OUR STORIES

A teaching material about Danish colonialism in the West Indies

MUSEUM VEST SJÆLLAND

INDEX

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Thanks to
Allan Spangsberg Nielsen and History Masterclass 2017 at Næstved Gymnasium, Duane Howard and St. Croix TST students, UNESCO TST-network, Rikke Lie Halberg, Jens Christensen, Bertha Rex Coley, Herman W. von Hesse, La Vaughn Belle, Jens Villumsen, Kwesi Adu, Samantha Nordholt Aagaard and Gunvor Simonsen.

The teaching material is written with support from the Ministry of Culture Denmark

KULTUR MINISTERIET

PREFACE

On March 31st, 2017, the large atrium inside Copenhagen City Hall was resonating with voices. Around the atrium were numerous different exhibits with text, photos and other forms of creative expression, all made by high school students. They had all participated in a contest to create the best presentation of Danish-Caribbean colonial history with the theme of "Pictures from the Past for the Future". Around the city hall itself, debates, workshops, film screenings and concerts dealing with the U.S. Virgin Islands and Danish colonial history were taking place. The event was happening because on that day, March 31st, 2017, it had been 100 years since the sale of the islands of St. Thomas, St. Croix and St. John to the United States by the Danish government. The event was attended by high school students from the U.S. Virgin Islands and by the Danish high school students who had created the exhibits in the atrium. All of them having explored the same stories, their discussions and exhibits became part of a conversation about the way history is experienced and remembered, how it is used and told. These questions will also be our point of departure when working with the present teaching material.

INTRODUCTION

THE HISTORICAL SOURCES

When the Danish West Indies were sold to the United States and became the U.S. Virgin Islands, something happened which would end up being crucial to the way the story of 246 years of colonial history would be told in both Denmark and the U.S. Virgin Islands. The outgoing Danish administration made sure to bring most of the existing historical records across the Atlantic to Denmark. All legal documents, letters, journals, censuses, maps, drawings and records were taken to the Danish National Archives where they remain to this day. This was not uncommon; it was a practice usually followed by colonial administrations. They were important government documents and they were not considered of any particular significance to the people of the U.S. Virgin Islands. Therefore, the Danish administration left only the parts of the archives considered important to the incoming American administration, and most of what remained was sent to Washington, D.C. Thus, the people of the U.S. Virgin Islands were essentially left with only the stories in their collective memory, while historians in Denmark were free to use the material of the historical archives as sources and to build their own version of the story of "The Danish West Indies". As a result, history became distorted. Because which stories are produced when almost all historical sources are written by those in power in a colonial society? Up until the 1990s, in an inexpedient search for a single historical truth, the possibility of listening to other voices and stories of colonial history was neglected. This is now changing, as historians, writers and artists are working actively to add more perspectives to the story our past.

BETWEEN DENMARK AND THE U.S. VIRGIN ISLANDS.

The islands of St. Croix, St. Thomas and St. John are three of 7,000 islands in the Caribbean Sea, and for about 200-250 years the kingdom of Denmark-Norway was the dominant colonial power on the three islands. Today, the Scandinavian countries Denmark and Norway are no longer one and the same state, and when in 1917 the Danish West Indies were sold to the United States, this was done by the Danish government alone. The themes you will be exploring in this material tell stories from the U.S. Virgin Islands from prehistory to the transfer of the islands to the United States. This includes stories of the indigenous Caribbean peoples and of a rapidly growing global trade with colonial produce. Stories of huge ships that sailed out loaded with sugar, rum, cotton, tobacco, iron and weapons, not to mention stories of the brutal oppression of enslaved people transported across the Atlantic from West Africa to the West indies. Stories of

abuse of power in Danish West Indian houses and fields but also of people who stood up to the colonial system and fought for a better future.

246 YEARS OF HISTORY

The Caribbean islands were inhabited by the indigenous Taíno and Carib peoples. When Europeans began colonizing America, the populations of these island communities were drastically reduced. The initial colonization of what we know today as the U.S. Virgin Islands began when France took over the island of St. Croix in the 1650s and made it a French colony in the 1670s. In the same era, Danish expeditions arrived in St. Thomas in 1671 and started establishing what became known as the Danish West Indies. At the beginning of the 18th century, they incorporated St. John into the colony and bought St. Croix from France. This was done in 1718 and 1733, respectively. The establishment of the colony could only happen because European trade ships had expanded their trade with the West African kingdoms in the Gulf of Guinea where they created a great demand for enslaved people. This demand was overwhelming, and because of it, 12 million people were forcibly removed from the African continent. They were brought into a life of slavery and would witness coming generations grow up in societies so different from the ones they had come from that new cultures and communities developed based on shared experience and African traditions.

After 150 years of slavery rooted in racism in the Danish West Indies, the enslaved claimed their freedom in 1848. By means of a rebellion, they forced through immediate emancipation, which was followed by a period of deep poverty in an ailing society that until then had been kept alive by a meticulous system held together by ideas of racial inequality. Working conditions and public health were especially poor on the islands, and in 1878 the many farm workers revolted. They demanded better rights and better pay. Conditions improved slightly, but the established hierarchy between European Caribbeans and African Caribbeans made it difficult to achieve real change. Because of the islands' poor economy and the fact that Europe and Denmark had changed significantly during the previous 150 years, the thought of selling the West Indies began to stir. A debate unfolded as to whether the islands, which for so many years had belonged to the Danish crown, could simply be sold off. But after several attempts - in spite of the issue mentioned above and the unwillingness of some - in 1917, St. Thomas, St. Croix and St. John were sold to the United States.

1.

THE CARRIBEANS BEFORE THE ARRIVAL OF THE EUROPEANS

Humans have lived in the Caribbean long before Columbus and the Europeans arrived at the end of the 15th century. The earliest traces of human presence in the area were left behind by a people who came from the Yucatan Peninsula in modern-day Mexico approximately 7,000 years ago, and around 500 BCE another people emigrated northward to the Caribbean from Venezuela. Over the next 2,000 years, different cultures and local kingdoms, among them the Taíno and Carib kingdoms, developed from the meeting between the two peoples. Both groups lived in and around the Virgin Islands, and we still do not know which people Christopher Columbus' men encountered when in 1493 they came ashore at Salt River Bay on the island of Santa Cruz, today's St. Croix. What we do know for sure, however, is that their first contact with the Spanish would spell the end of them.

European guns were far from the only thing to kill the Taíno and Carib. The Spanish brought different diseases like measles, against which the Caribbean peoples had no defense. The island of Hispaniola (today divided into two countries, Haiti and the Dominican Republic) had an estimated population of 2-300,000 people in 1492. As early as 1508, the population had fallen to approximately 60,000, and just six years later, it had dropped to an estimated 14,000. This story repeated itself everywhere the Europeans came.

Because the indigenous peoples of the Caribbean were practically exterminated as Europeans began settling on the islands, not many written sources exist to tell their story. Therefore, much of what is known about the peoples today is based on archeological excavations and findings. For example, among 2,000-year-old pieces of pottery and kitchen utensils made of clay archaeologists have found a griddle, a so-called burén. It was used for baking round tortilla-like bread made from cassava flour. This is some of the first evidence of human processing of plants in the Caribbean, and it provides insight into the diets and ways of life of indigenous peoples at this time in history. Therefore, artifacts like the burén help us expand our knowledge of historical peoples and societies, so we may gain an understanding of who and what was here before us.

In the West Indies, pottery shards and archeological artifacts emerged from the ground when plantations were established, and sugar cane, cotton and tobacco were planted. Some of this was probably not considered to be anything special, but there are many interesting prehistoric rock carvings on the island of St. John, and 19th century planters are known to have sent archeological artifacts from the Danish West Indies to Copenhagen in times when museums and collections were being established in Europe. However, the largest collection of Taíno and Carib artifacts from the area was excavated on the islands in 1922, when a representative from the National Museum of Denmark spent nine months digging for archeological artifacts there.

A carved stone figure shaped like a frog – a symbol of life.

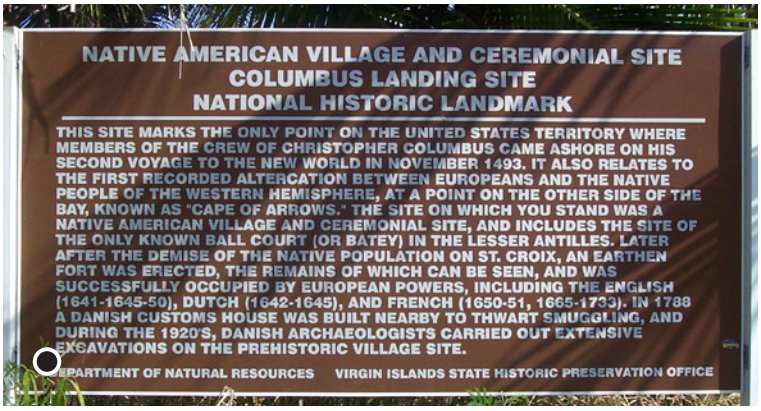
Photo: The National Museum of Denmark

Carvings like these are called petroglyphs. These are more than 500 years old and created by taínos on St. John. They depict the ancestors in the supernatural world and can be seen on the rocks at Reef Bay.

Photo: Daveynin, Flickr.

GUDMUND HATT 1884-1960.

In 1922, Danish cultural geographer Gudmund Hatt travelled with his wife Emilie Demant Hatt to the U.S. Virgin Islands where he carried out a series of archeological excavations. During a period of nine months, excavations were made in over 30 different places, and over 20.000 pre-Columbian artifacts were discovered. The extensive examinations of the sites were made possible thanks to the identification of good places to dig by interested local people. Moreover, local workers were hired by Hatt to help carry out the excavations. He chose to send the artifacts to the National Museum of Denmark in Copenhagen. He was working with the museum's ethnographic collection which was documenting different cultures from all over the world. The artifacts are still there today.



On St. Croix at Salt River Bay is the only ceremonial Batey or Ballcourt known in the Small Antilles. It was a very important place for the indigenous peoples, and Gudmund Hatt excavated the area. When Columbus and his men sailed to America on their second voyage, this was where they landed. Today it is marked as a historic place.

Photo: Wikimedia Commons.

AA face carved from bone.
Found during Gudmund Hatts excavations.

Photo: Nationalmuseet

INDIGENOUS ROOTS

The many artifacts Gudmund Hatt sent across the Atlantic to Denmark tell the story of what life was like in the West Indies before the arrival of Europeans. The artifacts tell us about the Taíno and Caribs and offer insight into a part of the Island's history rarely told outside the U.S. Virgin Islands. The artifacts ended up in Denmark, but they never became a part of the exhibitions of the National Museum. In fact, only today - almost a hundred years later - has work on the artifacts really begun. Today, the collection is digitized. Though explanations and descriptions of the displayed objects are not available yet, photographs of the artifacts are accessible via the museum's website.

Indigenous culture is increasingly important to people in the Caribbean. In the U.S. Virgin Islands, many people are interested in and feel connected to this part of the past. Nowadays, Caribbean culture is influenced by a mix of European, African and indigenous Caribbean traditions. In many cases, culture is important to people's sense of identity and feeling of belonging and may create an interest in family history. However, the sources of knowledge about the roots and forbears of many Virgin Islanders - and of African Caribbeans in particular - have been obscured by European history writing. This makes it almost impossible to determine a person's regional ancestry merely through ordinary family history research. Thus, modern DNA testing which makes it possible to trace a person's origins back to specific areas in the world has become popular since knowledge of one's origins may have a great impact on people's sense of identity.

At the end of the expedition they had found so many prehistoric objects that they began breaking them into pieces in order to transport them back to Denmark. It's a disrespectful way to treat cultural heritage that was unfortunately quite common at the time. The result was that only fragments of a whole were being preserved.

Photo: Nationalmuseet

ARCHEOLOGICAL FINDINGS

Because people are interested in pre-colonial times and in history in general, there are people in the U.S. Virgin Islands who believe it would be great to have a sort of main museum in the Islands in which the Islands' history and historical artifacts could be explored. There are several small museums, but their opening hours are short and their collections relatively limited. Politicians believe that a new and larger museum would be beneficial to the general public, to tourists and to the many school children who need to know their history. But creating a museum, especially an entirely new one, is expensive. That said, it may prove necessary in order to preserve historical artifacts that may otherwise perish. One of the main challenges is, however, that many of the things that might be interesting historical museum artifacts are already at the National Museum in Copenhagen, and thus the creation of adequate exhibitions may prove difficult.

A buried jar with child bones. Other findings of human remains that were scattered around led Gudmund Hatt to believe that the indigenous population had been cannibals. Archaeological studies have shown that the bones had not been eaten and that it was therefore one of the myths of "primitive wild people" that was very typical at that time.

Photo: Nationalmuseet.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:

You will discuss identity, sense of belonging and the accessibility of history. Please work through the following five questions in groups or pairs. Remember to include the reasoning behind your answers.

1

How should Denmark contribute to the increase of knowledge of the past in the U.S. Virgin Islands? Being the former colonial power in the area, should Denmark contribute at all?

2

Do you think Denmark should send the archeological artifacts excavated by Gudmund Hatt back to the U.S. Virgin Islands?

3

The hurricane season lasts from July to November, and the climate is hot and humid.
This is detrimental to museum artifacts. How do we make sure the artifacts are not destroyed?

4

Who should decide where historical artifacts belong? And why?

5

There are also museum objects from Danish colonial times of both European and African Caribbean origin, as well as artifacts that testify to the lives of the enslaved. What should happen to such artifacts?

ASSIGNMENT 1.A – DIGITAL EXHIBITION

If you go to the website of the Danish National Museum, www.natmus.dk, and look up "Gudmund Hatt" in the Digital Collections you may find several photos of the 1922 excavations and of the archeological findings.

1

Imagine that you are creating an exhibition about the different cultures of the Caribbean before the arrival of Europeans and Africans.

2

Pick three different artifacts and examine them. Take a good look at them. What are they made of? Are they decorated? What do you think they were used for? What do they tell us about the people who used them?

3

Now imagine you are experiencing your exhibition at a museum.
What does it mean to you?
What does it teach you?

ASSIGNMENT 1.B – THE MEANINGS OF OBJECTS

The two main functions of museums are making sure that historical artifacts are preserved for posterity, so that later generations may also benefit from them, and ensuring that the artifacts are made accessible to the public, so they may contribute to the creation of new knowledge about the past.

1

How do you think people in the U.S. Virgin Islands may benefit from experiencing historical artifacts from the West Indies?

2

How do you think people in Denmark may benefit from experiencing historical artifacts from the West Indies?

Compare the importance of the artifacts to people in the U.S. Virgin Islands and in Denmark.

3

In Denmark, 35,000 artifacts were returned to Greenland (a Danish colony since 1720s) where a new museum was built in 1976. But many other artifacts remained in Denmark, so that their story could be told in both countries, and joint research has begun.

Does this information change the outcome of your discussion? Do you think the same should be done regarding the U.S. Virgin Islands?

2.

FROM WEST AFRICA TO THE WEST INDIES

On the coast of the Gulf of Guinea in West Africa lie several old forts. Some of them were built during the 18th century, while others date back as far as the 17th century. Today most of them are but ruins on hills in towns where most people are less concerned about stories of trading enslaved people, gold, weapons and textiles. The forts still standing, with their worn down, white walls and rusty cannons facing the Atlantic Sea, are good for tourism and for school children exploring history. Many visitors to the old trading posts shudder at the sight of the dark dungeons and at the thought of the many people once squeezed together on the floors of the chilly, low-ceilinged rooms. From here, in the 18th century, many big ships were loaded with captured people to be shipped across the sea to an uncertain future in South America, the Caribbean or North America.

Once sold into slavery, it was almost impossible to avoid the hazardous voyage across the Atlantic. Some enslaved people were prisoners of war, others were debt slaves, and some were victims of raids by people on the hunt for villagers to sell to the Europeans. Later they were taken to the coast, and once European and African merchants had displayed their merchandise and negotiated with each other the dungeons of the forts would house the uncertainty and fear of the future in the minds of the enslaved. The period of incarceration in the dungeons varied, and sometimes the enslaved were given an opportunity to take a walk in the yard. Confinement caused disease, and as people were reduced to commodities, merchants were interested in keeping the prisoners healthy until a ship was ready to be loaded so they could be resold.

Chained, the prisoners were led through a coast-facing exit and transported in small boats to a big ship anchored off the coast. Often, this took place at night and with only a few prisoners at the time. The Europeans were afraid that the enslaved would try to resist and, the surf crashing violently against the shores, their chances of making it to shore alive were very slim. The voyage from Africa to the West Indies took two to three months, and the prisoners spent most of this time below deck in the cargo hold along with 2-300 other people also sold into slavery. They had not necessarily all boarded the ship at the same fort. Some ships sailed from trading post to trading post and were active in different places, which meant that the enslaved did not always understand each other's languages. Their clothes had been taken from them and the sanitary conditions were appalling. The only ways of resisting were either through suicide or rebellion, and both were difficult to get away with. The Europeans systematically made sure both the ship and life on board was designed so it could not be done. So here they lay, loaded as cargo onto a trade ship, on their way to a "new life".

Cape Coast Castle on the Gold Coast (today's Ghana) seen from the coast. *Photo: Ida Maria R. Skielboe*

THE PRICE FOR AN ADULT MALE IN 1749 WAS 96 RIGSDALER

The price for an adult male in 1749 was 96 rigsdaler, a monetary unit used in Denmark at the time. Payment was made in different European goods in which African merchants were interested. 96 rd. were equivalent to:

2 flintlocks (12 rd.), 40 pounds of gunpowder (16 rd.), 10 gallons (appr.) of aquavit (7 rd.), 9 pieces of textile (44 rd.), 2 bars of iron (4 rd.), 1 bar of copper (1 rd.), 2,000 pearls (2 rd.), a tin tray (2 rd.) and 20 pounds of cowries (8 rd).

A regular civil servant in Copenhagen would earn around 200-300 rd. a year.

As described by L. F. Römer. Reproduced according to the description in Danmark og kolonierne, Vestafrika.

A model of a slave ship. It is seen clearly how many people were lying on the deck, closely packed like goods. This model was giving to the British House of Commons in the 1790s by the abolitionist William Wilberforce as an example of how gruesome the slave trade was.

Photo: Humber Museums Partnership

A NEW LIFE, A NEW NAME

The expression "to give new life to something" means to give it new energy and strength. This is probably what it felt like in the plantations in the West Indies when the slave ships docked at the deep natural harbor in Charlotte Amalie on the island of St. Thomas. But this "new life" meant something very different to the Africans, who had been taken from their homes and sailed across the ocean. When they were sold into slavery, their whole lives changed and their identity started changing against their will. A very concrete example of this is that their names were changed. The names were officially changed, typically from African names into European ones. Thus, on many lists of enslaved, names like Anna, Magdalena, Peter or Tommy appear and only occasionally do we find a Cudjoe, a Kwaku or a Koofie who had been allowed to keep their Akan names. This practice and the general practices structuring slavery were the same all over the Caribbean and America. Often, a woman working as a nanny in a family was simply called "Nanny" or "Nana". Similarly, there are examples of women being called the same name as their predecessors regardless of what they were called originally. Because no written sources exist to tell us the story from the point of view of the enslaved, we cannot know to what extent they accepted their new names. We do know, however, that the different African cultures survived in the religions, cooking and music of the Caribbean, which makes it very likely that they held on to their real names in certain contexts.

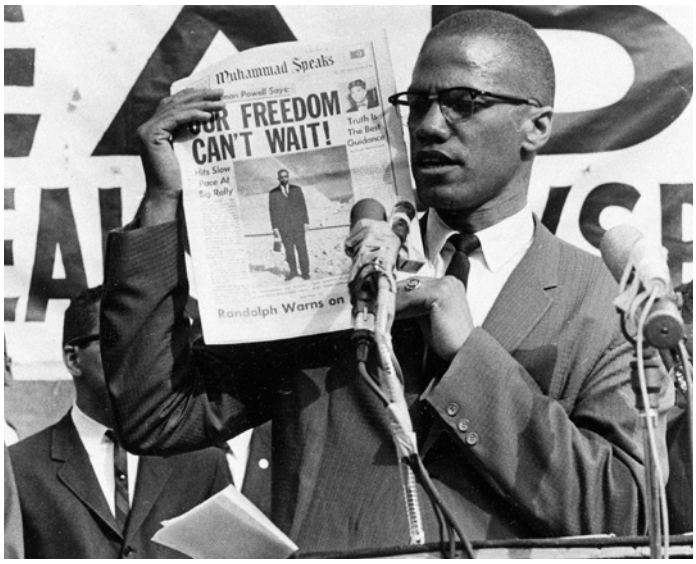
We also know that freed slaves who needed their last name registered were often given the last name of their previous owners. But when slavery was abolished during the 1800s, many people chose to invent entirely new names, thus contributing to their new identity as free people. In modern times, especially in the U.S. in the 1960s when African American civil rights were on the political agenda, many African Caribbeans and African Americans took African names and gave their children names inspired by their African roots.

Today, this door like any other like it, is called the "Door of No Return". This name has become synonymous with the moment the enslaved were forced to leave Africa. This door is from Elmina Castle in Ghana. It is narrow and low because it was designed to make sure Europeans could carefully control that only one person left the dungeons at the time to avoid turmoil and flight attempts.

Photo: Ida Maria R. Skielboe

One of the areas on the Gold Coast, where many of the Africans who came to the Danish West Indies came from, had many different kingdoms populated by Akan peoples. In Akan culture, children are traditionally named after the day they are born. Today, many Ghanaian children are also given an English name, and local culture is thus influenced by the fact that the British colonized the area in 1850. Similarly, colonial influence may be found in the form of English, Dutch, Portuguese and Danish last names.

DAY OF THE WEEK	BOYS' NAMES	GIRLS' NAMES
Sunday(Kwasíada)	Kwasi, Kwesi, Siisi, Akwasi, Kosi	Akosua, Akosi, Akosiwa, Así, Esi, Kwasiba.
Monday(Ɛdwóada)	Kwadwo, Kodjó, Kojo, Jojo, Cudjoe	Adwoa, Adjua, Ajwoba, Adjoa, Adjowa
Tuesday(Ɛbénada)	Kwabena, Komlá, Komlã, Komlan, Kabenla Kobby, Ebo, Kobi Kobina	Abenaa, Abénaa, Ablá, Ablã, Abena, Araba, Abrema
Wednesday(Wukúada)	Kwaku, Koku, Kokou, Kweku, Kaku, Kuuku	Akua, Akúá, Akuba, Akú, Ekua
Thursday(Yáwóada)	Yaw, Yao, Yawo, Yawu, Ekow	Yaa, Ayawa, Baaba, Yaaba, Yaba, Aba
Friday(Efíada)	Kofi, Koffi, Fiifi, Yoofi	Afua, Afí, Afia, Efia, Efua
Saturday(Méméneda)	Kwame, Kwami, Kuwame, Komi	Ama, Ámma, Ámmá, Ame, Ami, Amba, Ameyo.



Iconic defenders of African American and African Caribbean freedom and civil rights in the 1960s. Stokely Carmichael changed his name to Kwame Ture, and Malcolm X renounced his surname to clarify the colonial and repressive character of the name.

Photo: Wikimedia Commons

ASSIGNMENT 2.A – YOUR NAME

Work together in pairs. What does your name mean to you?
Write three to four sentences each about your name and afterwards tell each other about your names.

Example: My name is Valentin and I was named after my great-grandfather. My mother chose the name, and it annoys me each year come Valentine's Day.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:

1

What could you do if you wanted to avoid getting enslaved in the West Indies?

2

Describe how Europeans named the people they enslaved.

3

Why do you think people's names were taken from them? Try putting yourselves in their place. What would it mean to you if someone forced you to change your name into one belonging to another culture, another language and another religion?

4

Discuss what it might mean to a human being when their name is taken from them?

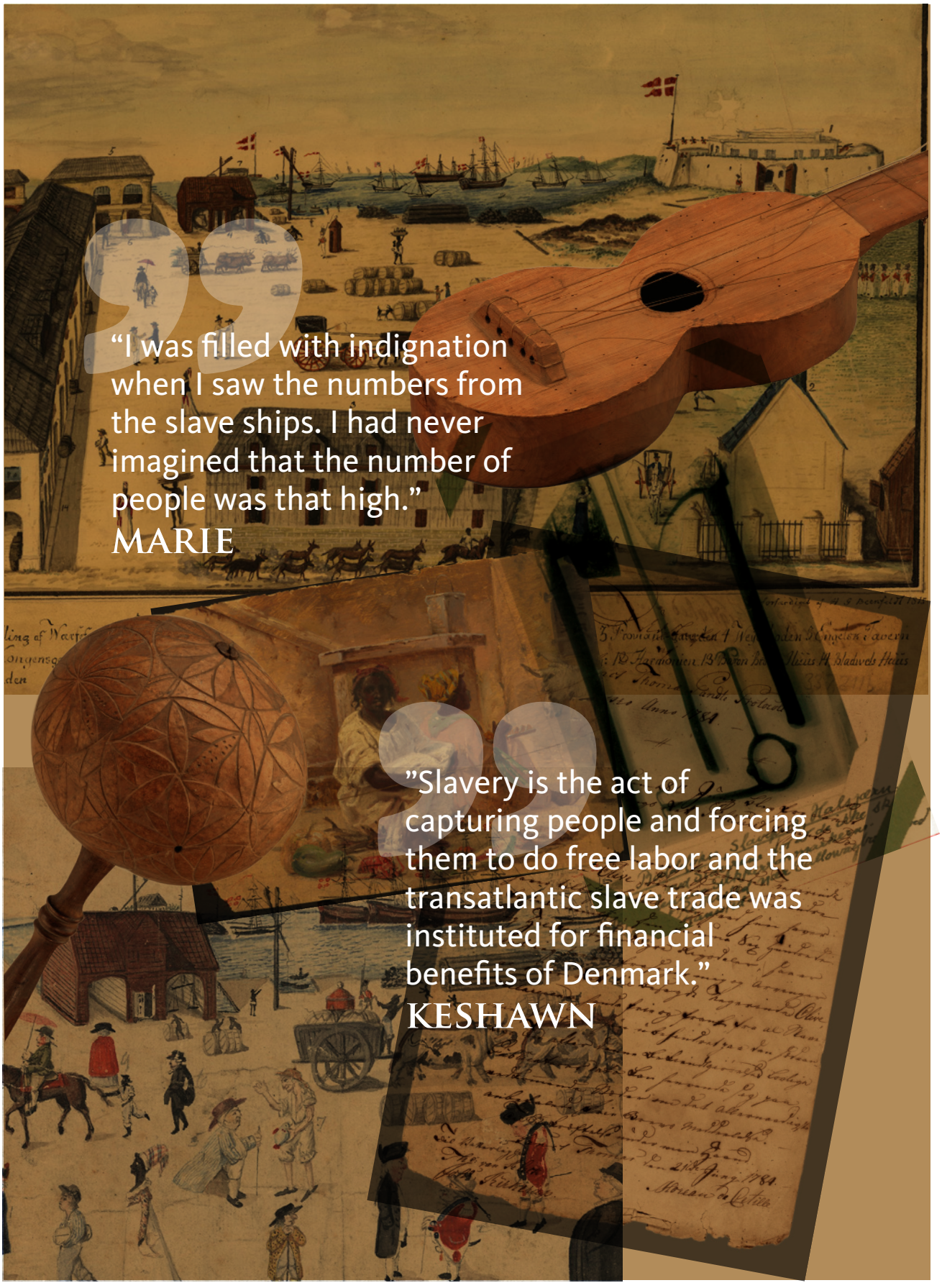
5

Do you know of other cases in history in which people's names were systematically taken from them?

6

Why do you think there are African Caribbeans and African Americans today who choose to give their children Akan or other African names?

For inspiration watch the video "Why I replaced my European name with my African name" by Okong'o Kinyanjui on youtube.


"I was filled with indignation when I saw the numbers from the slave ships. I had never imagined that the number of people was that high."
MARIE
"Slavery is the act of capturing people and forcing them to do free labor and the transatlantic slave trade was instituted for financial benefits of Denmark."
KESHAWN

Source 1:
17th century ledger belonging to Jørgen Iversen from St. Thomas in which the last four female slaves have been given cruel nicknames.

ASSIGNMENT 2.B – THE LIST OF ENSLAVED

Examine source 1. Look at page 2.
Here is a list of 24 slaves mentioned by name. Next to their name you may find their gender, and the column on the right has a number. This number represents the amount of sugar measured in pounds that a person was considered to be worth.

1

Do you recognize any names? Do any names stand out?

2

Examine how different values have been assigned to different people and discuss why this was the case.

3

Why were some considered to be worth 1,800 pounds of sugar and others only 200? Look at the four people considered least valuable and study their names. Let your teacher help you with translations.

4

Why do you think the last four women have been given nicknames?

5

What can this tell us about the relationship between Europeans and Africans?

3.

IN THE WEST INDIES

In the beginning, the Danish West Indies were predominantly a settler society. Most European settlers were not wealthy, and to them, settling in the West Indies offered a chance for a livelihood. At the time, plantations were not very large, and most often, plantation owners themselves would join the hard work in the fields. But during the 18th century, many plantations merged, creating fewer but larger plantations. This also meant that a plantation would yield considerably larger profits and attract wealthier European investors. Because plantations increased in size both in the West Indies and in the Caribbean as a whole, the number of enslaved people taken across the Atlantic grew rapidly. It is estimated that while this forced relocation took place, up to 12 million Africans were shipped to America - 120,000 of them on board Danish ships.

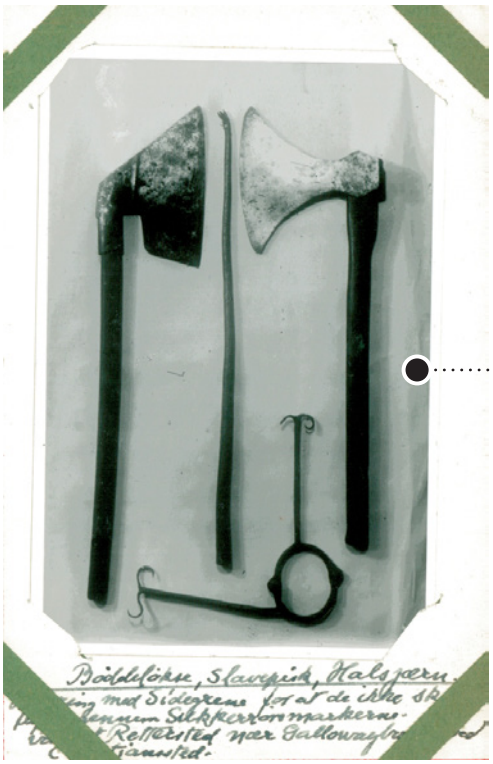
After arriving in the port city of Charlotte Amalie, the Africans were typically given a couple of weeks to rest and try to recover from the arduous journey. The European Caribbean merchants saw to it that the recently arrived people were given slightly better food so that they might look fit when they would be resold soon after – perhaps for the third or fourth time. They had arrived at an unknown coast, and ahead of them lay an uncertain future about which they could only speculate. These first weeks must have been marked by attempts to find out whether there was a way to exert any influence upon their future. However, the enslaved had already experienced first-hand how they had ended up at the bottom of this new society with no rights whatsoever.

Depictions of different lives in Christiansted on St. Croix at the beginning of the 19th century

Paintings by H.G. Beenfeldt, Danish National Archives

Depictions of different lives in Christiansted on St. Croix at the beginning of the 19th century

Paintings by H.G. Beenfeldt, Danish National Archives



Punishment was an integral part of 18th century society, and the life of an enslaved African was brutal. Here is a picture from a series which illustrates this part of life on the islands. The picture is part of a photo album from the 1940s and the notes have been written by the owner of the album. A note says, “Neck ring with prongs preventing the wearer from escaping through the sugar fields”. A clear example of how punishment was carried out in plantation society.

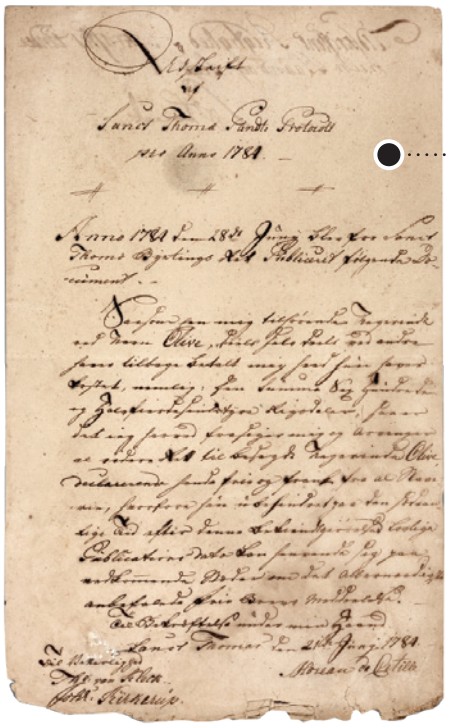
Photo:
The Royal Danish Geographic Society’s archives, National Museum of Denmark

SOCIAL STRUCTURE OF THE PLANTATION SOCIETY

Plantation societies were based on racial discrimination and on systematic oppression of enslaved African Caribbeans. At the top of society was a bourgeoisie consisting of a small group of European Caribbeans and at the bottom a large slave class of African Caribbeans. They were the property of the plantation owner, who could decide what happened to them just as he decided what happened to his livestock and material possessions. His ownership was essentially only limited by a law that prohibited him from killing an enslaved person.

Among the African Caribbean population, people's place in the hierarchy largely depended on their occupation. At the bottom were the enslaved people working in the fields. This group was by far the largest and its members had the toughest conditions and did the hardest work with very limited possibilities of improving their social situation. In 1797, 82 percent of enslaved people in St. Croix belonged to this group. A smaller group of enslaved African Caribbeans worked in the homes of European Caribbeans, in the sources these are referred to as "house slaves". Among other things, they would work as servants in the household as cooks or nannies. They were often of mixed descent - typically with an African Caribbean mother and a European Caribbean father. Even though working at the house was not as labor-intensive as working in the field, it was still very demanding. Physical and sexual violence against the girls and young women working in the house was not uncommon, and many "mixed" Caribbeans were born as a result. Other enslaved mastered a trade when arriving, which enabled them to work as craftsmen or master craftsmen though they were still enslaved. The tangible heritage that still exists in the U.S. Virgin Islands today – houses, forts and the ruins of sugar mills – was practically all build by enslaved craftsmen.

There was also a small group of free African Caribbeans. They had either been born free (because their mothers were free), had been given their freedom by their owners or had paid to achieve it. Even though free African Caribbeans and European Caribbeans were officially equals, the former in no way enjoyed the same status or the same rights as the latter. They were only allowed to settle in a part of town, which became known as "Frigottet" or Free Gut. Both in Charlotte Amalie and in Christiansted the neighborhoods of free African Caribbeans were located right next to the gutters that ran along the edge of the town. Here, construction was done more poorly than in the rest of town and the segregation of African Caribbeans and European Caribbeans upheld the existing hierarchies.



The letter that made Olive a free woman. The letter says she paid 670 rigsdaler to buy her freedom. Now she was the owner of her own body and had the opportunity to shape her own destiny.

Photo: National Museum of Denmark

The town markets represented important social spaces. Here, African Caribbeans had an opportunity to exert some influence upon their own lives, and on Sundays, people would arrive in great numbers from the countryside. Here it was possible to make a small profit selling vegetables grown in the village or home-made handicrafts.

Painting by F. Visby, Maritime Museum of Denmark

A guitar, a calabash and a maraca. All three musical instruments were made by African Caribbeans. Music was an important part of life both among the enslaved and later among farm workers, and there are several examples of songs with historical content that tell stories of for example events unfolding during rebellions.

Photo: National Museum of Denmark

FROM AFRICANS TO AFRICAN CARIBBEANS

West Indian society was profoundly different from European society. The entire Caribbean was characterized by similar ways of life, similar societies and cultures. The Caribbean islands were a cultural melting pot in which traditions, languages and ways of life were intermingling and fusing. People of different religions settled down next to each other and many different languages – African and European – were spoken. Some of these languages converged over time, giving rise to new languages called "creole". Like people from the Caribbean are sometimes called creoles, and the mixing of different cultural elements and adapting to life on the islands is called creolization. The fact that creolization took place in the Danish West Indies is important to keep in mind when imagining what life must have looked like on the islands in the 18th and 19th centuries.

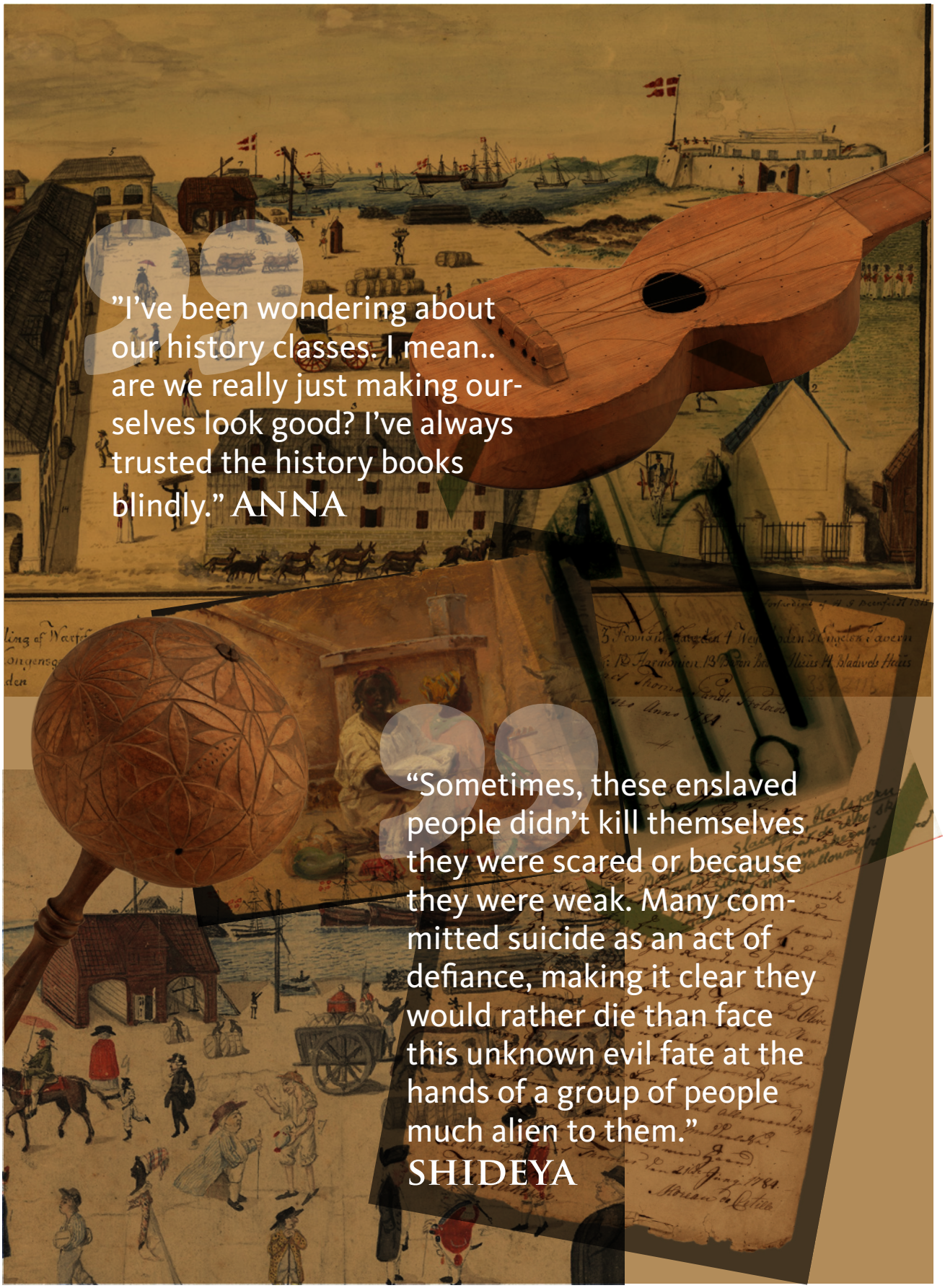
The people who had been forced to leave Africa carried their cultures with them, and so the lives of enslaved people were shaped by African traditions. The farm workers lived in small villages on plantation land and many practiced their own religions, danced and played music in the evenings. People developed a new sense of belonging and new communities were formed, especially based on linguistic affinity. Though African languages are no longer spoken in the U.S. Virgin Islands, they were important to the formation of new communities and were kept alive as long as Africans continued to arrive at the islands.

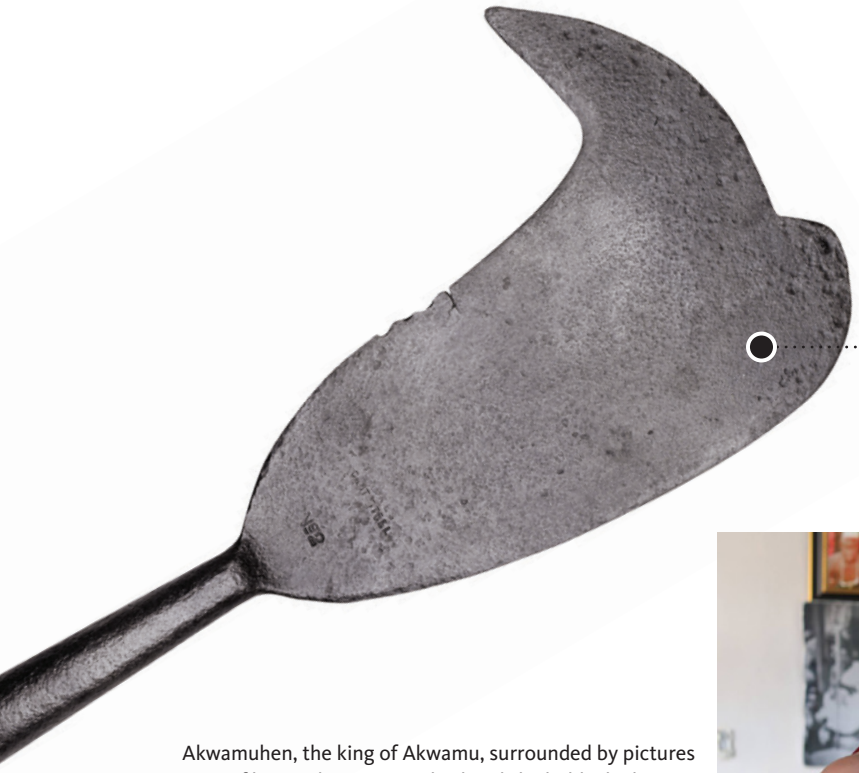
POSSIBILITIES OF RESISTANCE

As more and more people came to the Danish West Indies and more people were enslaved, European Caribbeans felt an increased need for control. There was a permanent fear that the enslaved African Caribbeans would rebel. Running away was another - albeit perilous - possibility to escape a life of oppression on the plantations. All over the Caribbean and in the southern states of the U.S., escaped slaves managed to establish small free societies outside the reach of the plantations. These communities were called "maroons" and running away was called "going maroon". Linguistically, the word "maroon" is demeaning, as originally it was used to refer to a feral animal, but today it is almost synonymous with the brave people who dared attempting to escape from the established hierarchies of the time. The fear of rebellion and of slaves escaping, not to mention a general attempt of greater control, led to stricter regulations on the islands. Punishments became more severe and African Caribbeans were prohibited from social gatherings with dancing and drumming. They were also no longer permitted to sell anything at the market unless they brought a written permit from the owner of their plantation.

If an enslaved man or woman ran way, their owner would put a "runaway ad" in the newspaper. These ads are excellent sources to the lives of the enslaved. It could for instance be written about a man, that he played the fiddle, rode a brown horse and was a good at playing cards, all details that are otherwise rarely described.

Illustration: "The Underground Railroad from Slavery to Freedom" by Wilbur Henry Siebert, Wikimedia Commons.


"I've been wondering about our history classes. I mean.. are we really just making ourselves look good? I've always trusted the history books blindly." ANNA
"Sometimes, these enslaved people didn't kill themselves they were scared or because they were weak. Many committed suicide as an act of defiance, making it clear they would rather die than face this unknown evil fate at the hands of a group of people much alien to them."
SHIDEYA



Sugar knives were a natural weapon to use during rebellions. To people who had not got hold of other weapons by means of smuggling, sugar knives would be a useful choice. It was an everyday life object at the plantations. The tall sugar canes had to be cut from the fields and taken to the sugar mills.

Photo: National Museum of Denmark

Akwamuhen, the king of Akwamu, surrounded by pictures of his predecessors. In his hands he holds the keys to Christiansborg, today Osu Castle, in Ghana.

Photo: Humans of New York

THE BIG REBELLION

On November 23rd, 1733, two men - presumably newly arrived Africans - were making their way to the fort on St. John with some firewood. As they were granted entrance, it became clear that delivering wood was a trick of theirs to get past the guarded palisades of the fort. They carried weapons and killed the guards in a successful attack. This was the beginning of a revolt against life in slavery, which lasted well into the spring of the following year. Besides clashing with and killing several Europeans, the rebels resisted through the destruction of property. They destroyed plantation estates and sugar cane fields as a way of causing damage to the economy, and thereby to the people who had placed them at the bottom of society. Even though the St. Thomas administration tried on several occasions to outmaneuver the insurgents and suppress their revolt, the 150 rebels succeeded in holding the island.

The rebellion only ended in late March of 1734 when two ships from the French island of Martinique arrived, carrying 200 soldiers. The soldiers came ashore in order to return the island to European control, and the rebels knew they would not survive. If they did not die fighting the French soldiers, they would be put on trial and executed when they were caught. The soldiers searched the island for rebels, and sources describe how in many places on the island they found groups of people who had chosen to take their own lives. One group of 11 and another of 24 had chosen to decide themselves how to end their lives. Behind them they left an island of torched houses and destroyed crops, but it only took a couple of years for a society of the same kind as the one they had tried to break away from to be established on St. John anew. Survivors convicted of taking part in the rebellion were sentenced to work in shackles in order to prevent them from running away.

Map of St. John on which the island's name in Danish, St. Jan, is written.

P.L. Oxholm, Danish Royal Library

Coral Bay on St. John. The dense vegetation on the mountains provided cover for people going maroon and weapons could be hidden in the thicket.

Drawing by Frederik von Scholten, the Maritime Museum of Denmark

The sources contain more details about the rebellion. Interrogations of captured rebels reveal that one particular group of Africans was the driving force behind the rebellion. It can be difficult to get an overview of the different names of the various ethnic groups that made out the African Caribbean population. Some of the new communities that were created were given new names often spelled in diverging ways, and far from all these names were written down. This is why the sources often describe the rebels on St. John as for example Amina or Mina, dubbing the rebellion the Amina Rebellion. It is believed that many of these Aminas came from the Akan kingdom of Akwamu in the eastern part of the Gold Coast and that most of them had only recently arrived at the Danish West Indies.

From 1729 to 1730 a war took place between the Akwamu and the Akyem kingdoms on the Gold Coast. The former suffered such crushing defeat that they lost their hitherto overwhelming dominance of the coast, and historians believe this might have meant that a large number of the kingdom's people were sold into slavery, some of them ending up on St. John shortly after the war. It was believed at the time that the purpose of the rebellion was to occupy the island and establish an independent Amina kingdom. The attempt failed on St. John in 1733, but 70 years later, a revolution in the French colony of Saint-Domingue ended up with the creation of the independent state of Haiti.

It would take a long time before slavery was abolished in the Danish West Indies. But at the same time as the Haitian revolution took place, the transportation of enslaved people to the Danish West Indies was officially banned. This happened when in 1792 a regulation entered into force calling for the transportations to end within the next ten years. Criticism of both the slave trade and slavery had been voiced elsewhere in Europe, but compared to for example England, this kind of criticism was fairly limited in Denmark. No one had called for the complete abolition of slavery, which is why only the transatlantic slave trade had to cease according to the above-mentioned regulation. However, even though it was now officially prohibited, illegal slave trade still took place across the Atlantic as well as locally in the Caribbean.

ASSIGNMENT 3.A - CARIBBEAN LIVES IN THE 18TH CENTURY

Take a good look at the two paintings by H.G. Beenfeldt depicting life on St. Croix. People are seen performing different tasks, they are dressed in different ways and some might have been painted with more personality than others.

1

Make a description of the different characters you see on the paintings – who do you think they are? How do you think their lives are?

2

Find out who H.G. Beenfeldt was. Had he been to the Danish West Indies himself?

3

Use the research and the descriptions you have made to discuss how the two paintings may be used as sources. What can they tell us about Danish West Indian society?

ASSIGNMENT 3.B - AKWAMUHEN, THE KING OF AKWAMU

1

Read all three blog posts and look closely at the pictures. What is the significance of the traditional kingdoms in Ghana today?

2

The king compares power today to power in the past. How does he compare the two forms of power?

3

At the end of his story he talks about a Danish colonial fort. How does he describe the Akwamu and their actions?

Next, examine source 4. It consists of comments to the blog posts written by Ghanaian historian Herman W. von Hesse.

1

What is his attitude to the king's description of the kingdom of Akwamu?

2

For example, he explains how, according to sources, the Akwamu king Asameni only held the fort a very short time and not several years as the king says. Why do you think their accounts differ?

CONTINUED ASSIGNMENT 3.B - AKWAMUHEN, THE KING OF AKWAMU

Source 3:
Facebook posts 1,2 og 3 from the blog "Humans of New York".

Source 4:
Facebook comments by Hermann W. von Hesse.

Hermann W. von Hesse *The Danes not Dutch. And Asameni held Christiansborg Castle for less than a year in 1693 and not "several years."
Like · Reply · 8w · Edited 11

Hide 11 Replies

Akua Gy Lol! I love all your corrections to this. He really sounds like a local trump: the oldest this, the best that, 'my subjects', 'first time a black man owned a castle' 😂
Like · Reply · 8w 1

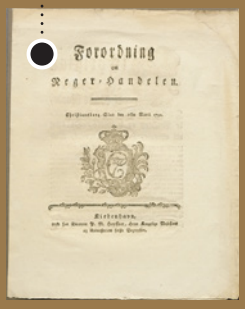
Hermann W. von Hesse Akua Gy thanks. Hahaha. Sadly, African history is not compulsory in high school and it's not taught in junior high or elementary school. Ghanaians either valorize/romanticize colonialism or whitewash their ethnic histories, like the Akwamu king is doing to make them look great.
Like · Reply · 8w 3

Hermann W. von Hesse Akwamu propaganda.
1. U didn't rule the whole of Southern Ghana. Just the south eastern Gold Coast (nowasays, Greater Accra, Eastern and parts of Volta Regions)
2. Akwamu was one of the most exploitative kingdoms in modern African history. Akwamu violated it's sacred obligation to its subjects. Even ethnic Akwamu within the kingdom were sold with reckless abandon to the Danes, British and Dutch. It took Akyem and Gã rebellion to sack Akwamu. Akwamu was vanquished and it's territory shrunk back into a tiny state on the Volta River, now known as Akwamufie.
Yes, Akwamu was feared by British, Danish and Dutch slave trading companies on the eastern Gold Coast because the West African kingdom exercised sovereignty over these European establishments - James Fort, Fort Crèvecœur and Christiansborg Castle - all in Accra, from 1677 to 1730 until their defeat.

According to Harvard historian, Emmanuel Akyeampong, Akwamu was an estate not a state because that kingdom virtually mortgaged it's subjects in its transactions with Europeans. Akwamu's greed became the germ that finally destroyed that state! Akwamu was unusual in its dealings with Europeans
The Atlantic slave trade corrupted the moral fibre of this kingdom.
Like · Reply · 8w · Edited 22

It may not look like much, but this piece of A4 paper has been highlighted again and again in Danish history. The constant reiteration of Denmark as "the first country to abolish the slave trade" has emphasized this step forward, but at the same time it has overshadowed the story of what life was like in Danish West Indian society.

Photo: National Museum of Denmark



THE ABOLITION OF THE TRANSATLANTIC SLAVE TRADE

Within limited circles of Danish society, the second half of the 18th century saw criticism of the transatlantic slave trade. Critics were inspired by developments in England, where in 1772 the Supreme Court had decided that all slaves would be given their freedom if they were to set foot on English soil. At the same time, arguments were made as to how the slave trade was in fact damaging the economy. With this development in mind, in 1791 a commission was tasked with examining the conditions and realities of the Danish slave trade. In December of the same year, a report was submitted to the Danish king citing various suggestions as to how to improve the situation: it was proposed that Denmark introduce a ban on transatlantic slave trade, which would take effect with a ten-year delay, giving plantation owners time to take "the necessary measures to become self-sufficient in slaves". Plantation owners would also be offered financial assistance from the state in order to improve living conditions for enslaved people as a way of "stimulating reproduction". Additionally, tax benefits would be given on the import of enslaved people so that planters would be offered financial motivation to increase the number of enslaved.

On March 16th, 1792, Christian VII of Denmark signed the "Regulation on the Negro Trade" which stated the recommendations of the slave trade commission. Taking effect on January 1st, 1803, a law had been passed which made it officially illegal to take enslaved people across the Atlantic to the Danish West Indies.

THE AKWAMU KINGDOM

By 1640, Akwamu had emerged as one of a number of interior Akan-speaking states competing for the control of Atlantic commerce in gold, captives, metals, textiles and other luxury goods on the Gold Coast (nowadays Ghana). In 1677-1680, Akwamu became the first Akan state (followed by Akyem, 1730-42 and Asante, 1742-1826) to redirect its imperial gaze on the Gã kingdom (also known as Great Accra). The kings of Great Accra had become important trade intermediaries after successively signing treaties with the Dutch, British and Danes to build trading forts and castles along Accra's Atlantic coast. These trading posts facilitated Atlantic commerce but also became a major cause of instability on the southeastern Gold Coast. Despite being the main suppliers of captives and gold, the Akan states in the interior felt slighted in the lucrative trade. In reaction, the Akwamu capitalized on internal conflicts within the Gã kingdom and sacked that state in 1677-1680. To show their supremacy, Akwamu did not only assume direct control of the European forts but also demanded the payment of ground rents. The Akwamu wars produced refugees many of whom sought mutual alliances of protection from the Danish, British and Dutch forts, whilst others fled to Popo and Glidzi on the so-called Slave Coast (now in modern Togo). The politically fragmented remnants of the collapsed Gã kingdom and its vassal states reconstituted themselves into independent towns in close alliances with the Danish, Dutch and British establishments. These alliances notwithstanding, the European establishments lacked the military capability to "protect" their Gã allies as they themselves were vulnerable to Akwamu attacks. For example, in 1693, an Akwamu official, named Asameni seized the poorly manned Christiansborg Castle under the pretext of buying European merchandize. Asameni had started his career as a pawn (or human collateral) at Christiansborg Castle and therefore understood the innerworkings and fragility of the Danish establishment. After several negotiations, Asameni handed over Christiansborg Castle to the Danes after controlling the establishment for a year. Despite their overpowering presence, the Akwamu empire fell to the Akyem and their Gã allies in 1730. Akyem then ruled Accra until that kingdom was sacked by Asante in 1742. The latter ruled Accra until 1826.

Source 2: "The Akwamu Kingdom" by Herman W. von Hesse. Ph.D. studerende University of Wisconsin-Madison.

4.

A FUTURE AS FREE PEOPLE

General Buddhoe urges calm from the back of his horse during the rebellion. *Painting by Carty, photo from an exhibit at Fort Frederik*

In late 18th and early 19th century England, a political movement was calling for an end to slavery, and in the beginning of the 1830s, the enslaved populations on the British islands of the Caribbean became free. Plantations in the Danish West Indies were in an extremely poor financial state. There were periods of hunger and drought on the islands, and in Europe a budding production of sugar from sugar beets had become a threat to the sugar cane industry. As their use of enslaved people faced growing criticism, plantation owners sought to defend their case arguing that slavery was necessary to uphold the sugar production. But the plantations were not profitable anymore, and soon the Danish West Indies had no choice but to follow suit and free the islands' enslaved population. But the upper echelons of Danish West Indian society, the islands' newly appointed governor and the Danish elites all thought it unwise to free the enslaved overnight. It was believed that slavery should be phased out slowly "for the slaves' own good". That way, they could spend some time getting used to the thought and understanding the responsibilities of being free and, most importantly, a society whose economy had been based on the work of slaves for 150 years would be able to slowly transform and enter a new reality.

Thus, in the 1830s, much to the dismay of plantation owners, a series of new policies were introduced in order to improve conditions for the enslaved. As part of the reforms, an enslaved person who had been baptized would now be able to testify in court. Moreover, free African Caribbeans were given the same rights as European Caribbeans and selling a child under the age of ten without the parents' consent became illegal. From 1839, schools were built in order to prepare the enslaved for a life as free people. The islands were preparing for the end of slavery, and in 1847 Christian VIII of Denmark announced that from now on children of enslaved women were born free. The same was not true for the rest of the enslaved population. They would have to wait another 12 years in order to achieve their freedom. This way, abolition would happen gradually, and the King would avoid having to pay damages to plantation owners for the loss of their "property". But the prospect of waiting 12 years to achieve their freedom did not sit well with the people involved.

In plantation society, the sounds of conches and bells were a signal to order but also to rebellion. In the daytime, the sounds would signal the progress of the workday, but if they were heard after hours people knew something was up.

Photo:
Museum Vestsjælland and the Maritime Museum of Denmark

EMANCIPATION

On the night of July 1st, 1848, the blaring of conches and the ringing of plantation bells were heard in the western part of St. Croix. This was a sign that something was going on among the African Caribbeans – someone was calling for rebellion, and unrest began to spread. A day of turmoil followed, and on July 3rd the situation escalated. Armed with sugar knives, sabers, machetes, axes and canes they marched on the town's police station which was torn down along with a couple of other houses. Facing the Chief of police, the enslaved demanded their freedom and demanded that Governor Peter von Scholten abolish slavery. They threatened to burn the town to the ground if their demands were not met. The governor was in Christiansted on the other side of the island, and the European Caribbeans had fled to ships in the roadstead off the coast of Frederiksted. They could do nothing but await the governor's return. The whole town was in an uproar and even though the governor quickly announced the abolition of slavery, the rebellion continued another couple of days. The situation was chaotic, and a few people were killed. In order to avoid further trouble, riders went out pleading for the return to order and especially stories of the efforts of one particular person have resonated through history.

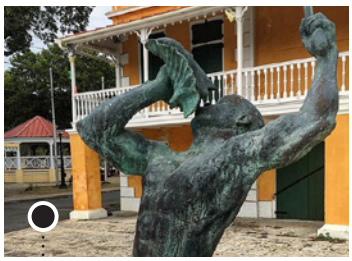
GENERAL BUDDHOE.

Historians have been unsure as to what name he was given when he was born, because it can be difficult to follow his trail in the written sources. But we know that his name has become part of history because of his role in the Emancipation Rebellion. He was known as General Buddhoe and was one of the leading rebels in Frederiksted on July 3rd, 1848. Buddhoe contributed to the rebellion not leading to bloodshed, and in the days after the rebellion, he rode around St. Croix spreading the word that slavery had been abolished. Thus, through diplomatic means, he contributed to calming the unrest that had arisen in the wake of the rebellion. As in previous revolts, in the absence of the planters, the now free African Caribbeans had directed their anger at the material things related to their lives in slavery. The houses, possessions, furniture and china of their former owners were destroyed as well as the homes of the despised overseers.

Despite the fact that General Buddhoe had helped restore order, like many others he was arrested following the rebellion in Frederiksted. No European Caribbeans had been killed, but the punishments for the rebellion and its devastations were brutal. Seventeen African Caribbeans were executed. Though Buddhoe was questioned for weeks in order for the police to ascertain what role he had played in the rebellion, he did not suffer the same fate as the ones who were punished by death. Instead, he was banished from the Danish West Indies and taken to the islands of Trinidad. What happened to General Buddhoe after he left St. Croix is unknown.

Peter von Scholten portrayed on a Danish bowl. On the back of the bowl it says the following about his time as governor: "...He held this position until 1848 when he, after having freed the slaves, returned to Denmark and ceased work."

Photo: National Museum of Denmark



The statue "Freedom" portrays an enslaved man sounding the attack. It was made by artist Bright Bimpong and erected in Frederiksted in honor of the 150th anniversary of the Emancipation.

A bust of General Buddhoe is placed in front of Fort Frederik, honoring the memory of his efforts during the Emancipation Rebellion.

Photo: Museum Vestsjælland

FREEDOM GIVEN OR FREEDOM TAKEN?

A few days after announcing that the enslaved were now free, von Scholten resigned his post as governor. He was criticized in almost all circles of Danish society and in particular by the planters, who had lost their property in the blink of an eye. Von Scholten travelled back to Denmark where he was prosecuted for misconduct since he did not have the authority to make any decisions concerning the abolition of slavery. He was acquitted by the Supreme Court in 1851 and died three years later, in 1854. Despite of the aftermath of 1848, in Denmark, posterity has treated von Scholten more mildly, which is why Danish 20th century history books portray von Scholten as a man whose merciful and insightful character led him to "give the slaves their freedom". A rather heroic picture of von Scholten was painted as part of a romantic notion of a great colonial past drawing to a close. In the U.S. Virgin Islands, however, General Buddhoe achieved a central position in the narrative of the emancipation. Likewise, the enslaved were not given their freedom – they took it themselves. The story of General Buddhoe, his deeds in the days after the rebellion and his unknown fate in Trinidad turned him into a symbol of a repressed population who took their fate into their own hands.

Therefore, the part played by Peter von Scholten was not as important in the U.S. Virgin Islands, something which also became clear to the Danish people in 1998. That year marked 150 years of emancipation, and Danish representatives had been invited to the U.S. Virgin Islands to celebrate. A reenactment of the events of July 3rd, 1848, had been planned in which Danish actor Kurt Ravn was to play the part of Peter Von Scholten and "free the slaves". But on the day of the event there was a commotion among the public – why was the reenactment the main event of the spectacle? Why were there no plans, for example, to issue an official apology for slavery? Kurt Ravn and the official Denmark were met with opposition and a debate which is still ongoing, 20 years later.

LANGUAGE MATTERS.

When in the 1830s measures were taken to improve conditions for the enslaved, the designation "slave" was officially changed to "unfree". This was done as an effort to refer to people with more dignity, but it did not catch on in practice. When society changes so does language, and this is the reason why today, instead of "slaves", the term "enslaved people" is used. It emphasizes the fact that these were persons that had been made slaves and that they were not merely slaves. This is part of an effort to see people for who they were rather than the function forced upon them by the colonial system.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:

1

Describe the roles of General Buddhoe and Peter von Scholten during the Emancipation Rebellion. Why have each of them been given an important place in history?

2

Why are General Buddhoe and Peter von Scholten more famous in the U.S. Virgin Islands and Denmark, respectively?

3

Why do you think that General Buddhoe has only now been given any real representation in Danish history books?

4

Explain the differences between being freed and freeing oneself?
Why does it matter how historical events are described?

ASSIGNMENT 4.A - FREEDOM

In Denmark, there are statues and monuments of many kinds in many different places, but nowhere in the country is there a permanent memorial to slavery in the Danish West Indies. In 2016, as a national gift, people in the U.S. Virgin Islands donated copies of three statues erected in the U.S. Virgin Islands to Denmark. In 2017, the statue "Freedom" enthralled Copenhagen, bringing with it the message that Danish colonial history needs its own official monument.

1

Look at the picture of "Freedom". Why is he portrayed the way he is?

"Freedom" at Copenhagen City Hall

2

Describe the difference between the statue of an enslaved man sounding the attack and a statue of a starving, sad slave in chains. Does it matter how we portray people? Which different stories are told?

3

Search for pictures online of monuments commemorating transatlantic slavery around the world.

"Freedom" ready for transport

ASSIGNMENT 4.B – YOUR MONUMENT

You will be working on your own monument commemorating colonial history. You may draw inspiration from discussions you have had in class. Choose either Assignment 1 or 2.

1

Write a project description of your monument. Consider its appearance and design, the material it should be made from, the story it should tell and where to place it. The project description must include an illustration.

2

Make a model of your monument out of a material of your own choosing – clay, wood, papier mâché, tin foil or whatever you decide. Consider its appearance and design, the material it should be made from, the story it should tell and where to place it.

3

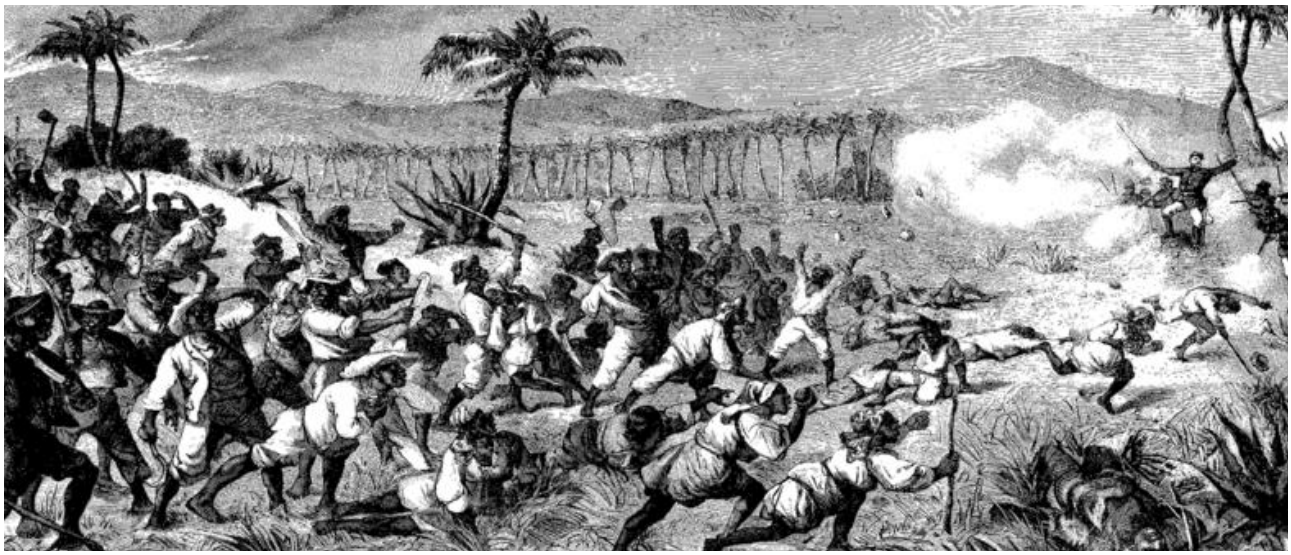
Write a speech for the inauguration of the monument. Consider the words and delivery closely. Why is the erection of monuments important? Why have you chosen this particular location? Who made it? What story does it tell?

"Freedom" in Charlotte Amalie and on St. Thomas

"Freedom" at Christiansborg Castle, Copenhagen

5.

THE FIREBURN



A Danish portrayal of the Fireburn taken from Danish weekly Illustreret Tidende, November 1878

In the time following emancipation, living conditions for the previously enslaved did not improve much. Through rules and regulations, the governorate made sure to prioritize plantation owners' need for cheap labor. Thus, it was decided that workers were only free to move to a new plantation on one particular day of the year, namely on October 1st. New work contracts could be drafted on this day. The rest of the year, workers would be bound by contract to the plantation where they had been hired. They were paid only ten cents with no possibility of negotiation. Therefore, many people chose to look for work in the cities instead, and others left for other Caribbean islands in search of a better life. This made it difficult for planters to find enough workers to maintain their production, something which led to inequality among the workers. Workers arrived from other Caribbean Islands, others bypassed the law and got better deals and higher wages than the workers who were already bound by year-by-year contracts. Also, a new boiling house had opened and they paid their workers more than what was allowed by law. This made room for discrimination, leading to frustration and uncertainty among the workers.

On October 1st, 1878, workers on St. John had had enough. People had gathered in Frederiksted to draft new contracts, and here a revolt broke out. The rumor had spread that ships and thus workers were prevented from leaving the islands. Enraged, workers started ravaging the city. They set fire to houses and shops, and a night of unrest followed. Only the next day did soldiers arrive in Frederiksted to arrest the rioters. Some rioters avoided arrest and were simply thrown out of town, but some of them proceeded to the plantations where they destroyed houses and burned down crops. Rhum and petroleum burned particularly well, and the sugar works were destroyed. For this reason, the revolt became known as the Fireburn. The groups of rebels walked

Even though slavery had been abolished, work done in the sugar fields still made up the financial basis of Danish West Indian society, and the European planter remained the one in charge.

Photo: The Royal Danish Geographic Society's archives, National Museum of Denmark

The graves on St. Croix belonging to the two soldiers who were killed.

Photo: Jens Villumsen.

Dancing women at a festival on St. Thomas in the 1950s. The dancers are carrying torches and machetes, the two weapons that have become symbols of the Fireburn. They are dancing behind a wagon – maybe the contents of the wagon represent the dry sugar cane waste which was burned by the rebels? Parades like these have taken place in the U.S. Virgin Islands ever since.

from place to place, managing to destroy more than 50 plantations on the island. Some European Caribbeans escaped to ships in the harbor, some were allowed to enter the forts and some hid in their houses and under beds hoping to avoid confrontation with the rebels. Only one planter died during the Fireburn, and the main focus of the revolt seems to have been to make a statement by destroying the sugar production rather than kill European Caribbeans.

However, around a hundred African Caribbeans were killed during the revolt and, according to some sources, one episode in particular made the military forces fighting to quell the revolt "almost as agitated as the rebels themselves". On October 3rd, the bodies of two soldiers who had been brutally murdered were found on the Carlton plantation. Their superiors had sent them to the plantation with two carriages that the military could not bring into town. It was early morning and the two soldiers decided to hide in the barn. At dawn, a large group of rebels had gathered at the plantation, throwing stones at the soldiers as they tried to escape. They were killed with sabers, canes and rocks, put on a cart and dropped off on the road where they were found later. After this, the military and the volunteers joining them were more likely to use all means in their hunt for the rebels. After a couple of days, about 160 people had been arrested, several farm workers had been killed and the revolt ended. In the following months, the number of arrests increased to 400.

AN INFLUENTIAL REBEL

According to sources on the Fireburn, many arrested rebels said - when questioned by police - that they had been forced to join the walk from plantation to plantation. But the sources also mention how some had been to two or three plantations before running away or joining other groups. In the sources, these groups are referred to as "gangs". One of these "gangs" was dubbed Nordsidebanden, The North Side Gang, because it moved around the northern side of the island. There were 25-30 rebels in the group, 50 at its peak, and especially one of them gained a prominent place in history. Her name was Mary Thomas. Together with her boyfriend, Jacob Pickering, she joined a man named Thomas Graydon and a couple of other farm workers who arrived at the Sprat Hall plantation on October 3rd. Thomas Graydon, who had been in Frederiksted the night before, had been given the name "Colonel" by members of the group. He ordained Mary "queen" of the group, which is why many know her today as "Queen Mary". During questioning, she confessed that she, Thomas Graydon and a man named Daniel Philip had been "captains" of the group, and they were convicted as rebel leaders. In the days after the revolt, Philip and Graydon were both shot following a court martial, while Mary Thomas and six other farm workers were sent to Denmark to serve prison sentences.

Today in the U.S. Virgin Islands, the revolt is remembered as an event characterized by strength, resistance and willpower. For example, in the years following the revolt of 1878, a song was written about Queen Mary and the events of the Fireburn, and the main road of St. Croix is named after her. On top of a hill in Charlotte Amalie there is a fountain with three female figures. It is located on a small square looking over the city and the bay, and on a plaque below the fountain it says that these three women led the revolt in 1878. The figures portray Mary Thomas, Axeline (Agnes) Elisabeth Salomon and Mathilda MacBean. Axeline and Mathilda both took part in the murder of the two soldiers and - like Mary - they were both convicted and served their sentences at the Women's Prison in Copenhagen.

Danish history books have not given the same attention to Queen Mary that she has received in the U.S. Virgin Islands. Similarly, there are different perceptions of the significance of the Fireburn in the narrative of the islands under Danish rule. This is one of the reasons why - as was the intention - it drew a great deal of attention when in March of 2018 a 23 feet tall statue of Mary Thomas was erected in front of Vestindisk Pakhus, "The West Indian Warehouse", at the Langelinie quay in Copenhagen. The artists behind the statue, Jeanette Ehlers from Denmark and La Vaugh Belle from the U.S. Virgin Islands, wanted to remind the Danish people that large parts of colonial history and of the perspectives on its stories are rarely included in the telling of history in Denmark.

THE FIREBURN IN NUMBERS

- Over 50 plantations destroyed
- 3 European Caribbeans killed
- Approximately 100 African Caribbeans killed
- Over 400 people arrested for participating in the revolt
- Approximately 50 of those arrested came from the Danish West Indies - the rest came from other Caribbean islands.
- 23 people died in prison, mainly from disease
- It took a commission 2 years to investigate the revolt
- 12 men were shot for their participation in the revolt
- 40 people were sentenced to death but ended up serving prison sentences instead
- 4 women and 3 men were sent to Denmark to serve prison sentences. The Women were sent to the Women's Prison in Copenhagen while the men were sent to Horsens State Prison.

Drawing of three of The Fireburn Queens from the schoolbook Clear the Road published in the U.S. Virgin Islands in 1976.

The inauguration of the statue "I Am Queen Mary" at "The West Indian Warehouse", in Copenhagen.

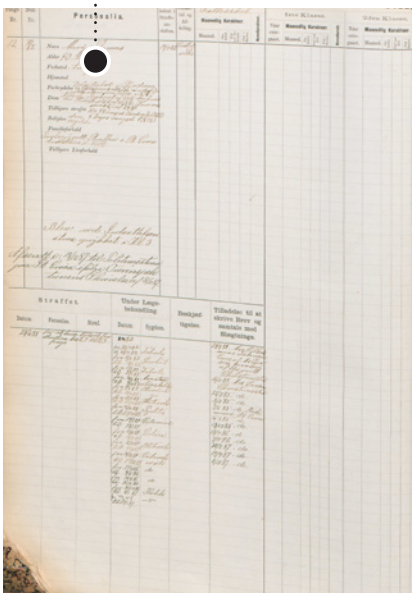
Photo: Ida Maria R. Skielboe

The fountain on St. Thomas with sculptures of The Fireburn Queens. Made by artist Richard Hallier.

Photo: Ida Maria R. Skielboe

Prisoner record for Mary Thomas from her time of imprisonment in the Women's Prison in Copenhagen.

Photo: The Danish National Archives



ASSIGNMENT 5.A – I AM QUEEN MARY

Use the statue "I Am Queen Mary" as a source.
Describe the statue's appearance and discuss it in your group.

1

Who does it portray? Where is it erected? How big is it?
What is it made of? Who made it? What does she look like? What does she hold in her hands?

Search online for news articles that mention the statue "I Am Queen Mary".

2

Which media outlets have written about the statue? How is it described in the articles?
Did the media focus on something in particular when it was erected?

Go on YouTube and watch "I Am Queen Mary: An interview with La Vaugh Belle and Jeanette Ehlers" on La Vaugh Belle's YouTube channel.

3

What do the artists consider important about the erection of the statue?

Why do you think it is of personal importance to them?

ASSIGNMENT 5.B - THE SOLDIERS' GRAVES

After the military found the bodies of the two soldiers, they were taken to Frederiksted and buried in the garden of the fort. The grave has now been moved to a cemetery in town where there are many Danish graves. It is practically impossible to find preserved African Caribbean graves. This is true of both the graves of enslaved Caribbeans and of those who were later freed. In the past, different Danish organizations have begun restoring the cemeteries in the U.S. Virgin Islands, hoping to preserve the graves, which in most cases belong to European Caribbeans. Considering that 90 percent of the 18th and 19th century population was African Caribbean, it may be difficult to understand why so few graves exist to bear witness to their lives. But they do exist. They are underground, under trees and in the soil of former plantation grounds around the islands, and a few are found at cemeteries as well.

1

Look at the picture of the soldiers' graves.

2

Why do you think there was a difference between a European Caribbean and an African Caribbean grave?

3

Do you find it important to preserve the graves for posterity?
Why/why not?

4

Write down some ideas of how old African Caribbean graves could be protected.

ASSIGNMENT 5.C - INTERPRETATIONS OF HISTORY

Watch "Gladys A. Abraham Elementary School Cultural Choir – Queen Mary" on Youtube. The song lyrics are as follows:

//Queen Mary, oh where you gon' go burn?//
Don't ask me nothin' at all. Just give me the match and oil.
Bassin Jailhouse, ah there the money there.
Don't ask me nothin' at all. Just give me the match and oil.
Bassin Jailhouse, ah there the money there.
//Queen Mary, oh where you gon' go burn?//
Don't ask me nothin' at all. Just give me the match and trash.
Bassin Jailhouse, ah there the money there.
Don't ask me nothin' at all. Just give me the match and trash.
Bassin Jailhouse, ah there the money there.
We gon' burn Bassin come down,
And when we reach the factory we'll burn am level down.

1

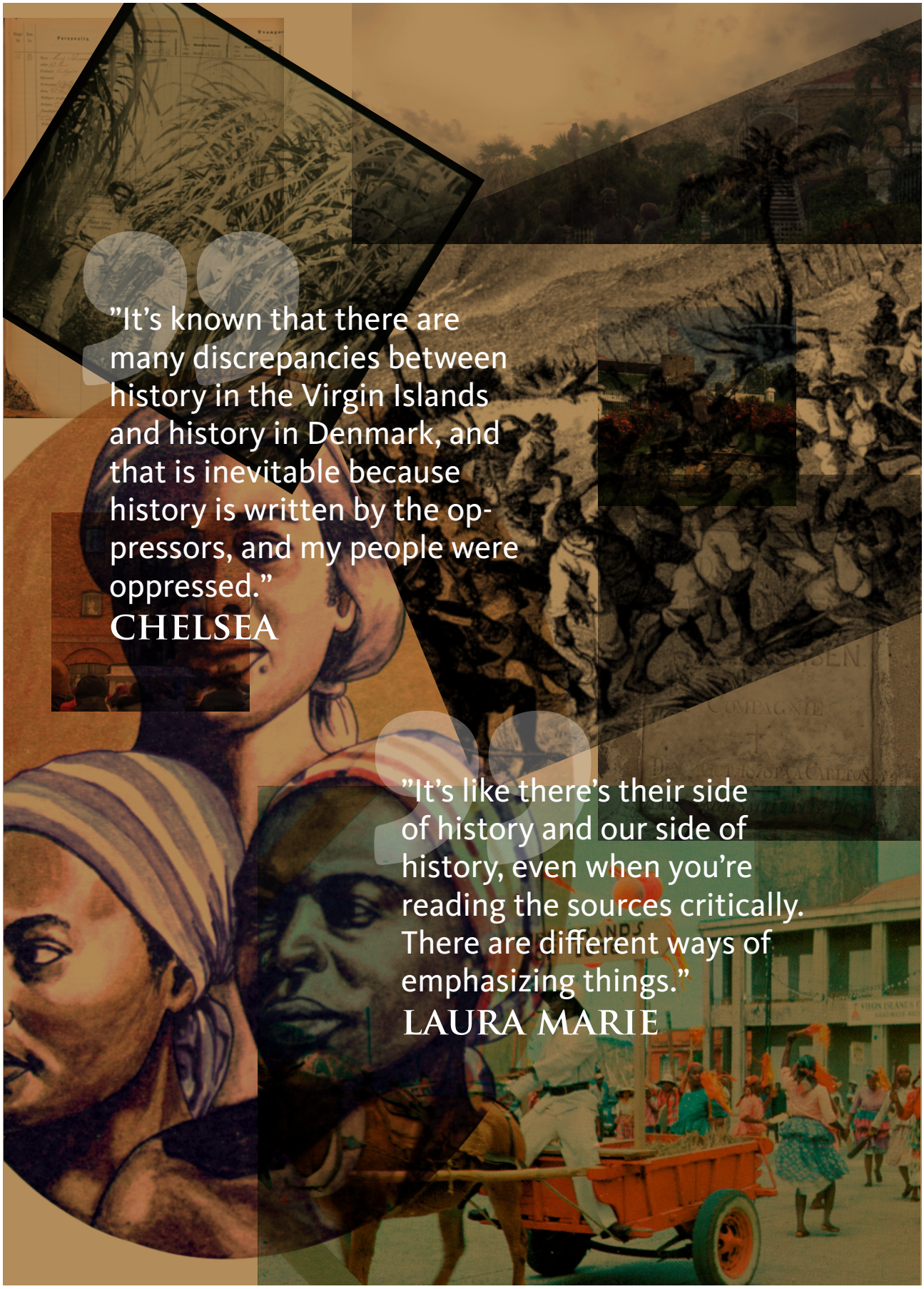
Now use the video and the picture of the festival from the 1950s as sources.
What do these sources tell you about the importance and place in history of the Fireburn in the U.S. Virgin Islands?

2

Next, use the installment of the work of art "I Am Queen Mary" as a source.
What does it tell you about the importance and place in history of the Fireburn, seen from Denmark?

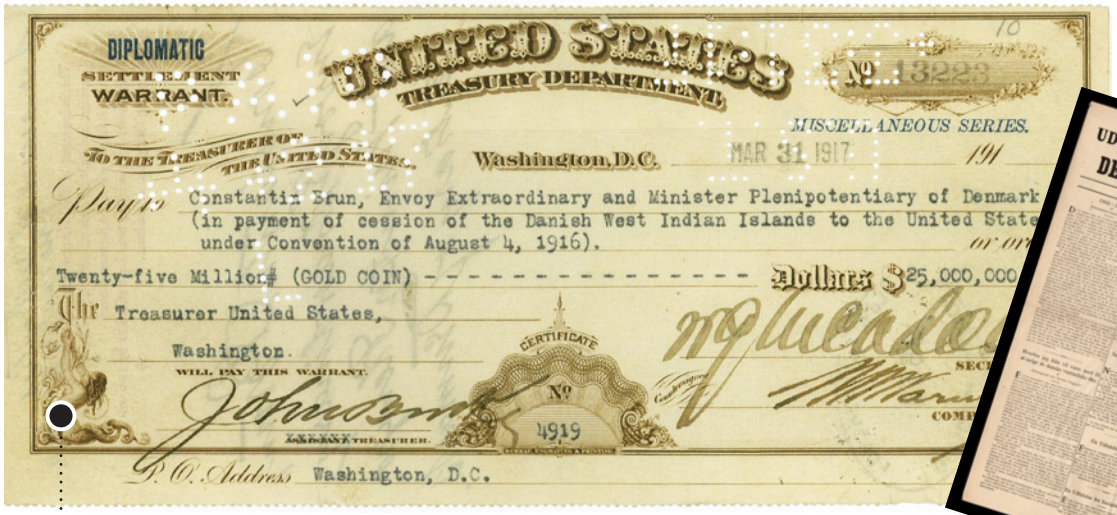
3

Compare the importance of the Fireburn in the U.S. Virgin Islands to its importance in Denmark. Discuss whether differences in importance exist and, if this is the case, why this is so.


”It’s known that there are many discrepancies between history in the Virgin Islands and history in Denmark, and that is inevitable because history is written by the oppressors, and my people were oppressed.”
CHELSEA
”It’s like there’s their side of history and our side of history, even when you’re reading the sources critically. There are different ways of emphasizing things.”
LAURA MARIE

6.

THE SALE TO THE UNITED STATES



The cheque for $25 million issued on March 31st, 1917, when St. Thomas, St. Croix and St. John were sold to the United States.

Photo: The National Archives, Washington, D.C., from the Danish National Archives

A letter drafted by Danish politicians concerning what was known in 1916 as "The West Indian case". Should Denmark sell the islands or not?

Photo: National Museum of Denmark

In the 19th century, Cuba was effectively the only prospering sugar producing Caribbean island. The English, French and Danish islands felt the consequences of degraded soil, the planters' resistance to change and a lack of investment in modern technology. In addition to low economic gains and deficits this also meant loss of political interest in the Caribbean by the European colonial powers.

In 1865, the first negotiations took place between the Danish and American governments on the possible sale of the Danish West Indies. The Danish West Indies had become a financial liability to Denmark, and the Americans were afraid that Germany, England or France would acquire the islands with the purpose of establishing a marine base in the Caribbean. This would go against American foreign policy, which did not allow European nations to expand their territories in the Americas. In 1867, a contract was drafted according to which the U.S. would acquire the islands of St. Thomas and St. John for the sum of $7.5 million. The agreement was passed smoothly in the Danish Landsting (main chamber of the Danish parliament from 1849 to 1953) but not so in the U.S. Congress, where it had to be processed several times and was voted down in 1870. At the beginning of the 20th century, another attempt was made at selling the islands. This time the agreement was voted down in the Rigsdag (name of the Danish parliament until 1953) with only one vote against. The reasons behind this is believed to be disagreements concerning the citizenship status of the islands' population after the American takeover and American refusal to hold a referendum on the three islands.

Of the European Caribbean families who stayed on the islands, many kept a sense of community based on the former colonial power, as seen here at the celebration of the King's birthday in the 1920s.

Photo: Museum Vestsjælland

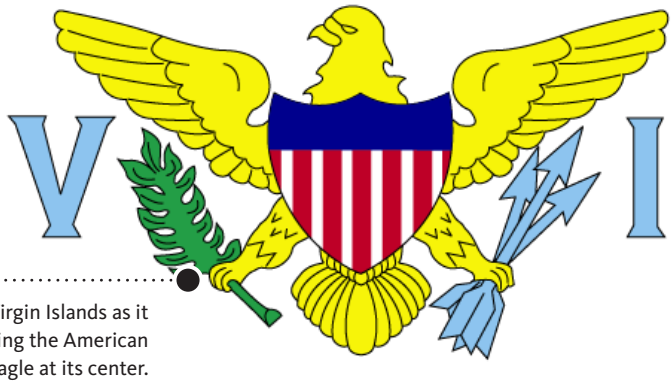
A romanticized clipping with a small version of Dannebrog in the background showing opposition to the sale of the islands in 1917.

Photo: National Museum of Denmark

On the day the islands were transferred, March 31st, 1917, Dannebrog was taken down and the Stars and Stripes was raised at a ceremony in Charlotte Amalie.
Photo: National Museum of Denmark

FROM DANISH WEST INDIES TO U.S. VIRGIN ISLANDS

With the advent of World War I from 1914 to 1918, the U.S. was increasingly interested in taking over the Danish West Indies, specially St. Thomas and its deep-water harbor. The Americans were not necessarily interested in the harbor as such, but they wanted to prevent Germany from gaining control of it in case of a German occupation of Denmark. Following significant pressure from the United States, negotiations began at the end of 1915. In Denmark, there was substantial political resistance to selling off the islands. Most of the resistance was based on fears that American racial violence - including lynchings - would come to the Danish West Indies as well. Nevertheless, negotiations proceeded at a high pace, and on August 4th, 1916, American secretary of state Robert Lansing presented a cheque of $25 million to the Danish envoy to Washington, D.C., Constantin Brun. Shortly after, the treaty was ratified by the U.S. Congress. In Denmark a referendum was held on December 14th in which a majority of the Danish voters approved of the sale of the Danish West Indies to the United States. The formal transfer of the islands took place on March 31st, 1917, on St. Thomas, as Stars and Stripes replaced the Danish flag Dannebrog at the fort of Charlotte Amalie and the islands became the U.S. Virgin Islands.



The flag of the U.S. Virgin Islands as it looks today, featuring the American eagle at its center.

AMERICAN CITIZENS?

After the transfer, it quickly became clear to the population of the U.S. Virgin Islands that - against all expectations - they would not be granted U.S. citizenship after all. In the treaty of 1867, the population was free to choose to become "citizens of the United States", whereas the 1916 treaty offered them the choice of becoming "citizens in the United States". This slight change in wording had great consequences, as the U.S. Congress stressed that the treaty offered citizenship in the United States and not the full citizenship implied by the use of the preposition "of". Only in 1927 and 1932, after years of grassroot-level work, all West Indians in the U.S. Virgin Islands were granted U.S. citizenship.

Life on the islands were still marked by poverty and poor public health in the years after their transfer to the United States. Many European Caribbean families with Danish roots chose to move to Europe or were given the chance to keep their Danish citizenship. The workers, however, were offered no such opportunity. *Photo: Maritime Museum of Denmark*

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:

1

Discuss the notion of "citizenship". What does it mean to have a citizenship? What can it be used for? Is not having any citizenship a problem?

2

Why do you think the population of the newly acquired U.S. Virgin Islands was not given full citizenship by the U.S. government?

3

Why was the U.S. interested in buying the Islands from Denmark? What interest did the U.S. have in adding the islands to its territory?

4

Find out what it means that the U.S. Virgin Islands is a territory and not an American state. What does this mean to the U.S. Virgin Islands today?

5

What do you think the mood was like in the U.S. Virgin Islands in 1917? What about in Denmark?

6

Discuss the population's sense of belonging. Do you think they felt Danish, American or Caribbean? Explain why, why not.

7.

REFLECTION

The teenagers you're about to meet live 7,561 km. apart, yet their history shares some of the same roots. They are from Denmark and the US Virgin Islands and in the period leading up to the centennial in 2017 they have been exploring their history and working together to discover the past. The students have been working with the same stories, as you have in order to get to know the past, to put focus on history and thereby better understand one another. What you see here is an extract of the reflections from their work. They have come face to face with the past, looked history in the eyes and reflected upon how choices made in the past affect the world today.

"We shouldn't brush-off our entire past. This is part of our history, and that's exactly what we've been really bad at embracing." HANNA

"I visited Cathrinesminde Teglvaerksmuseum. The exact factory where bricks used as ballast for ships sailing to St. Croix were made. It's amazing how history becomes more interesting when you're able to see and touch sites built centuries ago." KESHAWN

"I was just so saddened by the caricatures of enslaved Africans in the Danish West Indies. In all the paintings, the whites always looked human, while the Africans were portrayed as a sub-human hybrid."
ARON

"The colony's affairs are run by the mother country and the people in the colony cannot participate in the government. I think that today we have a different kind of colony." MICHAEL

"We reminisce on our history, because history shapes us into what we are today and allows us to grow to be better in the future." CHELSEY

"We sold them without them knowing that it was to a country that didn't intend to include them in their own system and carried on the oppression."
AMALIE & EMMA

"In Denmark, people can't relate to the history. It becomes superficial. But in the USVI there's a personal relationship. There've been people in Denmark that have been completely oblivious to what went on, while most of the people on the islands were affected by it."
EMILIE

The quotes are from the students' blogs, from intervies and from exhibitions by Næstved Gymnasium and St. Croix Educational Complex High School TST program.

ASSIGNMENT 7 – YOUR REFLECTIONS

1

Read the quotes and see if you recognize some of the thoughts that other students have had while working with the colonial history. There are also quotes on p. 19, 27 and 47.

2

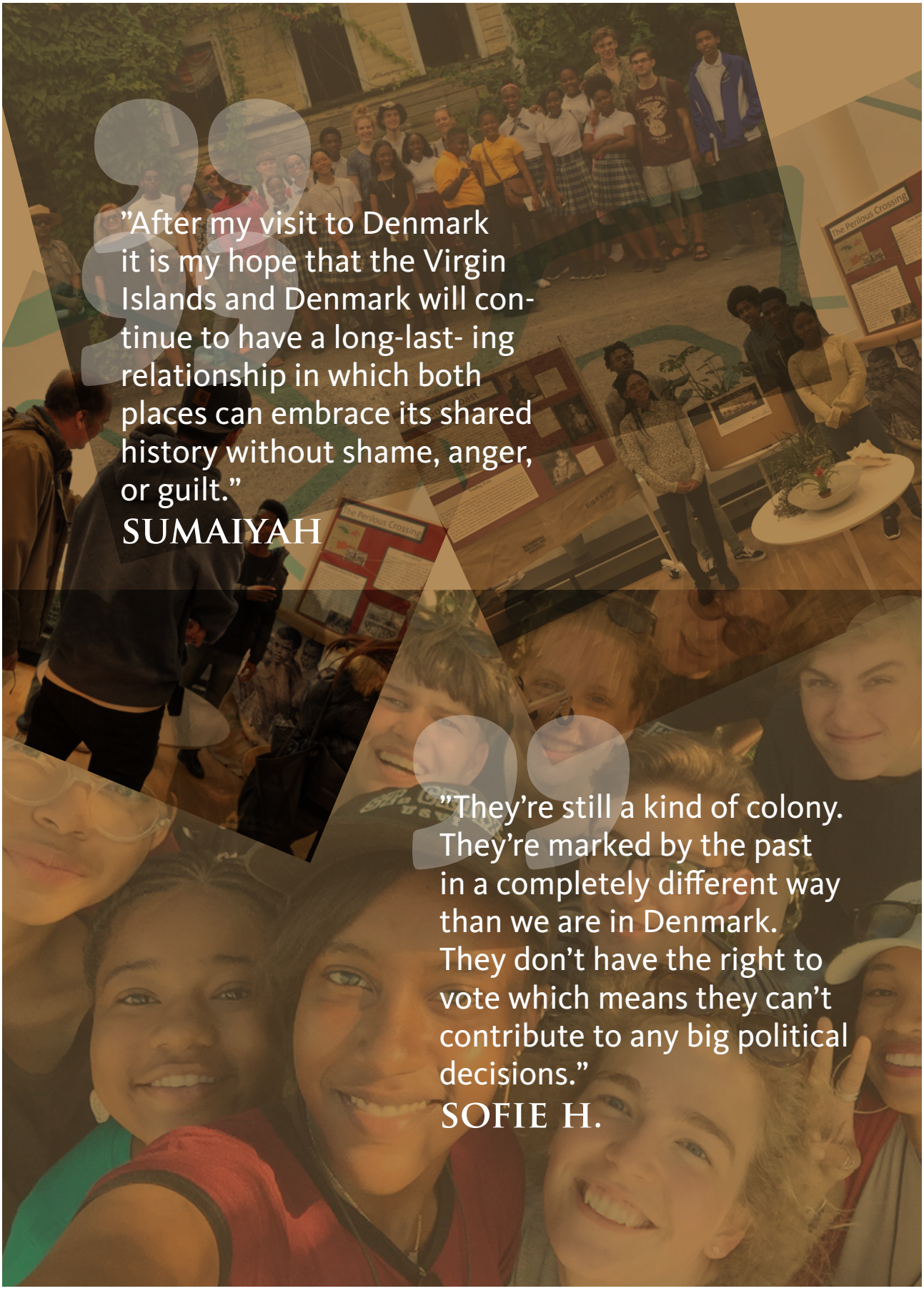
Choose 2-3 quotes that you think reflect some of the discussions and experiences that you and your classmates have had during your work with the teaching material.

3

Now try to place them according to the theme you've been exploring.
Make a mind map with the quote in the center and write notes around it.

4

Now write your own reflections. How has it been to work with these themes? What was most interesting? What rose questions? Is there something you want to know more about?


”After my visit to Denmark it is my hope that the Virgin Islands and Denmark will con- tinue to have a long-last- ing relationship in which both places can embrace its shared history without shame, anger, or guilt.”
SUMAIYAH
”They’re still a kind of colony. They’re marked by the past in a completely different way than we are in Denmark. They don’t have the right to vote which means they can’t contribute to any big political decisions.”
SOFIE H.

MUSEUM
VEST
SJÆLLAND