



Access to Vice-Admiralty and colonial records of the trans-Atlantic slave trade and of African slavery in Jamaica

Claudette Thomas

Jamaica Archives and Records Department, Kingston, Jamaica

E-mail: cthomas@jard.gov.jm

Thelma Whyte

Sir Arthur Lewis Institute of Social and Economic Studies
University of the West Indies, Mona, Jamaica

E-mail: fbeaudiere@yahoo.com

Pauline Nicholas

University of the West Indies, Mona, Jamaica
President, Library and Information Association of Jamaica, 2011

E-mail: Pnichus@yahoo.com

Meeting:

141 — Access to information: the Afro-Caribbean connection / Accès à l'information : parallèles entre l'Afrique et les Antilles — Access to Information Network - Africa (ATINA) / Réseau d'accès à l'information en Afrique (RAIA) Special Interest Group

Abstract:

Jamaican cultural identity is under severe pressure and following Marcus Garvey's dictum, "A people without the knowledge of their past history, origin and culture is like a tree without roots", many are searching to find their roots. It is for us as information professionals to guard against collective historical and cultural amnesia. Within this context the authors review issues which impact the availability to public access of records which exist in our Jamaican collections of the trans-shipment of slaves from Africa and of the Caribbean slave experience -- records of memorable significance to the developing countries of the region and to the continents of Europe, Africa and North America. Besides reviewing what issues impact access to Vice-Admiralty and slave records of Jamaica, we present how the Jamaica Archives and Records Department uses a public awareness campaign to increase the value of these and other records in their collection, and by extension promote its relevance to the country of the Jamaica Brand.

Keywords: Jamaica, Africa, slave, records, access, identity, history, culture, archives

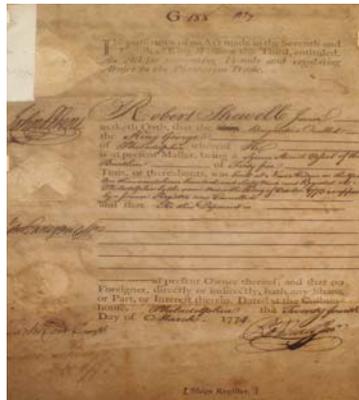
Historical Background

The Vice-Admiralty and slave records which exist in Jamaica present evidence of the commercial benefits which were derived from the trans-Atlantic trade at its peak during the eighteenth century and beyond. Commerce was the life blood of the West Indies as ships would leave Britain for Africa to barter for slaves, take them to the West Indies for sale, collect sugar and other commodities and return to Britain.

On the other hand, there was a lively commerce between America and the West Indies as the planters were dependent on imports to keep themselves going. This flow of commerce was however interrupted by the prevailing wars during the period between 1776 and 1815. When the French sided with the American colonists during the American War of Independence, ships of the Royal Navy and privateers patrolled the coasts of Saint Dominigue to capture as many as possible of the small sloops and schooners which carried the bulk of the imports and exports between America and the West Indies. These prizes were then dispatched to Jamaica for trial where they were 'libeled', and if found guilty sold along with their cargo.

In the seventeenth century, Vice-Admiralty courts were set up in the American colonies and throughout the West Indies. The types of offences of which these courts took cognizance were piracy and murder on the high seas, trials of ships and cargoes seized as enemy property, breaches of the Navigation or Revenue Laws, subtraction and detention of seamen's wages, and the overloading of slave ships, to name just a few.

One of the chief interests in the records of the Court of Vice Admiralty is the fact that many of the bundles contain collections of passports, bills, letters re economic matters such as exports, and other miscellaneous papers of human interest. One such letter was written by John Newton, the slave owner and author of the hymn, 'Amazing Grace', and addressed to his son.



Vice Admiralty record

Other records which gave evidence of enslavement include patents, plats, inventories of the estate of deceased individuals, crop accounts, current accounts and Manumission of Slaves.

The Registers of the Returns of Slaves, which outline the number, class and condition of slaves held by each slave owner, are also included.

The image shows a page from a historical register. At the top, there is a title in cursive: "Register of the Returns of Slaves". Below the title, there are several lines of text, including "The following is a list of the names of the persons who were brought to this country by the ships of the West India Company, from the year 1664 to 1713". The main part of the page is a table with multiple columns. The columns are headed with "Name", "Age", "Sex", "Condition", "Remarks", and "Date". The table contains several rows of handwritten entries, including names like "John", "Mary", and "Elizabeth", along with their ages and conditions. The handwriting is in cursive and somewhat faded.

Register of the Returns of Slaves

It has not been established, however, how many Africans were transported across the Atlantic via the slave trade, as there are no complete record sets. Estimates have varied widely, all the way from a few million to 100 million. From available ships' records most historians have approximated the number of enslaved persons who landed alive in America and the Caribbean at between 9 and 11 million. Another 10 to 20% died en route from various maladies, as well as suicides.

Some aspects of the slave trade do not have records, but records were kept of all trade voyages, showing for example how many barrels of wine were imported from France to Britain to how many enslaved Africans were carried in Britain's ships. However no records were found for the number of persons who died while being hunted in Africa; nor the number who died along the route sometimes at the hands of the traders; nor those who died awaiting sale at slave forts. One explanation for this lack was that the trade was unregulated in the period between 1698 and 1807, where it was opened to all traders and merchants who wanted to engage in the slave trade. Lacking also are slave records of deaths on the West African coasts.

Jamaica Archives and Records Department (JARD)

The rich heritage and cultural reservoir of the Jamaica Archives and Records Department are of national, regional and international importance. The Jamaica Archives and Records Department was formed in 1985 to consolidate historical and more modern records. It comprises three units (the Archives, the Audio Visual Unit and the Government Records Centre), situated in different locations. The historical collections are housed in the Archives Unit in Spanish Town.

The Archives Unit contains the archival collections of the country, spanning over three centuries (345 years) of documentation illuminating the history and heritage of Jamaica. Among our archival collections are records of prime value to the history of the trans-Atlantic

trade (Vice-Admiralty Court records 1776–1815) and the history of enslavement (the Returns of Slaves Registers 1817–1832).

Jamaica is particularly fortunate in possessing a large collection of the records left by the Vice-Admiralty Court, the majority of which are unbound and in varying states of repair. Fortunately, however, the important periods of the American War for Independence and the Revolutionary and Napoleonic wars are well covered. An examination of the Vice Admiralty records has shown that there was a vigorous but covert slave trade locally among the Caribbean Islands. In addition, documentation of slavery and plantation life make up a significant portion of the Vice-Admiralty records.

The rich collections of Vice-Admiralty and colonial records of the trans-Atlantic slave trade and of African slavery in Jamaica are being highlighted in the present paper, not only because of their far reaching significance to individuals in the Caribbean, but to the extent that private and commercial researchers in other regions such as North America, Europe and Africa are affected. Researchers (even from the film industry) have visited the Jamaica Archives from the far abroad to use these collections, and have on occasion requested copies for their research work, or filming permission. These collections are, therefore, significant to the collective memory of many countries.

In what follows we shall highlight a number of constraints to public and research access to the records and information held in the Jamaican Archives. Issues will be presented relating to preservation and conservation, to the government's commitment as evidenced in the legislative and policy framework and in human and physical resources, and to citizen awareness of archival records and services. Possibilities for the use of information and communication technologies (ICT) in the provision of access to the primary source evidence will also be discussed.

Preservation and Conservation

For Archives to memorialize our history 'the conservation of archives is necessary to preserve the past' (TANAP, 2011) and this is an important function in enabling access. Preservation is that holistic approach which addresses the symptoms of damage, and tries to correct the underlying causes. In fact preservation refers to everything which contributes to the physical well-being of the collections. A good preservation and conservation programme facilitates increase access to records, adds to their value, thereby making the archive more relevant. Hence the need for sustained funding and maintenance.

Preservation has to be approached from the macro level for effectiveness – the government has to work in tandem with the Archivist to achieve this. JARD has approached its preservation programme through four recognized elements:

1. direct preservation -- physical intervention for the material's conservation;
2. indirect preservation – includes the building environment, archive storage methods, security against threats, and handling;
3. reformatting -- preservation by substitution, making copies of the records, normally on microfilm, then using the copies in place of the originals, thus reducing wear and tear on the latter and preserving their condition;

4. chemical conservation -- employing chemical means to strengthen fragile or brittle records; this is expensive in Jamaica as all products are sourced overseas.

Jamaica Archives Unit has a reasonably large collection (approximately 60 to 80 boxes) of Vice-Admiralty records in varying physical condition. Some of the materials are fragile and brittle while some were in fairly good condition depending on the type and quality of the material the document was made of. Jamaica Archives' methods of direct and indirect intervention include placing documents in archival boxes. Vice Admiralty records are on paper with high acidity and some damaged by the use of certain inks (India ink) are unavailable or inaccessible to users due to their fragile state. Spring Back binding is used on slave records originally bound with deteriorating materials to prevent the spines from breaking.

The peculiarities of tropical climates challenge Jamaica's efforts at preservation of these and other historical archival records. Special conservation issues arise in the tropics, notably a myriad of rapid deterioration processes which further complicate preservation activities. Teygeler (2001) grouped three major categories of destructive forces in tropical climates, a) the physical – heat, sunlight, dust and sand; b) the chemical – moisture, gases, pollutants; and, c) the biological – fungi, bacteria, insects, rodents.

The high tropical temperatures and humidity of Jamaica foster insect growth and accelerate chemical and biological degradation. It is important therefore that one get the correct balance of conservation resources for the local archival conditions.

Cost factors impact preservation activities. Cost is both infrastructure related and government related, in terms of insufficient allocation of funds to cover the cost of running the institution. Chemical conservation is the most expensive while indirect preservation is the least costly. 'Survival of the archives can be seriously threatened by a lack of resources for providing proper storage conditions, and by wear and tear resulting from the frequent consultation of the documents' (TANAP, 2011). Funding is a chronic, age-old problem for developing countries as government funds are shunted to other priorities. Budgets are often too low to acquire sufficient archival materials and for a proper preservation programme.

The Government's Commitment: Policy and Legislation

The Jamaican government has indicated its public policy interest in access to government and archival information by various legislative measures and policies. Several key acts, regulations and policies seek to bolster both records access and e-government:

1. Policies - The *Public Sector Modernisation Project (PSMP)* with its goal 'Government at your Service'.
E-Powering Jamaica 2012, designed to facilitate the greater use of ICT anywhere, anytime to access government services.
2. Regulations - *Jamaica's Information and Documentation – Records Management Standards JS ISO 15489 -1:2001*
3. Legislation - The *Archives Act 1983* and the *Archives (Official Records) Regulations 1988*, both designed to establish and maintain a system for the proper care and control of official records within the custody of the Archivist.

The Electronic Transactions Act, 2006 which facilitates electronic transactions by means of reliable electronic documents;

The Access to Information Act, 2002 designed to accommodate citizens' 'right to know' principle of the information society, and

The Telecommunications Act, 2000 designed to facilitate 24/7 anytime, anywhere access to information and services.

The Archives Acts mandate that official records be retained for at least thirty years before public access can be obtained and that an Archives Advisory committee be established to monitor that and other processes, such as acquisition of archival materials and the proper control of the creation and disposition of official records within government. The Access to Information Act 2002 prohibits the thirty years access to official records clause making it irrelevant. The Government's push towards access to information was however focused mainly on records management within government ministries and agencies.

The Access to Information Act was passed in 2002 with much fanfare and since then provisions have been made in the annual budget for related activities including the establishing the Access to Information Unit for support. Principal Officers who had overall responsibilities were chosen from the highest levels in the Government --Ministers of Government, Directors General of agencies, Ambassadors, Permanent Secretaries (Access to Information Unit, 2011). The Jamaica Archives Unit and archival access were not given the same attention; its modus operandi of manual access remained the same as prior to the Act even though the Archives fell within its legislation at the time.

E-government which was designed to facilitate greater use of ICT for access is partially implemented by the Archives Unit. The Archives Unit participation in e-government was in the form of a website – <http://www.jard.gov.jm> . This site advertises the services of the Unit but no provisions are made for monetary transactions online, nor can digital images of printed copies be accessed online. Payment for services is made manually or in the form of postal or money order for overseas clients.

The Government's Commitment: Funding

A government's funding of its national archives is an indication of its interest and sincerity in preserving the memory of its nation. It has been suggested that funding for preservation is critically linked to the political systems operating in developing countries as the 'lack of funds' is 'put forward as an excuse for a policy of laissez-faire' (Teygeler, 2001 quoting Strickland, 1959).

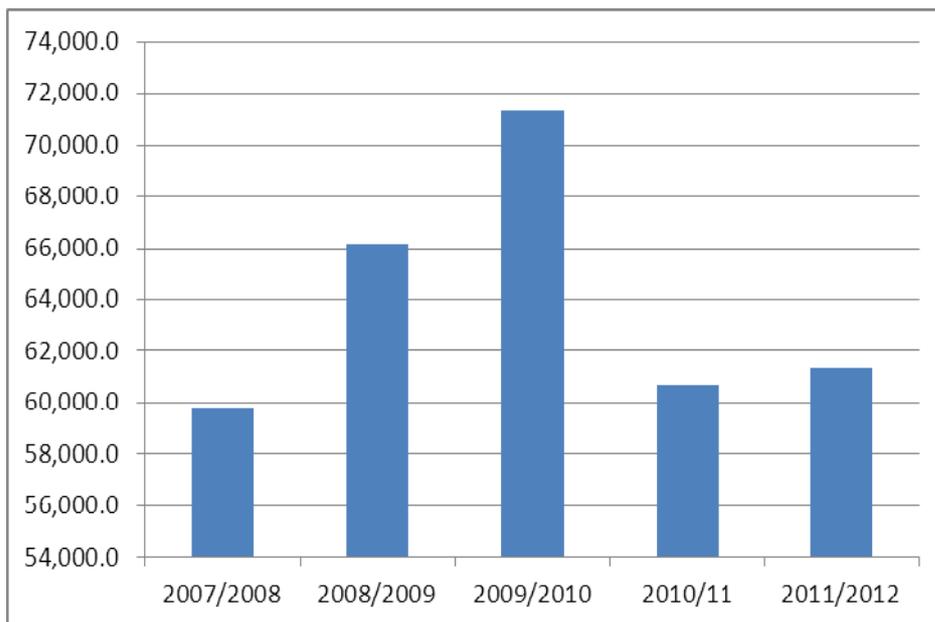
Teygeler also attributes the lack of support for archives by governments in developing countries to their past history of colonial rule. In the Caribbean as in Africa, colonial administrations had very little regard for the establishment of national institutions, including archives, within the colony; all collected records went back to the mother country (Kirkwood, 2009). This colonial approach to records had carried over after independence in a lack of interest contributing to weak conservation and preservation programmes.

The Jamaica Archives and Records Department received only 3% of the 2010/2011 budget allocation of the Ministry under which it fell. A five- year review of the budget allotted to the Department speaks to the low level of commitment to the Archive activity (see figure).

Budget Allocations 2007 – 2012

Jamaica Archives and Records Department

\$'000



Public Awareness and Public Access

Since the emergence of the Freedom of Information/Access to Information legislative regime of the 1990's, more citizens in Jamaica are becoming aware of their 'right to know' and therefore seek to exercise that right. In light of these factors the Jamaica Archives and Records Department has been working assiduously to establish the appropriate balance between the physical preservation of the collection and the needs of researchers and other individuals who wish to access information contained in this collection. JARD has sought creative ways of promoting archival records by periodically mounting displays to highlight aspects of its collections. The goal has been to bring to the public an awareness of its holdings, to ignite the interest of citizens in the richness of these records and to encourage research. Displays were mounted in schools to maximize exposure to students and to engage them in conversation about the contents and benefits of archival records.

JARD's main target audience has shifted now from students to the wider community. The main aim of this thrust was to increase usage of the services of the documentary heritage of Jamaica. Other objectives were to increase stakeholder interaction and rejuvenate interest and support by decision makers.

JARD's most recent public awareness effort typified its new strategy of maximum exposure. Undertaken in collaboration with the Library and Information Association of Jamaica (LIAJA), it used a marketing technique, engaging the mass media. The JARD/LIAJA Public Awareness Campaign was held in the week of April 17 – 23, 2011, under the theme “Information Overload Finding the Tree in the Digital Forest”. The theme was chosen to show the importance of maintaining good records and information as it relates to everyone from the public sector and private sector through to small business and even the homemaker. We sought to establish the “connect of information and people”. The theme was also tied metaphorically to the United Nations General Assembly declaration of 2011 as International Year of Forests.

The Archives Unit is making efforts to shift from its stereotypical image of being mere custodian to embrace the new era of facilitating access. The fragility of some of the Vice-Admiralty records however has forced the Archivist to provide closed access, as the condition of the records had to be evaluated to determine availability.

This situation highlights the importance indexes and catalogues play in providing archival record access in Jamaica. The Archive Unit provides card indexes to a portion of its records. A database was developed with description of the records but is not presently available online. Not having online access can be problematic for patrons who are accustomed to 24/7 electronic access to materials. Research and Reference Services are available to members of the public on site only, although telephone requests and written requests are also received via post or e-mail. Researches are conducted manually.

Digitization

Digitization for access has embedded paradoxes as archivists struggle between preserving documents and making them available without loss. This is more difficult because of the traditional archive culture of the ‘reclusive dust covered repository’ with what Prelinger (2007) describes as the ‘reluctance to embrace technology and resistance to providing public access online’. But there is a new breed of archival information seekers – ‘the production community, the blogger, the independent scholars and the genealogists’ – who are ‘discovering the density, evidentiary value and vividness of archival imagery and sound’ (Prelinger, 2007), and are making them available online. This public demand clashes with the attitude of traditional archivists who see themselves as “keepers of culture” protecting rare materials through barriers to access.

Compounding the issue of digitization are concerns generated by the not necessarily related issues of copyright and Digital Rights Management (DRM). Archivists have been known to express anxiety about copyright infringement and what Prelinger (2007) describes as “losing control of collections”. They thus are ‘doing a disservice to many patrons whose work might be significant contributions to scholarship or public culture.’ Archivists’ anxiety over copyright infringement and DRM has become an albatross, dragging archivists down on the side of caution and protectionism rather than access to archival materials. Professional listservs are filled with anxious questions about copyright and clearances; archivists choosing the rarefied and restricted path; and elitist concerns about making collections available to “just anyone” (Perlinger 2007). Such apprehension, Perlinger feels, is a serious lapse as ‘newcomers’ to the industry, filling the gaps by providing online 24/7 services, are bypassing traditional archives and archivists ‘making access to materials risky’.

But digitization of information in the world at large is inexorably forcing archives to shift into an era where digital images of archival materials will be made available online, and archaic archival practices will need to be adjusted to keep pace with the age of ICT and instant information. This will be the next challenge facing the historical Jamaican archives of the Vice-Admiralty and the slave trade.

Points for Discussion

1. There is no Jamaican law to counter selling records online. The Archive Act does not address this which means that there is a regulatory and legislative gap. There is need to revise the Act to reflect the changing technology
2. Funding is crucial as this is the underpinning of a proper preservation and access programme, and ultimately of unencumbered access.
3. Conservation and preservation are paramount but are constrained by
 - Lack of funds
 - Lack of will of the government to provide support
 - Lack of qualified human resources
4. Public education and outreach. The Vice-Admiralty records might be considered 'souvenirs of history', a little known, vital part of Caribbean culture but not of much value if they remain hidden in the collection.
5. Openness of records, even historical records, enables innovation, development and national prosperity.
6. The value of any archive depends on the number of users and increased usage adds value.

REFERENCES

Government sources

Government of Jamaica. Access to Information road map: a directional guide to ministries, their responsible officers and other public authorities (2011). Kingston, Jamaica.

http://www.mmt.gov.jm/PDF%20Files/MEMT/ati_road_map.pdf

Government of Jamaica. Estimates of Expenditure, Jamaica (2007). Kingston, Jamaica.

Government of Jamaica. List of responsible officers in ministries and some agencies (2011). Access to Information Unit: Kingston, Jamaica.

Other sources

Caribbean Slave Trade Archives Project: historical summary.

<http://www.caribbeanslavearchives.org/history.jsp>

Kirkwood, Francis T. (2009) “Colonial knowledge pathways back to the European capitals and

how to use them to recover the history of African knowledge in the early 20th century”, IFLA World Library and Information Congress, Milan, 2009, session 95, ATINA. <http://www.ifla.org/files/hq/papers/ifla75/95-kirkwood-en.pdf>

Prelinger, Rick. (2007). “Archives and access in the 21st. Century”. *Cinema Journal* 46.3 (2007): 114-118. <http://muse.jhu.edu/journal/v046/46.3prelinger.html>

TANAP: Towards a New Age of Partnership in Dutch East India Company Archives and Research (2011). Conservation methods.

<http://www.tanap.net/content/archives/conservation/conservation.htm>

Teygeler, R. (2001) Preservation of Archives in Tropical Climates. An annotated bibliography.

<http://cool.conservation-us.org/byauth/teygeler/tropical.pdf>