This is how you start searching: Five pieces of advice

Welcome to a world of knowledge about 250 years of Danish colonial history. About people and power, slavery, shipping and the lives of rich and poor in the Danish West Indies. Previously, it has been difficult to access and search for the documents. Now the documents have been digitized and are accessible to all.

Delving into the documents from Denmark and the Danish West Indies is fascinating work. However, it is unfortunately not straightforward. Because even though digitization opens up new possibilities, there are still many limitations. There are more than 5 million image files of documents and by no means all have been tagged with relevant search words.

One has to know what one is looking for, how the records are organized and the information they can contain. At the same time, many of the documents were written in Gothic script and older Danish or English that can be difficult to understand. In addition, only a handful of the documents will be translated into English in the first instance as translation is dependent on voluntary work through crowdsourcing.

In other words: Finding the information you are looking for requires knowledge, language skills, technical competencies and not least patience, drive and energy.

Therefore, here are five pieces of advice for you who are looking for information about the Danish colonial era in the West Indies.

Five pieces of advice

1. Get to know the archives

You will never find all the information about a person or an institution collected in one place. Every item of information must be looked for in the archive according to the person or institution that has created the information. An archive can contain many archive series dealing with different topics. Even though the majority of the Danish-West Indian archives are stored in the Danish National Archives, you will have to search for them one by one.

Start by getting an overview of the archives and what each one contains. The Danish National Archives have prepared special guides to the most relevant archive series in five areas:

- How to find a Person
- How to find a Place
- How to find sources about slavery
- How to find sources about Colonial power
• **How to find sources about Trade and shipping**

You will also find information on how important archive series are organized and structured, what they contain and how you can use them to find what you are looking for.

**Download a full list of record creators and record series in which you can search for on this website.**

2. **Be clear about what you are looking for**

The archives contain millions of documents. So, before you plunge into them, you should consider the type of knowledge that can take you further in your search:

Where did the person live? The person’s conditions of employment? Religion? Marriage and children? Legal disputes? Involvement in rebellion or other major events? Each of these types of information must be found in different archives and archive collections.

**Two examples:**

**First example: Maria Elizabeth Yard**

*The life story of Maria Elizabeth Yard*, which you find elsewhere on this website, is based on information from a number of different records. Here are some examples:

- Maria’s year of birth is documented by the census of 1841 for the Danish West Indies (Chamber of Revenue, Danish Department, The Table Commission, archive no. 303, Census of 1841, Danish West Indies, Croix, box no. 1, Christiansted free inhabitants)

- Maria’s letter of manumission, dated 23rd May 1800, is recorded in a list of free colored men, women and children in Christiansted in 1816 (The West India and Guinea Company, archive no. 678, Subject files: Social and cultural matters, Free colored men, women and children in the jurisdiction of Christiansted 1816, box no. 3.81.564, case no. 24)

- Maria’s residence in 1805 in a house owned by Sheriff Johannes Woldbye Mouritzen, i.e. no. 1&2 Fisherstreet, is recorded in the land register of St. Croix 1805-1806. (Audited Accounts, West Indian Accounts, archive no. 571, land register for St. Croix 1758-1915, 1805-1806, box no. 86.40)

- That Maria inherited the properties no. 1, 2 and 3 Fisherstreet in 1839 from Johannes Mouritzen is recorded in the Sheriff of Christiansted’s registers of mortgages
Second example: Moses Elias Williams

The life story of Moses Elias Williams, which you find elsewhere on this website, is based on information from a number of different records. Here are some examples:

- That Moses’ mother Cathrine lived on the plantation Castle Nugent is recorded in the census of 1841 for the Danish West Indies (Chamber of Revenue, Danish Department, The Table Commission, archive no. 303, Census of 1841, Danish West Indies, box no. 4, St. Croix country districts)

- That in 1850 the Williams family lived in no. 7 Company Street in Christiansted is recorded in the census of 1850 for the Danish West Indies (Statistics Denmark, archive no. 1308, census 1850, Danish West Indies, box no. 2, St. Croix, Christiansted, King Street – East Street)

- That Moses received his burgher certificates as a butcher in Christiansted in 1865 is recorded in the lists of individuals having been granted citizenship (The West India and Guinea Company, archive no. 678, Subject files: Social and cultural matters, Lists of individuals having been granted citizenship 1799 – 1911, box no. 3.81.588, 27th July, 1865)

- That Moses bought a number of properties in Christiansted during the years 1878-1888 is recorded in the land registers for these years (Audited Accounts, West Indian Accounts, archive no. 571, land register for St. Croix 1868-1894, box no. 86.95-96 – 86.121-122)

- That Moses in the 1880s was entitled to vote for the elections for the Colonial Council, the supreme authority on St. Croix, is recorded in the West Indian Government’s files concerning The Colonial Council (West Indian Government, archive no. 678, Subject files: Local authorities: cases concerning the Colonial Council, 1883-1894, box no. 3.81.70)
3. Make use of aids in your search

Searching the archives is now easier. Five million image files of documents are digitally available. Some documents have been transcribed at the same time from Gothic handwriting to searchable text.

Therefore, you can begin your search with the search function on this web page.

If the digital search does not help you, you can examine lists of relevant literature and continue your search from there. The National Archives have compiled a list of relevant literature, which you find here.

4. Ask for advice and guidance

The Danish National Archives find it important that everybody should benefit from the cultural heritage contained in the archives. This includes users without extensive experience of searching archives and conducting research.

We have produced a number of guides and tools that you can use during the process. See for example:

- Danish-English translations of archival terms
- List of Institutions related to the Danish West Indies (1600 - 1917)

5. Be patient – and persist

Finding precisely the records and documents that tell your story among five million image files can be a confusing process. At the same time, most of the documents are in Gothic handwriting and an older Danish that at times is incomprehensible.

Nevertheless, the documents are the gateway to our common past and their stories make us wiser about who we were – and why the world is what it is today. Every story counts.

Our best advice for everyone searching the archives is: be patient – and persist!