

GENDERING THE 'AQUEOUS TERRITORY'

A study of free Afro-Caribbean women and spatial practices in Charlotte
Amalie on St. Thomas in 1803

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History



ABSTRACT: This article examines how free Afro-Caribbean women shaped the transimperial space of Charlotte Amalie on St. Thomas in 1803. Using Ernesto Bassi's concept of an 'aqueous territory', the study highlights women's economic roles and mobility through an analysis of the 1803 Register of Free Afro-Caribbeans on St. Thomas. Focusing on migrants from Curaçao and Martinique, it shows how occupation, length of residence, and cultural competencies influenced integration. The article argues that free Afro-Caribbean women were not merely present in the free port but acted as spatial agents, actively contributing to the social and economic networks that defined the Caribbean's interconnected colonial world.

Keywords: Caribbean history, gender analysis, migration, colonialism, early 1800s.



Introduction

In the early 1800s, the Danish island of St. Thomas in the Caribbean was a small but strategically important colony within Denmark's Atlantic possessions. Claimed by Denmark in 1672, the island had become a key node in the wider Caribbean's sugar economy and maritime trade. Although it lacked the large plantations that characterized neighboring islands, its deep natural harbor made the capital, Charlotte Amalie, a vital trading hub for the circulation of goods, people, and information across imperial boundaries. Charlotte Amalie's status as a free port – granted in 1764 and allowing ships of all nations to trade without custom restrictions – made it a commercial and social center in the region and attracted free Afro-Caribbean¹ migrants from other islands. In this period the town experienced a significant influx of such migrants, drawn by economic opportunities, mobility, and legal flexibility.



View of Charlotte Amalie, St. Thomas, c. 1881. The painting shows the harbor, warehouses, and hillside residences overlooking the bay. Source: Painting by Frederik Visby. M/S Museet for Søfart.

¹ The term "free Afro-Caribbeans" refers to people of African descent living in the Caribbean who were either born free or later emancipated. In contrast, the term "Euro-Caribbeans" refers to people of European descent residing in the Caribbean.

Across imperial boundaries, often outside formal colonial regulation but tolerated within the open system of the free port, free Afro-Caribbeans migrated from islands such as Curaçao and Martinique to St. Thomas. Through their movement and settlement, they helped make Charlotte Amalie a fluid, transimperial urban space. This article examines how free Afro-Caribbean women participated in shaping this space – not merely as individuals adapting to an existing society, but as active spatial agents in a colonial port city marked by mobility and diversity.

Drawing on Ernesto Bassi's concept of an 'aqueous territory', this article analyzes Charlotte Amalie as a fluid and interconnected geographic space created through the movements and practices of historical actors. Bassi's analysis is implicitly gendered: his maritime world was populated primarily by men – sailors, merchants, and ship captains. This article seeks to complement and expand his approach by attending to the women largely absent from his narrative. It asks: How can Charlotte Amalie on St. Thomas in 1803 be understood as an aqueous territory, and how did female free Afro-Caribbean migrants participate in shaping this space through their work and social mobility?

Through an analysis of the 1803 Register of Free Afro-Caribbeans on St. Thomas,² – a census-like record compiled by the Danish colonial administration to document and control the island's free population – the article shows that free Afro-Caribbean women actively participated in and helped shape the social and economic structures that connected the Caribbean archipelago. It argues that women, too, must be recognized as co-creators of a transimperial space, that has so far been described predominantly from a masculine perspective.

Free Afro-Caribbeans in Caribbean Historiography

In Caribbean historiography, free Afro-Caribbeans have traditionally received far less attention than enslaved populations and European plantation owners.³ This article examines free Afro-Caribbean women in Charlotte Amalie and explores how their economic opportunities and social positions were shaped by mobility and settlement across imperial borders. Their ability to migrate and

² NARA Record Group 64, Censuses: St. Thomas Commission for the Registration of the Free Blacks: Proceedings and Register of Free Blacks, 1803.

³ An example of this is Higman, *A Concise History of the Caribbean*, from 2010.

establish themselves on new islands demonstrates a remarkable capacity for adaptation within the transimperial world.

This article aligns with a newer historiographical trend that shifts focus from viewing Caribbean islands as isolated national or colonial units to understanding them as part of a dynamic and interconnected interimperial space. In this approach, the islands are not seen as closed societies under a single colonial power but as nodes in a network of mobility, trade, and cultural exchange across imperial boundaries. Danish research in this area remains relatively limited, and the article therefore draws on a broader tradition of Caribbean historiography rather than the narrower Danish West Indian tradition, which tends to emphasize administrative and national perspectives, whereas newer Caribbean scholarship has been more concerned with mobility and everyday life in the region.⁴

A key contribution to this approach is Ernesto Bassi's work *An Aqueous Territory* (2017), which shows how maritime actors – especially sailors – created a transimperial “Greater Caribbean” (Bassi 2017: 57). Bassi challenges fixed national boundaries and instead conceptualizes the region as an aqueous territory: a fluid and flexible geographic space shaped by mobility, communication, and interactions across empires (Bassi 2017: 75-81). His work demonstrates that these actors did not simply move within existing structures but actively produced the connections and social dynamics that bound the region together (Bassi 2017: 56-60).

Bassi's approach provides a valuable analytical tool for understanding free Afro-Caribbeans as active agents within a complex, transimperial reality. However, Bassi focuses on men, while women's practices and contributions remain largely invisible. By combining his conceptual framework with studies of women's economic roles, this article seeks to make these gendered dynamics explicit and to expand the understanding of spatial practices through the experiences of free Afro-Caribbean women who, in many Caribbean port towns, gained economic agency despite social and legal

⁴ The article's interimperial focus in itself invites a perspective beyond the Danish West Indian historiography. Examples of studies with an interimperial approach include: Scott, *The Common Wind*, from 2018 in which he examines the role sailors played in spreading rumors and news about the Haitian Revolution. Also, Bassi, *An Aqueous Territory*, from 2017.

constraints that limited their right to property, regulated their mobility, and participation in formal trade (Hall 1994: 179-183).

Susan Socolow shows in her study of Cap Français that women acted as *ménagères* – housekeepers for Euro-Caribbean men, often in relationships that combined domestic labor with intimate cohabitation – as well as traders and property owners (Socolow 1996: 280-282). The role of *ménagères* was significant because it provided women with access to housing, social status, and in some cases, economic independence. Rogers and King add that many women also functioned as *rentières* – female property owners who earned a living by renting out real estate – often combining several economic activities in parallel (Rogers and King 2012: 358-61). In Martinique, Jessica Pierre-Louis and Anne R. Epstein demonstrate through their analysis of property transfers that free Afro-Caribbean women not only received but also actively donated property, consolidating social ties and ensuring economic stability (Pierre-Louis and Epstein 2019: 114-19).

What these three studies share is a site-specific focus – an approach also present in the work of Han Jordaan and Victor Wilson, who examine the free ports of St. Thomas, St. Eustatius, and St. Barthélemy, emphasizing their role as neutral trading posts (Jordaan and Wilson 2014: 275-78). They show how free ports attracted migrants and trade across empires. These studies primarily treat these islands as individual rather than as components of a shared interimperial space. Bassi differs here by arguing that space should be understood as something created through actors' actions and interactions rather than as something that precedes action.⁵

Existing research shows that the occupations of free Afro-Caribbeans in ports like Charlotte Amalie were shaped not only by colonial structures but also by interimperial networks, mobility, and cultural competencies. Women's practices were deliberate and helped shape the urban space – not merely as a static setting for social life but as something continually produced through everyday action. This perspective situates the analysis within a growing historiographical interest in how women's actions and spatial practices contributed to the making of Caribbean port cities.

⁵ For an overview of recent spatial approaches in historical research, see Fabian, *Spatiale Forklaringer*, from 2018.

By situating St. Thomas and its free Afro-Caribbean population in a broader regional context, it becomes possible to analyze how women participated in the creation of what Bassi calls an aqueous territory. The daily practices of free Afro-Caribbean women contributed to maintaining and expanding connections between islands, and thus they were not merely part of the space but co-creators of it. This perspective opens up a more nuanced understanding of colonial societies, where identities, affiliations, and possibilities for agency are shaped by transimperial relations rather than by singular national belonging.

Reflections on Source Selection

This approach requires historical source material that allows both quantitative mapping and qualitative analysis of socio-spatial practices. The 1803 Register of Free Afro-Caribbeans on St. Thomas,⁶ compiled by the Danish colonial administration, serves as the central source for examining patterns of occupation and migration among various groups in the free port of Charlotte Amalie. The register was created in response to the colonial authorities' concern over the growing population of free people of color arriving from other islands, reflecting both a desire for administrative knowledge and social control (Hall 1994: 180-182).

While censuses of the Danish West Indies existed, the 1803 Register was unique in its exclusive focus on the free Afro-Caribbean population, revealing the authorities' specific concern with mobility and social order. As James C. Scott argues, such practices of registration made populations "legible" to the state by simplifying complex realities into administrative categories that enabled surveillance and control (Scott 2020: 11-13, 53-56). The source contains information on individuals' gender, age, occupation, and migration patterns, forming the basis for an analysis of group composition and social position within the colonial society.

The register has been transcribed and processed⁷ to facilitate a quantitative analysis of the material, with the aim of identifying patterns and trends within the population. However, the register

⁶ NARA Record Group 64, Censuses: St. Thomas Commission for the Registration of the Free Blacks: Proceedings and Register of Free Blacks, 1803. Hereafter referred to simply as the 1803 Register.

⁷ The register was transcribed and processed by Hannah Katharina Hjorth as part of her master's thesis from 2023. For a more detailed account of the background and creation of the register, see the thesis.

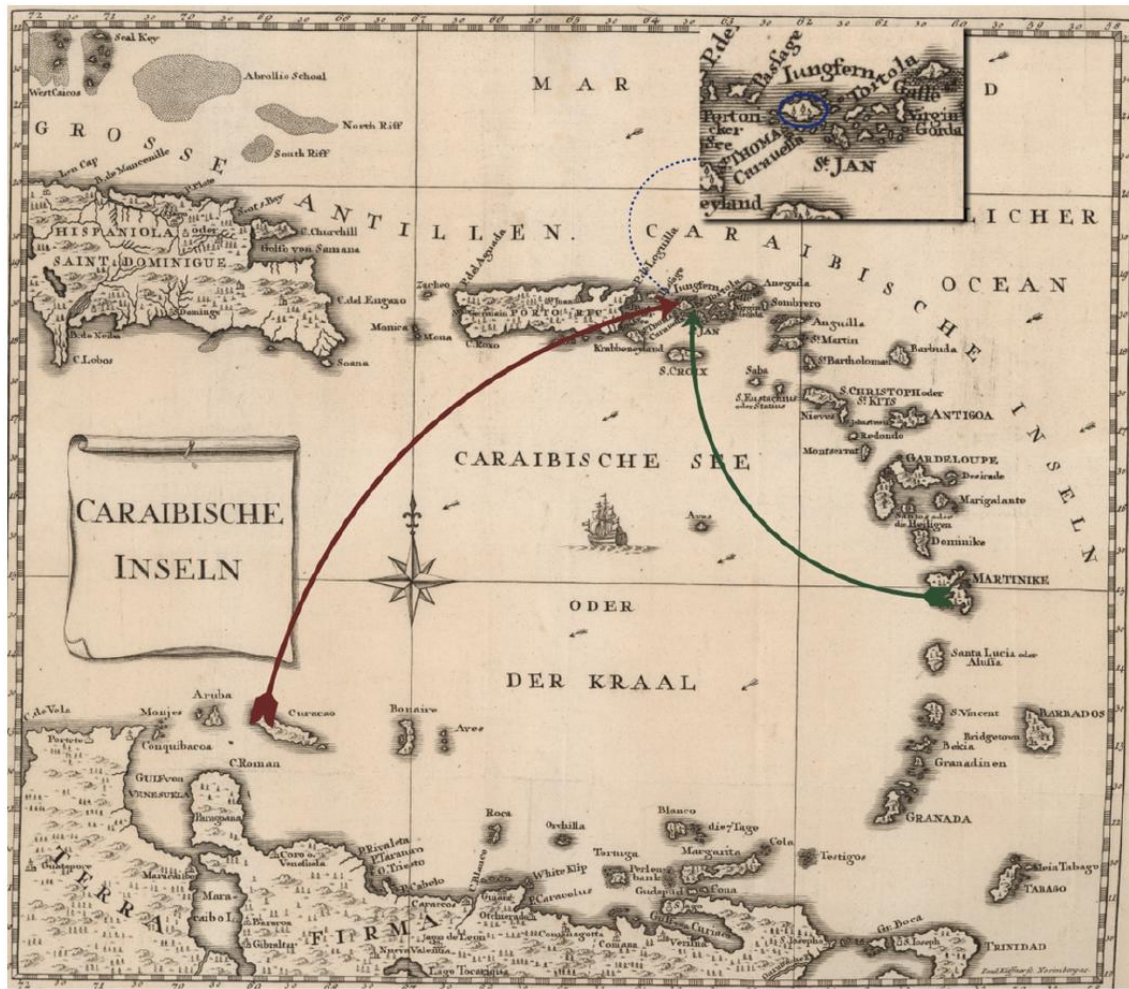
primarily captures formal occupations and basic demographic data, thus offering little insight into the social relations, networks, and informal practices that were also central to the spatial agency and everyday lives of free Afro-Caribbeans. As such, the source reflects the colonial administration's classificatory logic more than the lived experiences of the registered individuals. The quantitative data provide the foundation for an overall demographic and social mapping, while the qualitative analysis focuses on the types of occupation and economic conditions that shaped the agency of free Afro-Caribbeans on St. Thomas in 1803.

The Mobility and Spatial Practices of Free Afro-Caribbean Women in the Free Port

In 1797, the free Afro-Caribbean population on St. Thomas was estimated at 239 individuals (Hall 1994: 146). By 1803, the number had increased to 997, of whom 719 were born elsewhere. This development reflects a significant migration and mobility within the Caribbean region and confirms St. Thomas's role as a transimperial hub.⁸ As a free port, St. Thomas offered exceptional opportunities for trade and mobility across colonial boundaries, attracting free Afro-Caribbeans seeking economic opportunities, social networks, or an alternative to the conditions in their birth colonies. These patterns exemplify the image presented by Bassi of an aqueous territory, where movement and connections define the geographic space.

The register lists 47 different places of birth besides St. Thomas. This article focuses on the two largest recorded migrant groups – individuals born in the French colony of Martinique and the Dutch colony of Curaçao – as well as on the locally born Afro-Caribbeans on St. Thomas, who serve as a comparable group.

⁸ NARA Record Group 64, Censuses: St. Thomas Commission for the Registration of the Free Blacks: Proceedings and Register of Free Blacks, 1803.



Map from 1777 of the Lesser Antilles highlighting St. Thomas, Curaçao, and Martinique. Arrows indicate the main routes of migration and maritime connection between islands, illustrating the transimperial mobility that linked the Danish, French and Dutch colonies. St. Thomas, marked in the northern Virgin Islands, functioned as a central free port in this network, with Curaçao located to the west (red arrow) and Martinique to the east (green arrow). Source: John Carter Brown Librar, Oldendorp, C. G. A., C. G.A. Oldendorp's Geschichte der Mission der Evangelischen Brüder auf den caraibischen Inseln S. Thomas, S. Croix und S. Jan, 1777.⁹

⁹ I would like to thank my academic advisor, Hannah Katharina Hjorth, who transcribed and processed the dataset used in this article and for producing the map that forms part of the visual material. The arrows indicating routes of connection were added by Hjorth for illustrative purposes, based on the patterns of mobility discussed in this article. All remaining errors are mine.

As shown in Figure 1, women outnumbered men among both the local free Afro-Caribbeans and the migrant group from Curaçao, while the gender distribution among those from Martinique was more balanced. Overall, the data suggests that women played a central role in migration patterns.

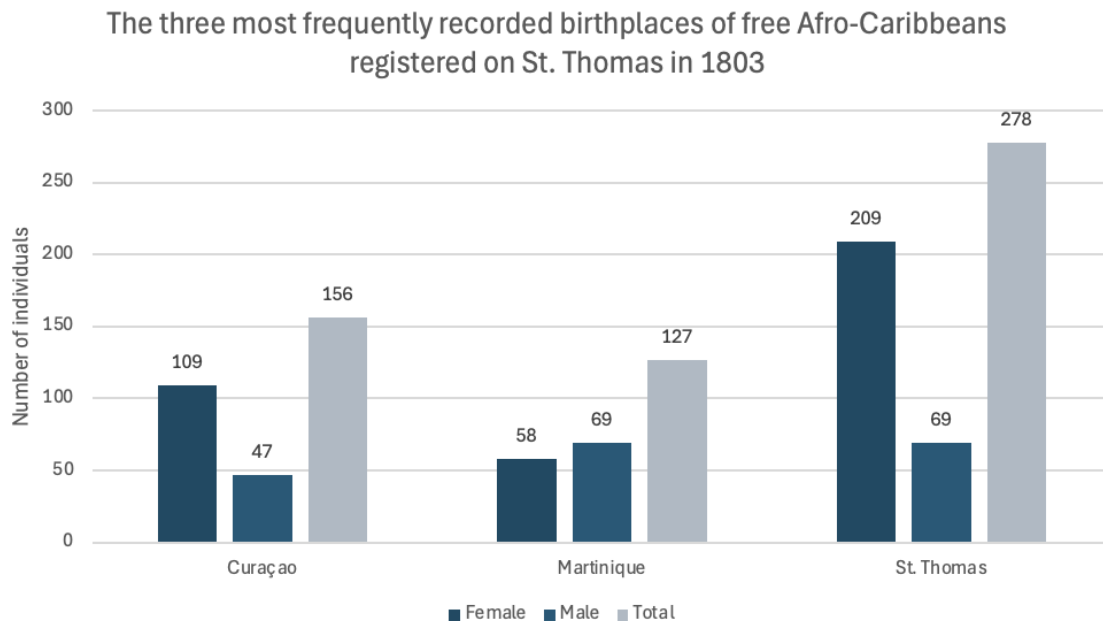


Figure 1 source: The 1803 Register of Free Afro-Caribbeans on St. Thomas

St. Thomas likely attracted women already experienced in navigating urban life – skills, such as managing household economies and trading goods, which were essential to survival in Caribbean port towns and had likely been acquired in places like Curaçao and Martinique. Free Afro-Caribbeans were mainly concentrated in urban centers such as Charlotte Amalie, where they engaged in small-scale trade and domestic service rather than rural agriculture (Hall 1994:180-184).

In the historiographical tradition, mobility in the Caribbean archipelago has often been associated with men as the primary agents connecting the region. Bassi's concept of an aqueous territory captures how sailors and merchants shaped a transimperial space through maritime movement and exchange (Bassi 2017: 75-81). The 1803 Register challenges this view: free Afro-Caribbean women actively participated in transimperial mobility – not necessarily at sea, but through migration and interaction in urban environments. Female migrants from Curaçao and Martinique were recorded as seamstresses, cooks, or washerwomen, occupations that depended on maritime traffic and trade. Through such work, women established relationships with sailors, merchants, and households,

positioning themselves within the networks that sustained the free port economy. Charlotte Amalie's dense urban environment offered both economic and social mobility, attracting women who could navigate its fluid boundaries between domestic, commercial, and maritime spheres (Hall 1994: 180-184). Viewing these women as spatial agents means recognizing that they not only moved within space but also actively shaped it. Drawing on Louise Fabian's notion of spatial practice, space is here understood as something socially produced through everyday actions and interactions (Fabian 2018: 22-27). Women's economic and social activities in Charlotte Amalie thus contributed to shaping the urban environment itself.

Looking at Figures 2, 3, and 4, the occupational distribution among free Afro-Caribbean women shows that one profession recurs across all three groups: seamstress. This suggests that sewing constituted an important and gender-specific form of labor accessible to free Afro-Caribbean women regardless of their place of birth. Among those from Martinique, seamstress was the most frequently listed occupation (22 out of 43). The inclusion of "wife" among this group as an occupation may reflect both inconsistency in the register and the blurred line between marital and economic status; in some cases, it may denote a role like *ménagères* (Socolow 1996: 280-282). Nonetheless, the register generally records only one occupation per individual and does not capture cases in which women combined several forms of labor.

The group from Curaçao shows a more diverse pattern. While seamstress also dominates (51 out of 86), many worked as sellers (20 as "seller" and 5 as "seller_street"), indicating active participation in the urban trade economy – consistent with Rogers and King's portrayal of women as dynamic actors in informal trade (Rogers and King 2012: 359-61). The 1803 Register does not specify what kinds of goods were sold or what was being sewn, reflecting the general limitations of this type of administrative source.

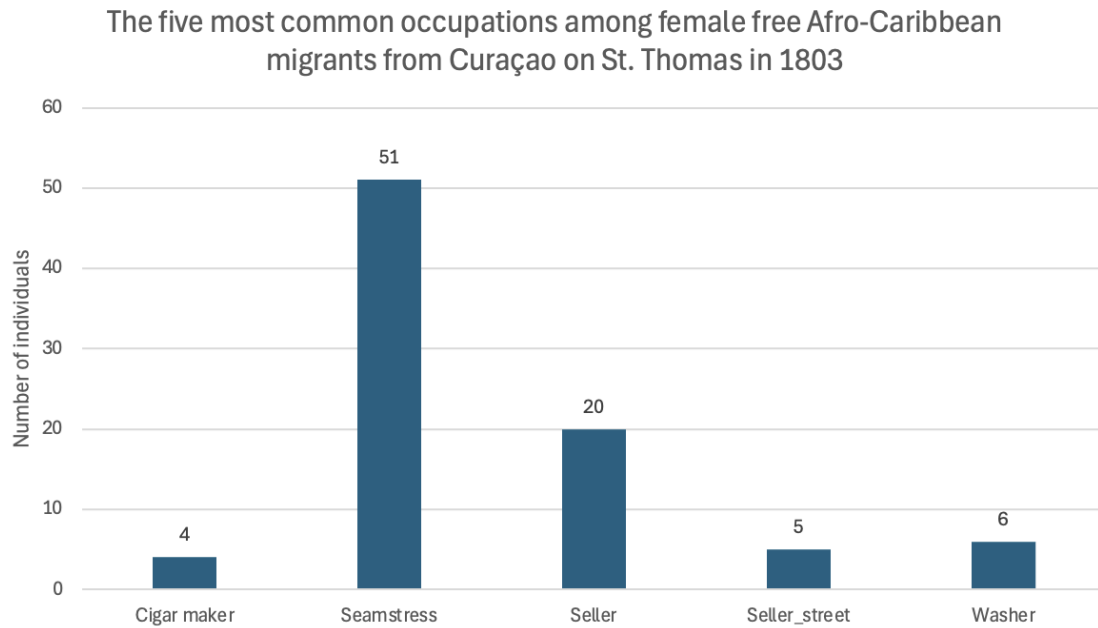


Figure 2 source: The 1803 Register of Free Afro-Caribbeans on St. Thomas

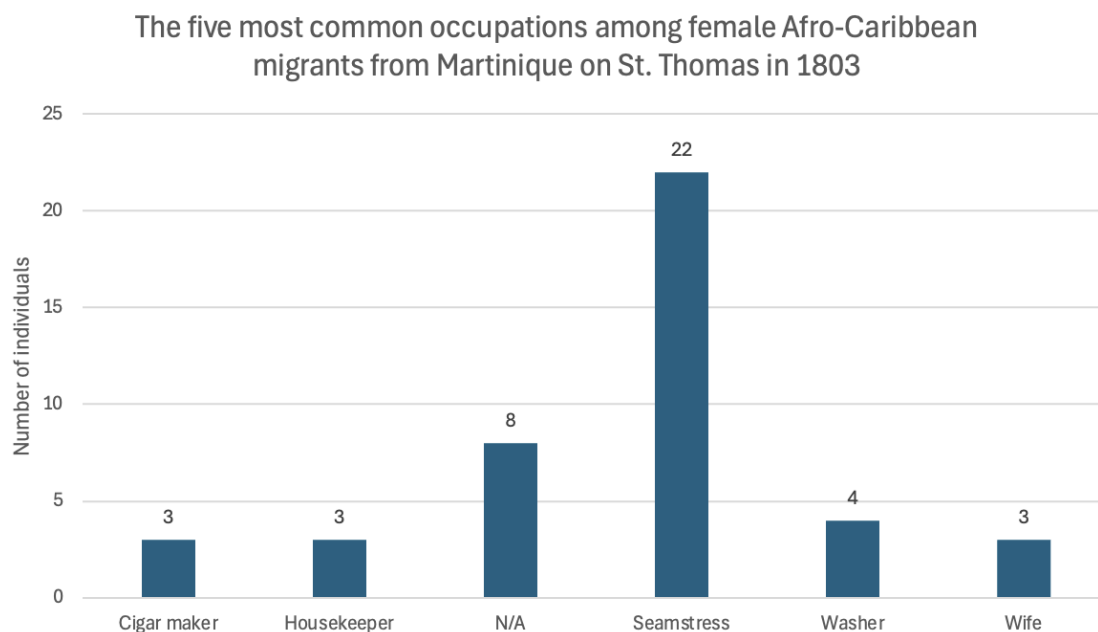


Figure 3 source: The 1803 Register of Free Afro-Caribbeans on St. Thomas

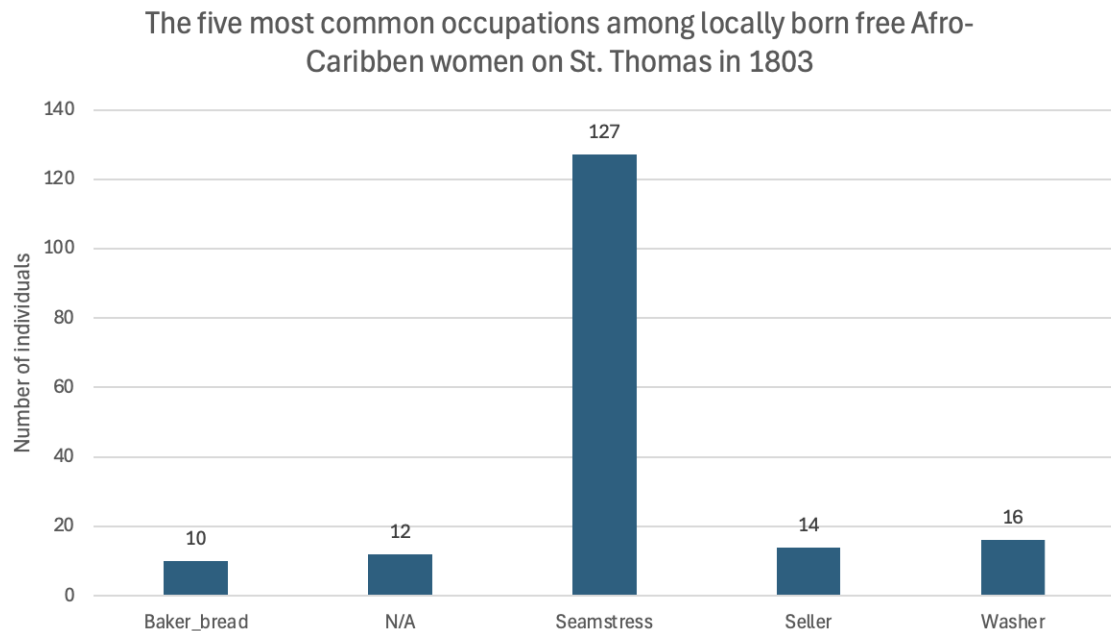


Figure 4 source: The 1803 Register of Free Afro-Caribbeans on St. Thomas

Locally born free Afro-Caribbean women had the widest occupational range. In addition to seamstresses (total of 127), there were a large number working as washers (total of 16), sellers (total of 14), and bakers (total of 10). This suggests that they benefited from possible pre-established social networks, linguistic competence, and familiarity with local norms.

These women exploited the port city's social and economic structures to build a livelihood through textile work, trade, and small-scale production. Their movements across colonial borders and adaptation to new systems testify to a female form of transimperial mobility, which has been underexplored in previous research but aligns with the analyses of Rogers and King (2012) and Socolow (1996), who argue for recognizing women as central actors in colonial contexts. Their mobility may not have been maritime in the traditional sense, yet it remained closely tied to the sea and the rhythms of the port city.

Because Charlotte Amalie functioned as a free port – where goods, people, and information crossed the sea daily – the practices of free Afro-Caribbean women must be understood as part of the maritime sphere. Sewing, washing, and baking in a port city like Charlotte Amalie did not mean isolation from maritime life, but participation in it. They created connections and relationships that

linked the free port to the wider Caribbean. They did not navigate with ships, but with goods, relationships, and a knowledge of the port's rhythm – and that made them co-creators of space. Charlotte Amalie was not merely a stage upon which their lives played out – it was a space they themselves helped shape.



Market scene from Charlotte Amalie, St. Thomas, c. 1881, depicting women selling goods such as fruit, poultry, and seafood. The image illustrates the everyday economic activities that structured urban life and sustained the free port economy. Source: Painting by Frederik Visby. M/S Museet for Søfart.

Although the 1803 Register offers little detail on where and under what conditions these women worked, comparable studies show that free Afro-Caribbean women typically engaged in small-scale, home-based, and service-oriented work. Socolow describes women in Cap François who sold old furniture, ironing tools, and washing equipment such as kettles and tubs – goods central to domestic and urban life (Socolow 1996: 285), while Rogers and King note others managing public bathhouses and dance halls (Rogers and King 2012: 362). Such occupations provided both income and independence, and their services were indispensable to sailors, merchants, and townspeople alike, making women's practices essential to the functioning and cohesion of the free port.

In contrast, the 1803 Register shows that free Afro-Caribbean men were often carpenters, seamen, shoemakers, tailors, or fishermen – occupations closely tied to the maritime trades and manual

craftsmanship that underpinned the island's export economy.¹⁰ While men's work was connected to the movement of ships and goods, women's labor sustained the social and domestic infrastructure that enabled that movement.

By analyzing the historical source material through the lens of Bassi's theory, it becomes clear that his understanding of an aqueous territory can be fruitfully expanded: women, too, created space in the Caribbean – not through seafaring, but through the practices that held the free port together. This space was profoundly social, geographic, and economic, and it helped shape the social and commercial dynamics of port cities on par with the male actors who otherwise dominate the narrative.

Migrants from Curaçao and Their Potential Advantages in the Free Port

As stated earlier, St. Thomas was granted free port status in 1764. This made Charlotte Amalie a central hub in the region's interimperial networks, especially for nearby colonies with limited access to free trade, such as Spanish-controlled Puerto Rico. Unlike Martinique, Curaçao – like St. Thomas – was a free port, which meant that migrants from there arrived with prior knowledge of the economic mechanisms of the free port and the practices of informal trade and smuggling (Pålsson 2017: 319-321) – knowledge that could potentially be turned into economic advantage.

As shown in the 1803 Register (see Figure 2), free Afro-Caribbean women from Curaçao were strongly represented in trade-related occupations, primarily listed as “seller” or “seller_street”: 25 out of 86, corresponding to approximately 29%. These categories likely covered small-scale vending of food, textiles, or other everyday goods in the port's markets. In contrast, none of the women from Martinique were recorded in this type of occupation.

This difference suggests that women from Curaçao were more successful in taking advantage of the trading opportunities offered by the free port and in establishing themselves as actors within the

¹⁰ NARA Record Group 64, Censuses: St. Thomas Commission for the Registration of the Free Blacks: Proceedings and Register of Free Blacks, 1803.

commercial economy. Curaçao itself worked as a regional trading hub under Dutch control, where free Afro-Caribbean people actively participated in trade (Hjorth 2023: 30; Rogers and King 2012: 358-362). A noteworthy explanation for this occupational success may also lie in the migrants' place of birth and linguistic skills. Curaçao was, like islands in general, a multilingual society first under Spanish and later Dutch colonial control. It is reasonable to assume that many migrants from Curaçao spoke Spanish, which could have been a key advantage in trade with Spanish-speaking colonies.

As previously mentioned, Socolow's analysis shows that free Afro-Caribbeans were economically independent actors who used their income to consolidate social relationships and ensure economic stability (Socolow 1996: 285-87). This perspective aligns with the 1803 Register, in which free Afro-Caribbean women from Curaçao appear in occupations that allowed flexibility – work that could be adapted to seasonal demand, shifting trade flows, or domestic needs – and thereby enabled a certain degree of social mobility. While opportunities for advancement were limited by race, gender, and legal status, the ability to accumulate savings, build networks, or acquire property nonetheless offered some women visible improvements in social standing.

Jordaan's study of Curaçao further shows that, despite discriminatory practices and local restrictions such as unequal legal rights and racialized local ordinances, free Afro-Caribbeans maintained some legal and social room for maneuver. The legal framework led to arbitrary court rulings, yet there were still structural limits to how far the discrimination could go. As Jordaan notes, the colonial authorities depended on the free Afro-Caribbean population as traders, craftsmen, and agents in the island's economy, and therefore could not completely exclude them from legal and economic participation (Jordaan 2010: 66-72).

It is therefore plausible that migrants from Curaçao transferred these experiences to Charlotte Amalie. In this analysis, they appear to have possessed structural and cultural advantages rooted in birthplace, language, and commercial experience from a comparable urban environment – factors that likely facilitated their integration into the transimperial economy of St. Thomas and enhanced their ability to navigate its social and economic networks.

In Bassi's theory, space emerges not only through movement but through the ability to engage in and shape connections (Bassi 2017: 75-81). These connections – social, economic, and spatial – link people, goods, and places across imperial boundaries, echoing Fabian's concept of spatial practice: the everyday interactions through which space is socially produced (Fabian 2020: 22-23). Free Afro-Caribbean women from Curaçao had not only moved to Charlotte Amalie but also actively participated in its economy. They did not merely adapt to the city, but they created it through daily practices that sustained their livelihoods. Following James C. Scott's notion of everyday resistance, such practices can be read as small, pragmatic acts of agency that, while constrained by racial and legal hierarchies, nonetheless redefined the social and economic boundaries of the free port (Scott 2008: 29-31, 50-52).

The Significance of the Duration of Stay for Spatial Practices in the Free Port

In addition to birthplace and linguistic competence, length of residence can also be seen as an indicator of a migrant's ability to gain a foothold in the urban space of Charlotte Amalie. As previously mentioned, there were significant differences between the groups – the locally born free Afro-Caribbeans, the migrants from Curaçao, and those from Martinique. Free Afro-Caribbean women from Curaçao were more strongly represented in trade-related occupations (approximately 29%) than those from Martinique where none were recorded in this category. At the same time, the 1803 Register (see Figure 5) shows that the two migrant groups differed markedly in terms of how long they had resided on St. Thomas. These differences are crucial for understanding how – and to what extent – free Afro-Caribbean women participated in the creation of what Bassi calls an aqueous territory.

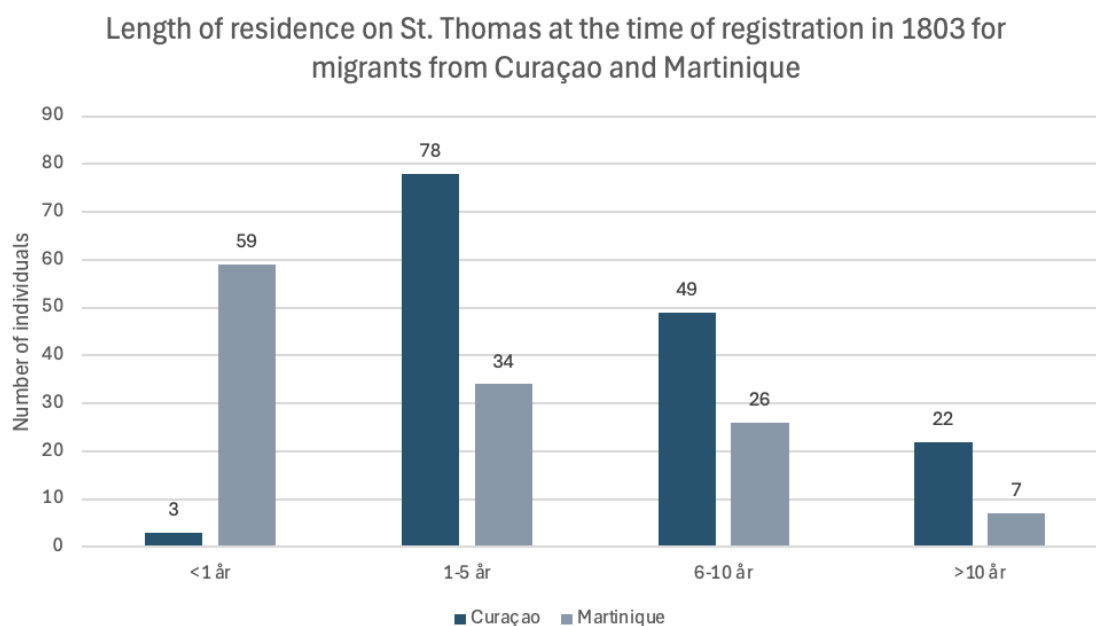


Figure 5 source: The 1803 Register of Free Afro-Caribbeans on St. Thomas

The vast majority of migrants from Curaçao had resided on the island for several years: 78 individuals for 1-5 years, 49 for 6-10 years, and 22 for more than 10 years. Only three had arrived within the past year. By comparison, most migrants from Martinique (a total of 59) had been on the island for less than one year, while significantly fewer had stayed for a longer period. The difference in length of residence reflects on the one hand, different forms of migration – migrants from Curaçao appear to have been economic migrants, whereas the group from Martinique was more likely political refugees¹¹ – and, on the other hand, varying degrees of opportunity to establish themselves and remain.

The difference in length of residence is crucial for understanding migrants' social roles and positions within the urban space. A longer presence can be both precondition for and a result of the ability to build networks and gain access to the local labor market. It suggests a dynamic interaction where networks and adaptability make it possible to remain and where this, in turn, enables further networking and rootedness, which potentially fosters a desire to stay. In this context, integration should not be understood as complete equality but rather as access to a certain degree of economic

¹¹ The migrants from Martinique were political refugees because of the revolutionary events and riots in the French colonies. For a more detailed account, see Hjorth's master's thesis from 2023.

stability, social networks, and mobility within the framework of the free port. The longer presence of the migrants from Curaçao indicates a certain level of establishment and continuity – key indicators of integration.

It is noteworthy that several free Afro-Caribbean women from Martinique as well as locally born women, are registered with the occupation N/A (not specified) (see Figure 3 and 4). This applied to 8 out of 43 free Afro-Caribbean women from Martinique (approximately 19%) and 12 out of 179 locally born free Afro-Caribbean women (about 6.5%). By comparison, none of the free Afro-Caribbean women from Curaçao was registered as N/A. This may indicate that several women from Martinique had not yet established a fixed occupation, which – when considered alongside their short length of residence – points to a low degree of integration and demonstrates that mobility did not automatically lead to access to the urban space.

However, the lack of occupational information does not necessarily indicate unemployment. As Hjorth notes, the register reflects the classificatory logic of the colonial administration rather than the full complexity of social and economic life. Certain types of informal or socially stigmatized labor – such as domestic service or prostitution – may not have been recorded or recognized as formal occupations (Hjorth 2023: 16-17, 43).

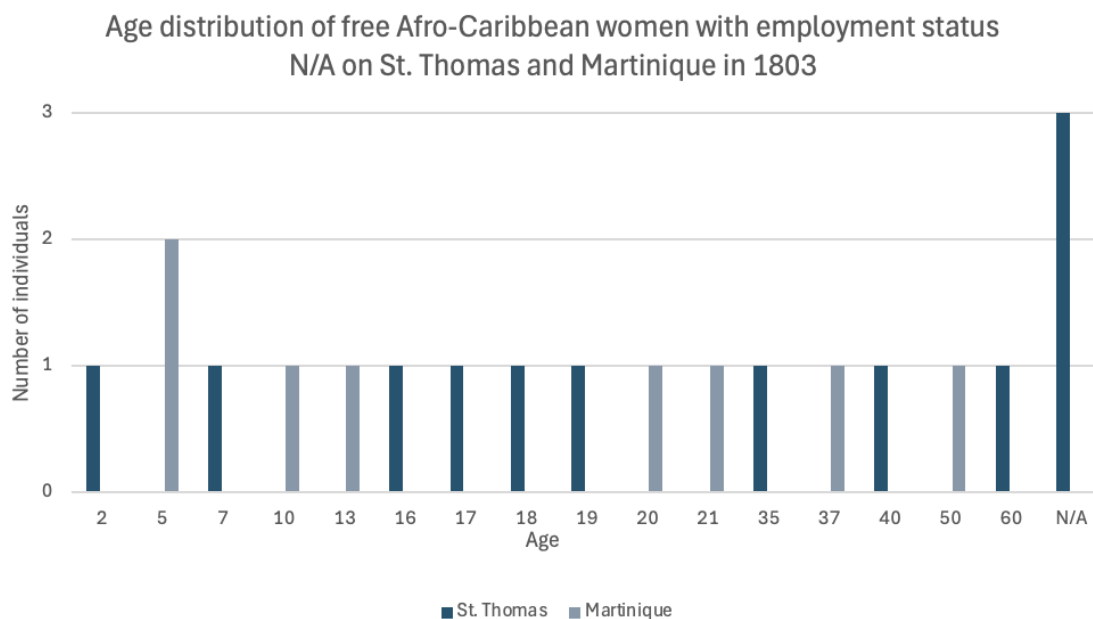


Figure 6 source: The 1803 Register of Free Afro-Caribbeans on St. Thomas

This point is further nuanced when considering the locally born free Afro-Caribbean women. The fact that some of them were also listed without an occupation indicates that integration into the labor market was not automatic but influenced by factors such as age. A closer look at the age distribution of women recorded without an occupation (see Figure 6) reveals important nuances. Among the eight women from Martinique marked as N/A, four were aged 13 or younger, and one was over 40 (aged 50). Only two were in their early twenties. This suggests that many of the Martinique-born free Afro-Caribbean women without a listed occupation were either too young to support themselves or perhaps beyond typical working age.

The pattern is different for the twelve locally born free Afro-Caribbean women where the majority were between 16 and 40 years old – an age range generally associated with active participation in the labor market. This raises the question of why these women who would be expected to work based on age alone, were not registered with an occupation.

These differences point to a key limitation of the historical source: the category N/A does not clearly indicate why a woman was not assigned a profession. It may reflect life stage, recent arrival, or simply gaps or conventions in the registration process. Thus, N/A must be interpreted cautiously and in context.

To gain a deeper insight into the specific living conditions and agency of these women, it is necessary to consult other types of historical sources¹² that can shed light on their everyday lives and economic practices beyond what is captured in the population register. Only through a broader use of historical sources can we begin to understand how these women navigated urban life – and how they, in doing so, actively shaped the space they inhabited. It shows that space-making was not given but something that had to be created.

Overall, the analysis shows that integration into the free port of Charlotte Amalie was differentiated and depended on a combination of length of residence, place of birth, language, and gender. Free Afro-Caribbean women from Curaçao appear to have been relatively more integrated than women

¹² Historical sources such as court record, tax lists, household inventories, or preferably personal letters.

from Martinique, as reflected in their longer stays, access to networks, and prior experience with similar free port environments.

This difference in integration can be viewed through Bassi's theory of the aqueous territory. While Bassi's framework is centered on male maritime actors whose mobility shapes the transimperial space, reading it through women's experiences reveals another dimension of the aqueous world. From this perspective, free ports like Charlotte Amalie appear as fluid spaces in which the ability to navigate across linguistic, economic, and social boundaries was crucial for determining who could gain a foothold.

Conclusion

This article has examined how Charlotte Amalie on St. Thomas in 1803 can be understood as an aqueous territory, and how free Afro-Caribbean female migrants participated in shaping this space through their occupation and social mobility. Based on Ernesto Bassi's spatial theory and a gendered analytical perspective, it becomes clear that free Afro-Caribbean women were not merely passive inhabitants of the colonial port city but active participants in the production of space whose practices were essential to the functioning of the free port as a trans-imperial hub.

The analysis of the 1803 Register shows that migrants from Curaçao differed from other groups by being more engaged in trade, indicating a more active participation in the urban economy and thus a greater degree of integration into the urban space. In contrast, migrants from Martinique appeared as a more recently and less rooted group. The overall analysis thus demonstrates that access to and participation in the aqueous territory was not equally distributed but conditioned by factors such as place of birth, length of residence, language, and prior experience.

These findings speak directly to the newer Caribbean historiography, which challenges earlier views of the islands as isolated colonial units and instead emphasizes their role in a dynamic, interimperial network. Through the lens of Bassi's concept of an aqueous territory, St. Thomas and its free Afro-Caribbean population emerge as part of a flexible geographic space shaped by mobility, trade, and cultural exchange across imperial boundaries. From this perspective, free Afro-Caribbean women

appear as active creators of urban space, adapting to and taking advantage of the free port's economic and social opportunities.

This article thus contributes to a more nuanced understanding of free Afro-Caribbean women in a colonial context. Rather than viewing them as subordinate individuals within an enslaved society, the analysis shows that free Afro-Caribbean women played an active role in shaping the transimperial connections that underpinned the foundation of the free port. In particular, free Afro-Caribbean women from Curaçao succeeded in establishing economic and social footholds within interimperial trade and social structures that characterized the free port of Charlotte Amalie in the early 1800s. Free Afro-Caribbean women should therefore be recognized as co-creators of the transimperial space. This does not imply that their positions were equal to those of men; while their opportunities were shaped and often constrained by both racial and gendered hierarchies, acknowledging their economic and spatial practices on their own terms allows for a more balanced understanding of how the free port functioned.

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