How to find sources about trade and shipping

Trade and shipping were decisive for the colony in the Danish West Indies. Easy access to the sea and ocean-going sailing ships made it possible for the islands in the Caribbean to develop into a huge economic success.

Shipping made it possible to procure enslaved laborers as workforce in one continent (Africa), produce foodstuffs that were much in demand in another continent (the West Indies, South America) and consume them in a third continent (Europe).

St. Thomas was a center for shipping and trade from the beginning. This was because the island’s big natural harbor is one of the best in the northern part of the Caribbean. The town developed into a regional center for long-distance trade, freight, transporting passengers, financial and practical services for the shipping industry and trade as well as being a center for the post and telegraph system.

The selected groups of sources below show different aspects of trade and shipping. The documents concerning the voyages of the Danish West India and Guinea Company’s ships to the Danish West Indies and Guinea and the books kept on the ships of the Guinea Company show conditions on board. The merchant books show how the ships’ cargoes of goods were sold on St. Thomas, while the auction books of the company’s bookkeeper in Copenhagen record the sale of West Indian goods there. The Pilot journals of incoming and outward bound vessels provide an insight into where the ships in the harbor of St. Thomas came from and were going to, while the burgher certificates tell about the businesses that existed in the town and where the business community came from. Finally, the records of licenses for rum shops and public houses document the many public houses and rum shops that served sailors and others in the busy harbor.

One example of how the archives containing information about trade and shipping can be used is the kind of clothes that were given to the enslaved laborers. It appears from the merchant book from 1734-1736 that 9 blue and white shirts had been bought for the company’s enslaved laborers who worked in the warehouse (called ”pakhuuss Negere”, i.e. warehouse negroes). Likewise, the merchant book for 1737-1740 shows that 2 female enslaved from the company’s sugar plantation each got 3 alen (one alen was about two feet) of Osnabrück linen (rough linen) to wrap their newborn babies in.

The most important groups of sources

- Documents concerning voyages to the West Indies and Guinea 1671-1754
  - You will find the following in documents concerning voyages
When one of the West India and Guinea Company’s big trading ships sailed from Denmark to the West Indies between 1671 and 1754, it carried with it a number of documents that can provide an insight into life on board. For example, where the ship was heading to, who was on board (mariners and passengers), what they ate, goods in the hold, provisioning en route, shipwreck, damage to the ship etc.

- This is how documents concerning voyages are structured and organized
  The documents are gathered in covers (also called ’læg’) after the name of the ship and the year of the expedition in question. The covers are then organized chronologically, and each box contains several covers. Covers marked with (V) show expeditions that went to the West Indies, while covers marked with (G) show expeditions to Guinea. However, ships to Guinea almost always sailed home via the West Indies. The covers contain a varied collection of documents, e.g. sea letters, instructions, rations, muster rolls, invoices and inventories. The documents are most frequently written in Danish (Gothic), German (Gothic) or Dutch (Latin).

- What you should know when using documents concerning voyages
  - When: You should know which year or period you want to investigate.
  - Where to: You should know whether you want to investigate ships to the West Indies or ships to Guinea.
  - The name of the ship: It will make your search easier if you know the name of the ship.

- Documents concerning voyages are archived here
  The West India and Guinea Company, Board of Directors (archive no. 446), Documents concerning voyages to the West Indies and Guinea 1671-1754 (nos. 191-216).
  Link to Arkivalieronline

- Books kept on board the ships of the Guinea Company 1766-1778
  - You will find the following in books kept on board the ships of the Guinea Company
    Each officer on board the company ships kept their own books. There is nautical and navigation-related information in the logbooks of the captain and mate. The ship’s assistant kept the ship's registers (inter alia with letter copies), the pay book (account of each man’s pay), the consumption book (account of equipment and fittings, provisions and commodities) and the trade book. Finally, the ship’s doctor kept the medical journal (with an overview of patients and their treatment). All journeys took the triangular route from Copenhagen to the Gold Coast, further to the West Indies and home to Denmark.
This is how documents kept on board the ships of the Guinea Company are structured and organized
The books are organized according to type and then after the name of the ship and its voyages in chronological order. The documents are most frequently written in Danish (Gothic) and some in German (Gothic).

You should know the following when using books kept on board the ships of the Guinea Company
- **When**: You should know the year or period you want to investigate.
- **The name of the ship**: It will make your search easier if you know the name of the ship.

The books kept on board the ships of the Guinea Company are archived here
- Guinea Company (archive no. 447), Ship's logs 1766-1777 (nos. 88-108). [Link to Arkivalieronline](#)
- Guinea Company (archive no. 447), Ship's registers 1766-1778 (nos. 109-122). [Link to Arkivalieronline](#)
- Guinea Company (archive no. 447), Pay book 1767-1777 (nos. 123-130). [Link to Arkivalieronline](#)
- Guinea Company (archive no. 447), Consumption book 1767-1775 (nos. 131-133). [Link to Arkivalieronline](#)
- Guinea Company (archive no. 447), Trade book 1769-1773 (nos. 134-135). [Link to Arkivalieronline](#)
- Guinea Company (archive no. 447), Medical journal 1767-1775 (nos. 136-141). [Link to Arkivalieronline](#)

Pilot journals of incoming vessels 1821-1865
- You will find the following in the pilot journals of incoming vessels
Pilot journals of incoming vessels were kept by the Harbor Master in Charlotte Amalie on St. Thomas between 1821 and 1865. They provide a picture of the traffic of trading ships that sailed to St. Thomas in the heyday of the island as a center of trade. They can *inter alia* help you to discover where the ships came from, their number, their nationality, how big they were and the cargo they carried. The Harbor Master kept a corresponding record of outward-bound vessels. The records of incoming vessels 1865-1918 are in the US National Archives in Washington DC.
This is how the pilot journals of incoming vessels are structured and organized
The series of records are organized chronologically. Each record is also chronologically structured. They are written in Danish (Gothic).

You should know the following when using pilot journals of incoming vessels
• When: You should know period you want to investigate.

The pilot journals of incoming vessels are archived here
The Government-General, St. Thomas Harbour Master (archive no. 701), Pilot journals of incoming vessels 1821-1865 (nos. 25.4.1-17).
Link to Arkivalieronline

Pilot journals of outgoing vessels 1821-1865

You will find the following in the pilot journals of outgoing vessels
The pilot journals of outgoing vessels were kept by the Harbor Master in Charlotte Amalie on St. Thomas between 1821 and 1865. They provide a picture of the traffic of trading ships that sailed from St. Thomas in the heyday of the island as center of trade. They can inter alia help you to discover where the ships from St. Thomas were going, their nationality, number, size and the contents and weight of the cargo etc. The Harbor Master kept a corresponding record of incoming vessels. The records of outward-bound vessels 1865-1922 are in the US National Archives in Washington DC.

This is how the records of the pilot journals of outgoing vessels are structured and organized
The series of records are organized chronologically. Each record is also chronologically structured. They are written in Danish (Gothic).

You should know the following when using the pilot journals of outgoing vessels
• When: You should know the period you want to investigate.

The pilot journals of outgoing vessels are archived here
Government-General, St. Thomas Harbour Master (archive no. 701), Pilot journals of outgoing vessels 1821-1865 (nos. 25.5.1-16).
Link to Arkivalieronline
• **Merchant books 1734-1755**
  
  o *You will find the following in the merchant books*
    The merchant books were kept by the merchant of the Danish West India and Guinea Company on St. Thomas 1734-1755. They contain information about the goods the merchant sold to and bought from which plantation owners and other persons on the island. The trade registers can help you to gain an insight into the goods used in running the plantations and for private consumption. There was a wide range of goods, from linen for the clothes of the enslaved laborers to luxury goods such as china and tea.

  o *This is how the merchant books are structured and organized*
    The series of merchant books is organized chronologically. Each volume is divided into different types of goods with one account for each type. Each account is chronological and with debit and credit. Most of the volumes have an alphabetical goods index. The books are written in Danish (Gothic).

  o *You should know the following when using the trade registers*
    
    - **When**: You should know which year you want to investigate.
    - **What**: You should know which goods you want to investigate.

  o *The merchant books are archived here*
    
    The West India and Guinea Company, the Treasurer and the Merchant, St. Thomas and St. John (archive no. 446), *Merchant book 1734-1755* (nos. 760-765).
    
    [Link to Arkivalieronline](#)

• **Auction books 1673-1754**
  
  o *You will find the following in the auction books*
    The Danish West India and Guinea Company kept detailed accounts of which goods brought to Denmark were sold at the Company’s auctions in Copenhagen, who bought them and their price. Every single barrel of raw sugar, every bale of cotton, every roll of tobacco, every sack of coffee beans, every elephant tusk etc. was noted.

  o *This is how the auction books are structured and organized*
    The auction books are fair copies of notes kept during the auctions themselves. The auctions are entered in chronological order, and each auction is divided into types of goods. In many cases there are also statements of each buyer’s total purchases at the auction. The records are written in Danish (Gothic).
You should know the following when using the auction books

- **When:** You should know the year you want to investigate.
- **What:** You should know the goods you want to investigate.
- **Who:** You should know which purchaser you want to investigate.

The auction books are archived here

- The West India and Guinea Company (archive no. 446), Bookkeeper and treasurer, Auction book 1673-1689 (no. 407). [Link to Arkivalieronline](#)
- The West India and Guinea Company (archive no. 446), Bookkeeper and treasurer, Auction books, kept by the bookkeeper 1697-1754 (nos. 408-413). [Link to Arkivalieronline](#)

Burgher certificates 1755-1909

- **You will find the following in the burgher certificates**
  The burgher certificate was proof that a person had been granted citizenship in the colony of the Danish West Indies. Citizenship came with certain privileges and rights, including the right to conduct business in the colony and the obligation to perform different public duties, e.g. the militia and the fire service. The registers of burgher certificates contain information about who had received a burgher certificate, the birth date of the person in question and the trade by which he or she lived. Thus, they can provide information about the businesses that existed in the colony at a certain point in time and where the tradesmen and -women came from. They are most frequently artisans, retailers, and small-scale traders, many of whom were connected to trade and shipping, e.g. merchants, skippers, ship’s mates etc.

- **This is how the burgher certificates are structured and organized**
  The series of burgher certificates is organized chronologically. Each volume in the series is also chronologically structured, but with an alphabetic index of names organized by surname. However, it should be noted that the first volume in the series that covers 1755-1788 (no. 11.53.171) has no information about occupation.

You should know the following when using the burgher certificates

- **When:** You should know the year or period you want to investigate.
- **Who:** If you are looking for a specific person, you should know the surname of the person in question.

The burgher certificates are archived here
License records for rum shops and public houses 1834-1903

- You will find the following in license records for rum shops and public houses
  The license records for rum shops and public houses contain information about who had a license to operate this special type of retail trade on St. Thomas between 1834 and 1903, and who had permission to have a public billiard saloon. Sometimes there also is information about the location of the rum shop, public house or billiard saloon. The license records can provide information about how many public houses served the many sailors, skippers and tradesmen in the busy harbor of St. Thomas, who owned them and where they were.

- This is how the license records for rum shops and public houses are structured and organized
  The series of license records are organized chronologically, while each volume is structured alphabetically after the name of the licensee.

- You should know the following when using the license records for rum shops and public houses
  - **When**: You should know which year or period you want to investigate.
  - **Who**: If you are looking for a specific person, you should know the surname of the person in question.

- The license records for rum shops and public houses are archived here
  St. Thomas and St. John Government (archive no. 693), Subject files: Trade, License records for rum shops & public houses, 1834-1903 (nos. 11.53.220-223).
  Link to Arkivalieronline