

How to find sources about colonial power

The Danish colonial power played a part in many aspects of life in the Danish West Indies. The following groups of sources have been selected as examples of the areas in which the colonial power controlled life in the colonies – in court, at the barracks and the hospital or at school.

Proclamation books, police journals, records of the Police Court and records of the Military Court provide an insight into how the civilian and military legal system functioned, but simultaneously witness testimonies reflect everyday life for good or for bad. Medical records tell about health and sickness among the population – from harmless cases of coughing to epidemics that killed hundreds. Finally, cases from the school system open a window on how schooling was structured, from timetables to complaints by civil servants about the lack of understanding for the importance of schooling on the part of children and parents.

Court cases are an example of how one can use archives with information about the colonial power. For example, the story of the enslaved worker Stephan and the damaged rum, which is described in the article [Obeah and justice – records of the police court](#). Details of the case appear in the proceedings from the Sheriff in Christiansted in 1781 e.g. that Stephan tried to commit suicide.

The most important groups of sources

- Proclamation books, 1733-1882

- *You will find the following in the proclamation books*

A proclamation book is a collection of local legislation. The proclamation books can help you to examine local legislation in the Danish colony for a specific subject at a specific time between approximately 1733 and 1882. As well as local legislation, there was also central legislation issued by the central power in Copenhagen. The two types of legislation supplement each other, but normally the proclamation books contain the most detail about conditions locally.

- *This is how the proclamation books are structured and organized*

Each of the eight proclamation books is organized chronologically, but there are big overlaps in the periods of time they cover and therefore the same legislation can appear in several books. Nor is it certain that a proclamation book contains all the legislation from the period it states it covers. One must examine all eight proclamation books to find all local legislation concerning a specific topic in a given period. Some of the proclamation books have an alphabetically organized subject index at the back, which makes it possible to find proclamations on a specific topic

even if one does not know when they were issued. This applies to, for example, nos. 2.1.4, 2.1.5 or 2.1.6. A chronological index can also be found in the same place. The books were written in either Danish (Gothic) or Dutch (Latin) until about 1800, and after 1800 in Danish (Gothic) or English (Latin).

- *What you should know when using the poster books*
 - **What:** You should know which topic you are looking for legislation on.
 - **When:** You should know the period of time that contains the legislation in which you are interested.

- *The proclamation books are archived here*

The Government-General (archive no. 677), Proclamation books 1733-1882 (nos. 2.1.1-8).

[Link to Arkivalieronline.](#)

- Police journals and Records of the Police Court, 1756-1904

- *This is what you can find in the police journals and records of the Police Court*

Police journals and records of the Police Court are two different but related types of documents from the police authorities in the colony. The police journals are a kind of daily report listing all events at a police station – e.g. enslaved laborers who complained about bad treatment or reports of fights at public houses or about dead dogs somewhere in the town. The police records can help you to gain an insight into everyday life, especially in the towns, and what people in general thought was illegal, or cases where the authorities had to intervene.

The records of the Police Court are the next step in the legal process. They are minutes of what was said in the Police Court during questioning. The records of the Police Court can help you to gain an insight into what both free men and women and enslaved laborers said when they were charged or testified in a court case. They also show how local and central legislation was interpreted and applied. For example, a case about mistreatment that an enslaved laborer had reported to the police station and that had been registered in the police records could become a case in the Police Court.

- *This is how the police journals and records of the Police Court are structured and organized*

The police journals and records of the Police Court are separately organized but in the same way. They are organized geographically by island and then chronologically. Each single police journal and volume of the records of the Police

Court was also kept chronologically. In addition, every case in the records of the Police Court has a case number, which makes it possible to follow the case when the investigations took place over a long period of time. The registers were written in Danish (Gothic or Latin).

○ *What you should know when using the police journals and records of the Police Court*

- **Where:** You should know which island and which town you want to investigate.
- **When:** You should know the period you want to investigate.
- **Case number:** If you want to investigate a specific case, it will make your search easier if you know the case number.

○ *The police journals and records of the Police Court are archived here*

The police authority was under the town or country sheriff, and therefore both police journals and records of the Police Court are usually archived under this authority. The records of the Police Court from Frederiksted form an exception as they were destroyed when the police station was destroyed during the rebellion of 1848. However, weekly transcripts of the police records for Frederiksted for the years following 1827 are preserved in the West Indian Government.

- **St. Thomas**

- Sheriff of St. Thomas (archive no. 698), St. Thomas Police Office, Police journals 1804-1891 (nos. 14.8.1-19).
[Link to Arkivalieronline.](#)
- Sheriff of St. Thomas (archive no. 698), St. Thomas Police Office, Records of the Police Court 1788-1896 (nos. 14.1.1-83).
[Link to Arkivalieronline.](#)

- **St. John**

- St. Thomas and St. John Government (archive no. 712), Sheriff of St. John, Police journals 1829-1892 (nos. 35.23.1-7).
[Link to Arkivalieronline.](#)
- St. Thomas and St. John Government (archive no. 712), Sheriff of St. John, Records of the Police Court 1818-1904 (nos. 35.17.1-19).
[Link to Arkivalieronline.](#)

- **St. Croix**

- *Christiansted*
 - Sheriff in Christiansted (archive no. 684), Police journals 1798-1846 (nos. 38.31.1- 15).
[Link to Arkivalieronline.](#)

- Sheriff in Christiansted (archive no. 684), Records of the Police Court 1756-1841 (nos. 38.9.1- 24).
[Link to Arkivalieronline.](#)
 - *Frederiksted*
 - The government of the West Indies (archive no. 678), Files relating to register of correspondence, series B, 1827-1880 (nos. 3.64.22-270).
[Link to Arkivalieronline.](#)
- Records of the Military Court, 1769-1914
 - *This is what you can find in the records of the Military Court*

The military had its own court. Cases at this court were reported in the records of the military jurisdictions on St. Thomas and St. Croix (Christiansted and Frederiksted), respectively. Therefore, the records of the Military Court can provide insight into the offences committed by people employed in the military and thus the problems that had an impact on their everyday lives. The proceedings also contain the verdicts pronounced and the sentences given.
 - *This is how the records of the Military Court are structured and organized*

The records of the Military Court are organized geographically by island and town and then chronologically. Each volume of records is kept chronologically and in Danish (Gothic or Latin).
 - *This is what you should know when using the records of the Military Court*
 - **Where:** You should know which island and which town you want to investigate.
 - **When:** If you want to find a specific case, you should know when it was dealt with at the military court.
 - *The records of the Military Court are archived here*
 - **St. Thomas**
 - St. Thomas Military Jurisdiction (archive no. 710), Court records concerning St. Thomas and St. John, 1769-1914 (nos. 16.1.1-17).
[Link to Arkivalieronline.](#)
 - **St. Croix**
 - St. Croix Military Jurisdiction (archive no. 687), Court records of the Military Court on St. Croix, 1817-1904 (nos. 42.1.1-10).
[Link to Arkivalieronline.](#)

- St. Croix Military Jurisdiction (archive no. 687), Court records of the Military Court in Christiansted, 1876-1898 (nos. 42.2.1-3).
[Link to Arkivalieronline.](#)
 - St. Croix Military Jurisdiction (archive no. 687), Court records of the Military Court in Frederiksted, 1872-1892 (no. 42.3.1).
[Link to Arkivalieronline.](#)
- Medical reports, 1823-1910
 - *This is what you can find in the medical reports*

The medical reports were annual reports from the royal district physician (landfysikus) and all doctors in the colony to the *Sundhedskollegium* (Board of Health) in Copenhagen. The reports can provide you with insight into sickness, health and the health system. For example, which diseases were prevalent on the islands among both enslaved laborers and free men and women and what was done to fight them, the military doctors and doctors with private practices, the hospitals, the midwife system, the pharmacies, vaccination against smallpox and the quarantine system in the harbors.
 - *This is how the medical reports are structured and organized*

The medical reports are organized chronologically by year and then geographically by island. Each report contains a general report from the *landfysikus*, with appended reports from all doctors on the islands, both those in private practice and from the military. The reports are written in either Danish (Gothic or Latin) or English (Latin).
 - *What you should know when using the medical reports*
 - **When:** You should the period you want to investigate.
 - **Where:** You should know which island you want to investigate.
 - **Who/What:** If you know which institution (e.g. hospital) or person (e.g. doctor) you are looking for it will make your search easier.
 - *The medical reports are archived here*
 - Board of Health (archive no. 1252), West Indian medical reports, 1823-1910 (nos. 1-8).
[Link to Arkivalieronline.](#)
- Cases concerning the school system, 1852-1907
 - *This is what you can find in cases concerning the school system*

Cases concerning the schools can provide insight into children's schooling in the country and the town during the period from the abolition of slavery in 1848 to the sale of the islands to the USA in 1917. The cases consist of different types of material, among other things reports by head teachers, reports from local school commissions, material concerning work with local school legislation, and administrative cases between the schools and the West Indian Government. There is a wide range of information, from the number of children in the classes, to curricula and timetables and to farmhand mothers who did not make sure that their children attended the country school. The cases are written in Danish (Gothic or Latin) and English (Latin).

- *This is how cases concerning the school system are structured and organized*
Cases concerning the school system are organized geographically under St. Croix and St. Thomas with St. John, respectively, and then chronologically. The contents of each box are not bound but loosely organized in covers (also called 'læg') according to subject areas. Each case has a case number referring to the West Indian Government's registers of correspondence, series A, and cases for these registers. This means that there may be more information about the same cases in these registers.
- *This is what you should know when using the cases concerning the school system*
 - **Where:** You should know which island you want to investigate.
 - **When:** You should know which period you want to investigate.
 - **Who/What:** Your search will be easier if you know which topic you are interested in – e.g. legislation concerning schools, number of pupils, curriculum or personnel matters.
- *Cases concerning the school system are archived here*
 - **St. Thomas & St. John**
 - The West Indian Government (archive no. 678), Subject files: Social and cultural matters, Cases concerning the schools on St. Thomas 1852-1861 (no. 3.81.616).
[Link to Arkivalieronline.](#)
 - **St. Croix**
 - The West Indian Government (archive no. 678), Subject files: Social and cultural matters, Cases concerning the schools on St. Croix 1852-1907 (nos. 3.81.617-621).
[Link to Arkivalieronline.](#)