

# How to find a place

**The structure of property ownership in the Danish West Indies was in principle very similar to that which existed in Denmark at the same time. Most of the land and anything else of value was owned by a small upper class, which in the West Indies mainly consisted of plantation owners and merchants.**

The rest of the population did not own very much and the enslaved laborers even less. The greatest difference from Danish conditions was that during slavery one also could own people and thus bequeath them to one's heirs or take out a loan against their value in the same way as with other property.

Property in land, houses and enslaved laborers was registered for tax purposes in tax records and land registers. That way you can follow the successive owners of a particular property. It was recorded in mortgage books and records if an owner took out loans in his or her property, whether it was a plantation, a ship or an enslaved laborer. Thus you can get an insight into not only the land (with plantations and houses) a person owned, but also other types of property. Finally, information about the property and possessions of deceased individuals was registered in the probate documents, where you often get an even more detailed insight into personal belongings, such as teaspoons, shirts and books.

An example of how to use archives containing information on property matters in relation to genealogical research could be the story of the free colored businesswoman Maria Elizabeth Yard (c. 1789-1851 ). [You find the story of Maria Elizabeth Yard described here.](#) The tax records for St. Croix 1805-1806 show that Maria lived at Fiskergade nos. 1 & 2 in Christiansted and owned five enslaved individuals: a woman, a boy and three girls under the age of 12. Similarly, it appears from the mortgage records of the town bailiff of Christiansted for the years 1838-1841 that in 1839 Maria inherited the properties nos. 1, 2 and 3 in Fiskergade and a considerable annual pension of 1,100 rix-dollars. Other information about Mary's life is found in censuses and the like ([cf. the article on the sources of personal history](#)).

## The most important groups of sources

- Land lists and land registers, 1688-1915
  - *You will find the following in land lists and land registers*

Land lists (called land registers from 1755) were the annual tax returns from the islands' property owners for calculating personal and land tax. They can help you investigate the ownership of property in the city or in the country in a given year. They also state the number of people who lived on the property: men, women, children, employees and enslaved laborers. Free persons are usually listed by name and perhaps with other personal data. The names of the enslaved are not stated (these can be found in the land tax register forms/slave lists). The location, size and type of crops and production of the plantations are also stated.

- *This is how land lists and land registers are structured and organized*  
The land lists and land registers are archived separately. Both are organized geographically by island and then chronologically. The following volumes have been preserved:
  - Land lists:
    - **St. Thomas:** 1688-1694, 1697-1749, 1751-1752, 1754.
    - **St. Jan:** 1728-1739.
    - **St. Croix:** 1742-1754.
  - Land registers:
    - **St. Thomas:** 1755-1915.
    - **St. Jan:** 1755-1915.
    - **St. Croix:** 1758-1775, 1780-1783, 1786-1806, 1814-1915.

Land lists and land registers are divided geographically by quarters, (rural areas) and towns, respectively, under each year. The sequence is different under every geographical area, e.g. from east to west or from west to east, but the order is usually the same for long periods. From about 1718, the land lists have an alphabetical index arranged by the owner's first name – in the land registers after the owner's surname. From about 1800, the plantations in each district are listed under their owner's name. After this, the name of the plantation also appears with the owner's name. Please note that some plantations change name, new ones are established and some disappear through mergers and parceling out. The land lists are written in Dutch (Latin) or Danish (Gothic), while the land registers are written in Danish (Gothic). Land lists and land registers are divided geographically by quarters, (rural areas) and towns, respectively, under each year. The sequence is different under every geographical area, e.g. from east to west or from west to east, but the order is usually the same for long periods. From about 1718, the land lists have an alphabetical index arranged by the owner's first name – in the land registers after the owner's surname. From about 1800, the plantations in each district are listed under their owner's name. After this, the name of the plantation also appears with the owner's name. Please note that some plantations change name, new ones are established and some disappear through mergers and parceling out. The land

lists are written in Dutch (Latin) or Danish (Gothic), while the land registers are written in Danish (Gothic). [A detailed list of plantations on St. Croix is available here.](#)

- *What you should know when using land lists and land registers*
  - **When:** You should know the period you are interested in.
  - **Where:** You should know the location of the property you want to find, i.e. on which island and in which quarter or town.
  - **Owner:** It will make your search easier if you know the name of the property owner.
- *Land lists and land registers are archived here*

Land lists and land registers are archived under two different authorities.

  - Land lists:
    - **St. Thomas:** The West India and Guinea Company, Accounts from St. Thomas and St. John: The Bookkeeper (archive no. 446), Land lists for St. Thomas 1688-1754 (nos. 731-749).  
[Link to Arkivalieronline](#)
    - **St. Jan:** The West India and Guinea Company, Accounts from St. Thomas and St. John: The Bookkeeper (archive no. 446), Land lists for St. Jan 1728-1739 (nos. 750-754).  
[Link to Arkivalieronline](#)
    - **St. Croix:** The West India and Guinea Company, Accounts from St. Croix: The Bookkeeper (archive no. 446), Land lists for St. Croix 1742-1754 (nos. 849-861).  
[Link to Arkivalieronline](#)
  - Land registers:
    - **St. Thomas & St. Jan:** Audited Accounts, West Indian Accounts (archive no. 571), Land register of St. Thomas and St. John 1755-1915 (nos. 63.83.1-119).  
[Link to Arkivalieronline](#)
    - **St. Croix:** Audited Accounts, West Indian Accounts (archive no. 571), Land register of St. Croix 1758 -1915 (nos. 63.86.1-142).  
[Link to Arkivalieronline](#)
- Probate documents, 1671-1903
  - *You will find the following in the probate documents*

The probate documents were the legal documents that were drawn up when a free person on the islands died. You will find information in these documents about the

deceased person's property and heirs. The information about property can be very detailed and can include everything from whole plantations with enslaved laborers and buildings down to pots and pans.

○ *This is how the probate documents are structured and organized*

It is not easy to work with the West Indian probate documents. They consist of different types of probate records that were written at different points during the processing of a probate case, and they also change over time. The following guideline is divided into two periods:

1. Probate documents before 1755.
2. Probate documents after 1755.

Probate documents before 1755 are not subdivided by type of document but only according to whether the deceased was employed in the West India and Guinea Company or was a private citizen, respectively, and then chronologically. In the following, probate documents after 1755 are subdivided into the three most important groups of probate documents in prioritized order, as well as a fourth group that could also be usable. These four groups are first subdivided geographically by island and then chronologically.

Subdivision into types of records **after 1755**:

**1. Registers of inventories and appraisals**

- You should start by examining these records, which register the beginning of a probate case, i.e. the death and the assets in the estate of the deceased. In addition to the sequence of cases, some records contain an alphabetical index by the name of the deceased. Each probate case was assigned a number that is repeated in the types of documents described below.

**2. Probate Court records of proceedings**

- These records register the court sessions in the probate proceedings in chronological order. The court sessions dealt with paying off debts in the estate and the recovery of outstanding debts.

**3. Registers of probate letters**

- The probate letter was the final document in the administration of the estate. It documents the winding up of the estate and distribution among the heirs.

**4. Case papers of the Probate Court, individuals**

- This group contains documents that were presented or used when the probate case was processed, e.g. bills, loan certificates and deeds.

Unlike the three records above, the case papers concerning individuals are organized in four sub-groups, sub-groups I, III and IV of which are alphabetical by the name of the deceased. Sub-group II is not organized.

- *What you should know when using the probate documents*
  - **When:** You should know the date of death of the person whose property you want to investigate.
  - **Who:** You should know the name of the person whose property you want to investigate.
- *The probate documents are archived here*

The probate documents from the period **before 1755** are archived under the West India and Guinea Company. As a rule, the probate documents from the period **after 1755** are archived under the Sheriff, one of whose tasks was to enforce the law in a specific geographical area. In addition, some special probate cases are archived under the West Indian Government. The two time periods – before and after 1755 – overlap in some instances. Consequently the categorization is not always exact. You should therefore look in both groups to find the needed probate:

  - **Before 1755**

**The West India and Guinea Company**, Board of Directors 1671-1755 (archive no. 446):

    - Letters and documents concerning inheritance and settlement of estates left by persons who had died in the West Indies 1671-1754 (no. 230).  
[Link to Arkivalieronline](#)
    - Administration of the decedent estates of Company functionaries at St. Thomas and St. John 1705-1754 (nos. 231-234).  
[Link to Arkivalieronline](#)
    - Regarding Governor Jørgen Iversen's estate 1679-1684 (no. 235).  
[Link to Arkivalieronline](#)
    - Governor Michel Crone and his half-brother Knud Helmer's decedent estates 1713-1737 (nos. 236-237).  
[Link to Arkivalieronline](#)
    - Administration of decedent estates of Company functionaries at St. Croix 1734-1751 (nos. 238-239).  
[Link to Arkivalieronline](#)

- Administration of decedent estates of inhabitants of St. Thomas 1689-1701 (no. 240).  
[Link to Arkivalieronline](#)
- Letters of administration and other documents concerning deceased inhabitants of St. Thomas 1726-1751 (no. 241).  
[Link to Arkivalieronline](#)
- Letter of administration in the estate of planter Willem Vessup at St. Thomas 1732-1740 (no. 242).  
[Link to Arkivalieronline](#)
- Notices concerning the administration of West Indian decedent estates 1733-1739, 1736-1740 (no. 243).  
[Link to Arkivalieronline](#)
- **After 1755**
  - Sheriff of St. Thomas 1755-1909** (archive no. 697):
    - Registers of inventories and appraisals 1736-1891 (nos. 13.26.1 - 16).  
[Link to Arkivalieronline](#)
    - Probate Court records of proceedings 1736-1893 (nos. 13.23.1 - 15).  
[Link to Arkivalieronline](#)
    - Files relating to the Probate Court records of proceedings 1815-1893 (nos. 13.24.1 - 159).  
[Link to Arkivalieronline](#)
    - Registers of probate letters concerning inhabitants 1717-1766 (nos. 13.27.1 - 13).  
[Link to Arkivalieronline](#)
    - Registers of probate letters concerning planters 1724-1763 (nos. 13.28.1 - 6).  
[Link to Arkivalieronline](#)
    - Registers of probate letters concerning civil servants and inhabitants 1800-1814 (no. 13.29.1).  
[Link to Arkivalieronline](#)
- St. Thomas and St. John Government, Sheriff of St. John 1741-1910** (archive no. 712, 446):
  - Registers of inventories and appraisals 1763-1882 (nos. 35.37.1 - 4).  
[Link to Arkivalieronline](#)
  - Registers of inventories, appraisals, proceedings, wills, etc. 1807-1836 (nos. 35.38.1 - 2).  
[Link to Arkivalieronline](#)

- Probate Court records of proceedings 1758-1799 (nos. 35.36.1 - 3).  
[Link to Arkivalieronline](#)
- Probate Court records of wills and proceedings 1836-1859 (nos. 35.39.1 -2).  
[Link to Arkivalieronline](#)
- Records of the Probate Court 1741-1823 (nos. 35.40.1 - 10).  
[Link to Arkivalieronline](#)
- Probate files 1778-1859 (nos. 35.41.1 - 14).  
[Link to Arkivalieronline](#)
- Probate letters 1783-1806 (nos. 35.42.1 - 2)  
[Link to Arkivalieronline](#)

**Sheriff of Christiansted 1734-1901 (archive no. 684):**

- Registers of inventories and appraisals:
  - Registers of inventories and valuations concerning burghers and planters 1747-1799 (nos. 38.41.1 - 11).  
[Link to Arkivalieronline](#)
  - Registers of inventories and valuations concerning civil servants 1755-1800 (nos. 38.42.1 - 2).  
[Link to Arkivalieronline](#)
  - Registers of probate letters concerning non-commissioned officers, private soldiers, servants, unemployed persons, and free blacks 1782-1798 (no. 38.43.1).  
[Link to Arkivalieronline](#)
  - Registers of inventories and valuations concerning all ranks and classes 1800-1878 (nos. 38.44.1 - 12).  
[Link to Arkivalieronline](#)
- Probate Court records of proceedings:
  - Probate Court records of proceedings concerning burghers and planters 1747-1883 (nos. 38.38.1 - 27).  
[Link to Arkivalieronline](#)
  - Probate Court records of proceedings concerning civil servants 1759-1863 (nos. 38.39.1 - 10).  
[Link to Arkivalieronline](#)
  - Probate Court records of proceedings concerning non-commissioned officers, private soldiers, servants, unemployed persons, and free blacks 1781-1833 (nos. 38.40.1 - 4).  
[Link to Arkivalieronline](#)
- Registers of probate letters:

- Registers of probate letters concerning burghers and planters 1736-1790 (nos. 38.46.1 - 36).  
[Link to Arkivalieronline](#)
- Registers of probate letters concerning civil servants 1734-1792 (nos. 38.47.1 - 7).  
[Link to Arkivalieronline](#)
- Registers of probate letters concerning non-commissioned officers, private soldiers, servants, unemployed persons, and free blacks 1786-1792 (no. 38.48.1).  
[Link to Arkivalieronline](#)
- Probate cases:
  - Case papers of the Probate Court, individuals 1748-1857 (nos. 38.60.1 – 38.63.60).  
[Link to Arkivalieronline](#)
  - Case papers of the Probate Court in alphabetical order 1847-1889 (nos. 38.65.1-8).  
[Link to Arkivalieronline](#)

**Sheriff of Frederiksted 1745-1903 (archive no. 717):**

- Registers of inventories:
  - Registers of inventories 1848-1876 (nos. 39.19.1 - 2).  
[Link to Arkivalieronline](#)
- Probate Court records of proceedings:
  - Probate Court records of proceedings concerning burghers and planters 1760-1793 (nos. 39.13.1 - 4).  
[Link to Arkivalieronline](#)
  - Probate Court records of proceedings concerning civil servants 1781-1801 (no. 39.14.1).  
[Link to Arkivalieronline](#)
  - Probate Court records of proceedings concerning non-commissioned officers, private soldiers, servants, and unemployed persons 1781-1801 (no. 39.15.1).  
[Link to Arkivalieronline](#)
  - Probate Court records of proceedings concerning the estate of manager Thomas Clarke (no. 39.16.1).  
[Link to Arkivalieronline](#)
  - Probate Court records of proceedings concerning all ranks and classes 1844-1881 (nos. 39.17.1 - 5).  
[Link to Arkivalieronline](#)
- Registers of probates:

- Registers of probates concerning burghers and planters 1760-1794 (nos. 39.21.1 - 6).  
[Link to Arkivalieronline](#)
- Register of probates concerning civil servants 1776-1792 (no. 39.22.1).  
[Link to Arkivalieronline](#)
- Register of probates concerning non-commissioned officers, private soldiers, servants, and unemployed persons 1781-1800 (no. 39.23.1).  
[Link to Arkivalieronline](#)

- Miscellaneous old case papers of the Probate Court 1761-1832 (no. 39.25.1).

[Link to Arkivalieronline](#)

- Case papers of the Probate Court 1859-1903 (nos. 39.26.1 - 29).

[Link to Arkivalieronline](#)

**The West Indian government 1773-1849** (Archive nos. 678, 699, 686):

- Subject files: The judicial system (e.g. nos. 3.81.176 - 209).

[Link to Arkivalieronline](#)

- Registers of mortgages, 1736-1907

- *You will find the following in the registers of mortgages*

You will find information about mortgaging of property on the islands in the registers of mortgages. They give you an insight into what a person owned during his or her lifetime. The mortgaged property can be anything from whole plantations and ships to individual enslaved individuals. Enslaved laborers were regarded as property and could thus be used as collateral.

- *This is how the registers of mortgages are structured and organized*

There are two types of mortgage records:

- Registers of mortgages..
    - Documents recorded in court.

Both are chronological. Alphabetical indices are preserved for some of them, organized by name of person and/or place name.

- *What you should know when using the registers of mortgages*

- **Who:** You should know the name of the mortgaged property (plantation) or the person whose property you want to investigate.
    - **When:** You should know the year(s) you are interested in.

○ *The registers of mortgages are archived here*

The mortgage records in the Danish National Archives are not complete. This is partly because some of the material is kept in the US National Archives in Washington DC and the Recorder of Deeds Office on the US Virgin Islands, and partly because much of the material from Frederiksted was burned during the workers' rebellion in 1878.

The material in the Danish National Archives is archived under two different authorities. There are mortgage records for St. Croix under the Sheriff of Christiansted. In the case of St. Thomas and St. Jan, there are Documents recorded in court under the West Indian Superior Court.

- **The West India and Guinea Company, Sheriff of St. Thomas** (archive nos. 446, 697):
  - Registers of mortgages 1741-1754 (nos. 1.18.1 - 2).  
[Link to Arkivalieronline](#)
- **Sheriff of Christiansted** 1734-1901 (archive no. 684):
  - Registers of mortgages 1736-1844 (nos. 38.26.1 - 42).  
[Link to Arkivalieronline](#)
  - Indexes to the registers of mortgages 1765-1855 (nos. 38.27.1 - 14).  
[Link to Arkivalieronline](#)
  - Separate index to registers of mortgages, letters H-W 1801-1801 (no. 38.28.1).  
[Link to Arkivalieronline](#)
  - Abstract of indexes to registers of mortgage 1788-1795 (no. 38.29.1).  
[Link to Arkivalieronline](#)
- **West Indian Superior Court** 1805-1907 (archive no. 680):
  - Documents recorded in court 1807-1907 (nos. 5.9.1 - 15).  
[Link to Arkivalieronline](#)