known for the slave revolt of February 1763. The colony then had about 350 whites (men, women and children) and 4000-5000 African slaves. Almost all the whites had to flee from their plantations. About 40 of them were killed. Estates were laid waste, houses burned and sugar mills wrecked. In the violent reconquest of the colony, which lasted no less than ten months (and the aftermath another year longer) more than 1800 slaves perished. The hundreds of pages of examinations of the rebels taken prisoner and a diary kept by a Rotterdam regimental officer show the atrocities committed in the settlement of the revolt.<sup>5</sup> The Berbice slave revolt was the first organised attempt by a large group of slaves to win their freedom in the whole American continent. Marronage – the flight from slavery, from the plantation to the jungle – remained a great problem for the colonisers, not only through the loss of labour but also because of the great social impact.<sup>6</sup> After independence 23 February, the day the revolt started, was proclaimed a national day in Guyana.

After Great Britain had taken over the rule of the Dutch colonies in 1814, the British asked for the transfer of archives compiled earlier in the territories, seeing 'the necessity of having frequent and immediate references to the records of these settlements'. It is primarily the reluctance and foot-dragging of the Zeelanders in the office of the former WIC at Middelburg which ensured that only a part of the WIC archive went to London, and that only after the intervention – not once but twice – of the Minister of Foreign Affairs. As a gesture of goodwill another two beautiful maps could be sent along (these were considered of no importance because much better ones were available). King William I ordered the official transfer of the archives by Royal Decree in 1818.<sup>7</sup>

A subsequent request for the Berbice archives could not be ignored by the Society administration in Amsterdam. There was no more talk of time-wasting. The letter of 16 March 1819 from Robert Melvil, the British consul at Amsterdam to Earl Bathurst, Colonial Secretary in



CO 116: Two of the original volumes, bound in red leather, of the Society of Berbice. (Photo by author.)

London, mentioned:

I have the honor to transmit to your Lordship here inclosed Bill of Lading of two cases marked B shipped by me, on board of the Dutch ship de Jonge Hendrik, Klaas de Wilde master, bound for London, and directed to your Lordship. These cases contain Books and Papers regarding the Colony Berbice delivered to me by the Dutch Government agreeable to the inclosed List, and are sent by order of G.W. Chad esq., His Majesty's Minister Plenipotentiary at Brussels.

One of the schedules accompanying the letter detailed the archives.<sup>8</sup>

In an earlier Metamorfoze project (2014) within the theme Slavery and the Slave Trade, this portion of CO 116 has already

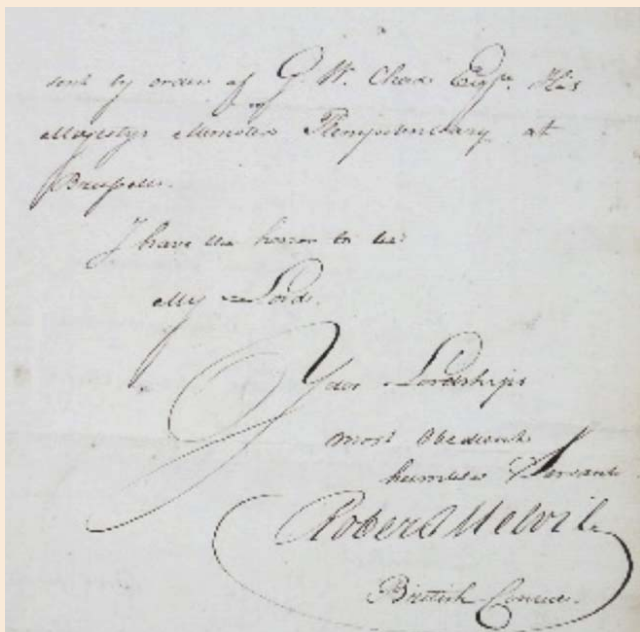
been digitised and is available online. But there is more in the Colonial Office, recently surveyed for the closing project of the theme. Many items exemplify the image that can be painted of the range and structure of colonial society.

### Essequibo, Demerara, 1781-1802

There is archival material that remained in Guyana after the Dutch left, supplemented with new administration on how to manage the colony just acquired. The British tried to find out who everyone was that lived there. There are four leather-bound volumes of correspondence and other documents primarily concerning Essequibo and Demerara (CO 111/1-4). Happily, the British bound these separately, everything is numbered with a serial numbering machine and the front cover complete with the crown stamp and underneath the letters 'C D'



CO 116/77: Atlas of Berbice, surveyed from 1766 by the surveyor C. T. F. Cederkreutz. (Photo by author.)



CO 116/67: Letter of Robert Melvil, British Consul in the Netherlands, to Earl Bathurst, Colonial Secretary, 1819, about the shipping of two chests of archives from Berbice. (Photo by author.)

(‘Colonial Department’). These volumes contain letters and other documents (in Dutch and English), such as lists of seized goods, value of goods, ammunition stocks, transfers of ownership, and detailed inventories including numbers of slaves with their names. There are overviews of the numbers of ships bound for the Netherlands, North America, Britain, and the revenues from rum, sugar and molasses. Illustrating these details are those on demographics: the number of slaves in 1798, for instance, was 14,567 at Essequibo and 37,431 at Demerara.

### Berbice, 1799-1814

Furthermore, there is a series of nine leather-bound volumes with correspondence and other documents relating to Berbice (CO 111/73-81). Amongst others, these contain lists with numbers of slaves, their names, physical condition, the work to which they were put and their performance. There are overviews of the plantations’ revenues (rum, sugar and molasses); inventories of the estates; minutes of the Court of Justice; printed notices, proclamations and ordinances. There is also a beautiful detailed map by Samuel John Neele of the Berbice River, with the border of Demerara and coast of Surinam, giving the names of the plantations and the estate-owners.<sup>9</sup> For comparison, in 1798 there were 14,792 slaves in Berbice.



CO 111: Bound correspondence from Essequibo and Demerara. (Photo by author.)

### Saint Eustatius, 1781

There is also data on the population of Saint Eustatius (CO 318/7-8). Within this is a register of inhabitants of the island after its capture by Rear-Admiral George Bridges Rodney and Major-General John Vaughan on 3 February 1781. The existence of the privateer- and buccaneer nest Saint Eustatius – it was not named ‘the Golden Rock’ for nothing – did not sit well with the British. From here many of the rebels in North America were supplied. After two days the capitulation to the large British force was a fact.

Equally, for a moment the island played a role on the world stage. When the American warship *Andrew Doria* arrived at Saint Eustatius for weapons and munitions on 16 November 1776, the Dutch governor Johannes de Graaff authorised Fort Oranje (Orange) to answer the ship’s saluting shots. In a codified form of respect offered by the initiator, blank charges were fired in a ritual exchange, customarily acknowledged in like fashion by the recipient. For the rebels, this was seen as formal recognition of the American flag (‘the First Salute’), for the British it was blatant betrayal by an ally. De Graaff had to go to The Hague to explain what had happened. Inadequate apologies and vague diplomatic statements of support from The Hague, together with the ongoing smuggling led to the British declaration of war on 20 December 1780 and the subsequent capture of Saint Eustatius.<sup>10</sup> This time De Graaff was taken as a prisoner of war to London to account for everything that had occurred. In May 1781, the Dutch Republic declared war on Great Britain. The Republic was the second European power, after France, to recognise the independence of the United States of America.

After the seizure of the island the population was registered. The British were eager to know exactly who everyone was that now lived on Saint Eustatius. Another reason was that Rodney had promised his crews a part of the booty. The registration is all the more interesting because in 1781 the British destroyed the island’s administrative archive; such a glaring contrast with the preservation of all captured letters and ships’ documents in the Prize Papers. And the archive had already been cut to the bone by the destruction wreaked by a hurricane in 1772.

The two leather-bound volumes are labelled on the back as ‘Military West Indies 1779’ (the year is confusing).<sup>11</sup> In one is correspondence, primarily on



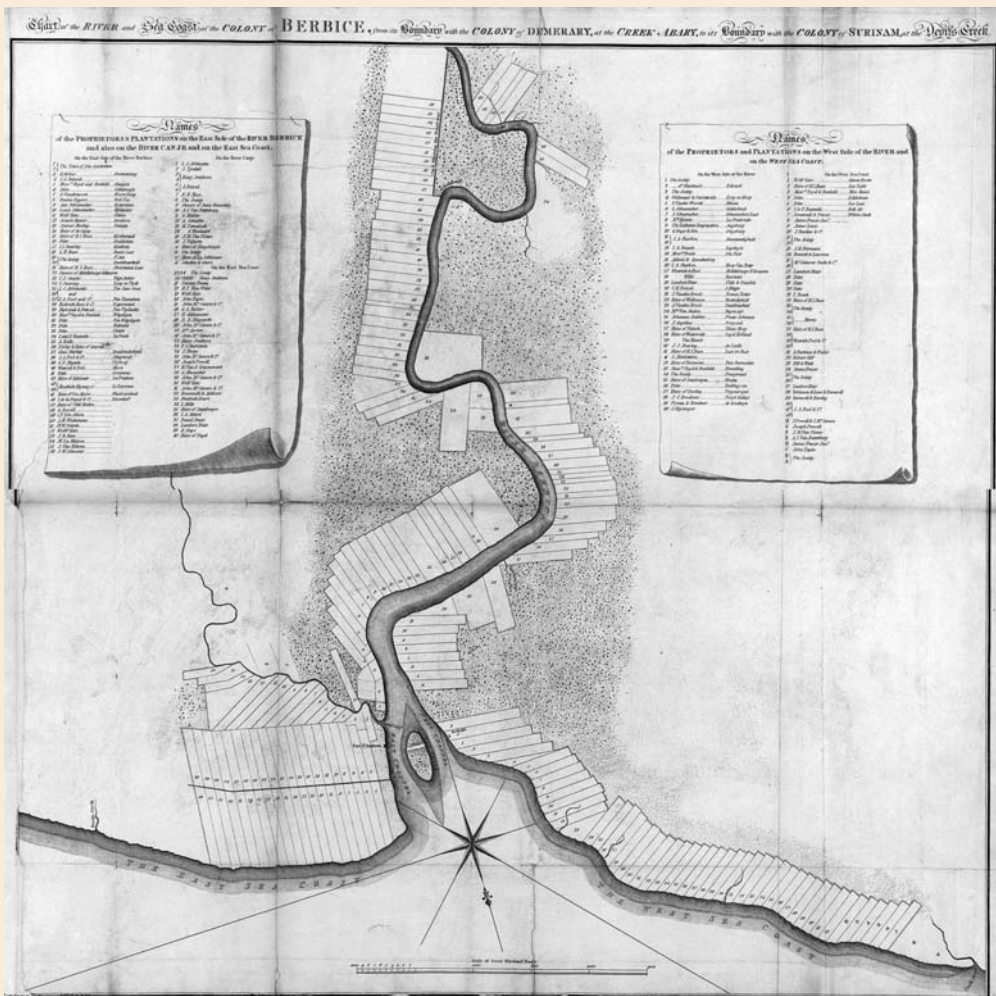
CO 111: 'CD' stamp on the bound documents from Essequibo, Demerara and Berbice. (Photo by author.)

military affairs, not only regarding Saint Eustatius, but also Saint Lucia, Saint Kitts (otherwise Saint Christopher), Antigua and Barbados. In the other volume



CO 278/17: One of the volumes of forms from the Surinam census of 1811. (Photo by author.)

are instructions for Rodney and Vaughan for the assessment of the island: residents, slaves, buildings, livestock (the so-called 'Rodney Roll'); 'An Alphabetical List of all Burghers resident in the Island of St Eustatius'. This is an alphabetical overview by surname of all inhabitants of the island at the time of its capture by Rodney, with further mention of wife, number of sons and daughters, 'male slaves, ditto women, boys and girls'. This list was the fair copy and was marked 'This book to be sent to England'.



MPG 1/968: Map of the estates in Berbice, engraved by Samuel John Neele, 352 Strand, London, attached to a letter from the Dutch governor A. J. van Imbyze van Batenburg, 1799.

The population of Saint Eustatius was surprisingly small in relation to the huge flow of trade – according to the register amounting to 3295 souls, of which 1631 were slaves. The free populace were of various origins: besides Dutch also French, Americans, Spaniards, Greeks, Turks and even English. Within one year the French had taken the island and Rodney's inventory disappeared into a drawer, but remained well-preserved.

**Surinam, 1811**

Finally worthy of mention are 13 leather-bound volumes (this time without any stamp) containing the Surinam census made according to the proclamation of 17 October 1811 (CO 278/15-27). These consist of three series of bound 'returns' – census forms returned completed, whether signed

or marked with a cross. There are pre-printed and hand-written forms in both Dutch and English, showing the transitional situation. The first series is the registration of slaves per estate (two volumes: A-L and M-Z), and at the front of the first volume an alphabetical list of all plantations (more than 500), with the manager's name and number of slaves. The second is a statement of the white population by list of names (five volumes). At the front of the first of these volumes is a numbered list of all white inhabitants (nos. 1-981) with their families and number of slaves. And third is a statement of the free black and mixed-race population by list of names (6 volumes). At the front of the first volume is a numbered list of all free black and mixed-race inhabitants (nos. 1-1351) with their families and numbers of slaves. The names of slaves are also recorded, their occupations, performance, and other particulars.

At the front of volume 17 is a letter dated 30 March 1812, from Pinson Bonham, interim governor of Surinam with details of the composition of the population by faith at that moment. He had inquired with all the various ecclesiastical leaders (Dutch Reformed, Lutheran, Roman Catholic, Anglican, the German and Portuguese Jewish community, and the Moravian Brethren). Although no detailed membership lists were kept, they do clearly indicate how large their congregations were and the number of mixed-race people these included.

According to Bonham the totals were (as in the original citations):

- 'white inhabitants with their families: 2,029';
- 'their slaves of all descriptions: 7,115';
- 'the free colored & black with their families: 3,075';



*The coffee plantation Mariënbosch on the Commewijne river in Surinam, oil on canvas by Willem de Klerk, after a drawing by A. L. Brockmann, mid-19th century (Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, SK-A-4087).*



*CO 318/8: The register of the population of Saint Eustatius, 1781. (Photo by author.)*

- 'their slaves: 2,599';
- 'total number of slaves of plantation or residence: 42,223';
- 'total number of souls: 57,041'.

The total number should be higher still, because 'maroons' and indigenous native Amerindians were not counted. Maroons were escaped slaves who settled in the jungle, forming communities where they tried to maintain the old, African traditions. After all, they did not live on the estates, but deep in the interior. It is primarily the iconic images of the practice of slavery by the Scots-Dutch military officer John Gabriel Stedman (1744-1797) that contributed to the eventual abolition. In Surinam during the 1770s he had taken part in expeditions to recapture escaped slaves, but gradually he became more and more convinced of the cruelty of the



*Armed maroon on patrol, etching by Christoforo dall'Acqua after a drawing by John Gabriel Stedman, from: J. G. Stedman, Narrative of a five years expedition against the Revolted Negroes of Surinam (London, 1796).*



*Beads made from fruit by maroons in Surinam, donated in 1817 by A. F. Lammens (Zeeuws Museum, Middelburg, Collection Koninklijk Zeeuwsch Genootschap der Wetenschappen, G3694). (Photo by Ivo Wennekes.)*

entire system of slavery. Stedman penetratingly described and drew the daily life of estate owners and overseers and the fate of slaves, from the abominable punishments to the hunts for escaped slaves and the lives of the maroons. His book of 1796, with around 80 prints of his drawings, thus became a vehicle for British abolitionists. The book has been translated and reprinted countless times.<sup>12</sup>

In 1814, three years after the census, the Dutch slave trade to Surinam came to an end. The British had already banned the trans-Atlantic slave trade in 1807. In 1814, Great Britain and the Netherlands together set up the so-called Mixed Commission Courts to fight the slave trade at sea.<sup>13</sup> These courts were established in Sierra Leone and in Surinam. The Zeeland jurist Adriaan François Lammens (1767-1847), judge and later president of the Court of Civil and Criminal Justice in Surinam, was also a member of the Mixed Court at Paramaribo. His well-kept memoirs give details about slave uprisings, abuses

of slaves on estates and aboard ships, but also about customs and daily life.<sup>14</sup> Lammens had close contacts with both maroons and indigenous peoples. He sent the Zeeland Society of Arts and Sciences, of which he was a corresponding member, descriptions of the country and its inhabitants. And he donated a number of objects, ranging from natural specimens to implements and ornaments, which, as he wrote, were important for our knowledge of the colony. These were, according to him, then already rare because foreign academies ventured to give money for them.<sup>15</sup>

As Surinam came under Dutch rule again in 1816, the whole census operation was superseded and it was neatly stored in the archive of the Colonial Office in London.<sup>16</sup>

In sum, exceptional sources for the history of slavery and the colonial history of the Dutch West Indies are hidden in a British archive. They give a good picture of the society and extent of the free and unfree populations in the various colonies. This material on the plantation economy of the West Indies remains barely used or completely unused; it begs further research.

The scans of the TNA material, as well as those from the other archives and collections in the *Metamorfoze* theme *Slavery and the Slave Trade*, are available at the website of the Dutch National Archives.<sup>17</sup> The opening of the large exhibition on slavery at the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam was moved because of the Coronavirus pandemic to Spring 2021. And the international conference (online) linked to the exhibition, with the presentation of the results of the digitisations via *Metamorfoze* by the Minister of Education, Culture and Science, was also moved to Spring 2021. What remains unshaken by the crisis is that a whole world of important sources for Dutch (and also some British) colonial history and history of slavery is now available for research.



*Earthenware jug, of indigenous people, to keep water cool and painted bowl, of maroons in Surinam, donated in 1817 by A. F. Lammens (Zeeuws Museum, Middelburg, Collection Koninklijk Zeeuwsch Genootschap der Wetenschappen, G3608, G3607). (Photos by Ivo Wennekes.)*



*S<sup>t</sup> Eustache*  
*une der Antillischen Inseln in Nord-America welche 1781 von den Engländern erobert und denen Holländern abgenommen worden.* | *une des Isles d'Antilles dans l'Amérique du Nord, la quelle fut prise aux Hollandais en 1781 par les Anglois*  
*Se vend à Amsterdam au N<sup>o</sup> 100, chez M. de L'Académie Impériale de Commerce des Arts & Manufactures, avec Privilège de Sa. M<sup>te</sup> Impériale, Impriale de son Ordre, au N<sup>o</sup> 100, au N<sup>o</sup> 100, au N<sup>o</sup> 100.*

The Dutch island of Saint Eustatius taken by the British fleet in February 1781, etching by Johann Baptist Bergmüller. (Library of Congress, Washington, 2004670216, commons.wikimedia.org.)

### Author's Note:

My sincere thanks for the third time to Andrew R. Little for an expert translation, as with my articles on the rediscovered archive of the Dutch slave forts and the beads and gold rings from West-Africa found in the Prize Papers (*Magna* 2017, No. 2; *Magna* 2019, No. 2). And also my appreciation once again to Julie Senior, whose fine cooperation makes the editing process so pleasant.

### Notes

1. Erik van der Doe, "By the ship Diamond, via the West Indies: The captured archive of the Dutch slave forts rediscovered in The National Archives", in: *Magna. The Magazine of the Friends of The National Archives* 28/2 (November 2017), pp. 44-50.
2. Erik van der Doe, 'Small hidden treasures in the Prize Papers: Beads and gold rings from West-Africa', in: *Magna. The Magazine of the Friends of The National Archives* 30/2 (November 2019), pp. 42-51.
3. This article is a translation and slightly modified and supplemented version of that published in the Dutch journal for archives *Archievenblad*, year 124, no. 4 (August 2020), pp. 6-10.
4. M.A.P. Meilink-Roelofs, 'Archivalia betreffende de voormalige Nederlandse koloniën Essequibo, Demerary en Berbice in het Public Record Office te Londen', in: *Nieuwe West-Indische Gids*, year 41 (1961-1962), pp. 127-140.
5. Nationaal Archief, archief Sociëteit van Berbice; Stadsarchief Rotterdam, Collection Manuscripts, no. 2385. The diary, which Metamorfoze has also brought into the Slavery and the Slave Trade project, is attributed to the commander of the marine regiment, Colonel Jan Marius de Salve (1708-1768).
6. On the Berbice Slave Rebellion see especially Marjoleine Kars, *Blood on the River, the untold story of the Berbice Slave Rebellion. A Chronicle of Mutiny and Freedom on the Wild Coast* (New York 2020).

7. Koninklijk Besluit no. 51, 20 June 1818, *Staatsblad* 635.
8. CO 116/67.
9. CO MPG 1/968, originally in CO 111/73.
10. On Johannes de Graaff and the capture of Saint Eustatius based on sources in TNA see especially Peter de Bode, 'Reuring om een aantal kanonschoten. Correspondentie rond een saluutincident op de rede van Sint Eustatius in 1780', in: *Buitgemaakt en teruggevonden. Nederlandse brieven en scheepspapieren in een Engels archief. Sailing Letters Journaal*, vol. V (2013), pp. 181-192; Randolph Cock, 'Avarice and Rapacity' and 'Treasonable Correspondence' in 'an Emporium for All the World': The British capture of St Eustatius, 1781' in: *The Mariner's Mirror* 104/3 (2018), pp. 265-278.
11. The draft version (with deletions and corrections) of the 'Rodney Roll' can be found in HCA 42/150.
12. On Stedman see especially Roelof van Gelder, *Dichter in de jungle. John Gabriel Stedman, 1744-1797* (2019). The first edition of Stedman's book was *Narrative of a five years expedition against the Revolted Negroes of Surinam* (London, 1796). The first translation in Dutch was *Reize naar Surinamen en door de binnenste gedeelten van Guiana* (Amsterdam, 1799).
13. Several pieces within CO 318 contain correspondence of the Mixed Commission Courts. Some registers of proceedings have also been recovered in the Prize Papers: seized Netherland vessels (HCA 30/787), Portugese vessels (HCA 30/788), Spanish vessels (HCA 30/798); see also Dirk J. Tang, 'Een echt zwartboek?', in: *Buitgemaakt en teruggevonden*, pp. 222-223.
14. J. Voorhoeve, 'De handschriften van Mr. Adriaan François Lammens. De Surinamica van het Surinaams Museum', in: *Nieuwe West-Indische Gids*, year 40 (1960), pp. 28-49.
15. Zeeuwse Bibliotheek, Middelburg, Collection Manuscripts Koninklijk Zeeuwisch Genootschap der Wetenschappen (Zeeland Society of Arts and Sciences), nos. 3684, 4476, 5036, 5037, 5038, 6382.
16. For an overview of the history of Surinam see especially Eveline Sint Nicolaas, *Shackles and bonds. Suriname and the Netherlands since 1600* (Amsterdam/Nijmegen 2018).
17. See [www.nationaalarchief.nl/slavernijverleden](http://www.nationaalarchief.nl/slavernijverleden) (in Dutch); [www.nationaalarchief.nl/en/slavery](http://www.nationaalarchief.nl/en/slavery) (in English). (Accessed 22 August 2021.)