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# Fifty Shades of Trade

## *Privateering, Piracy, and Illegal Slave Trading in St. Thomas, Early Nineteenth Century*

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### Abstract

From 1816 to the 1830s, the islands of St. Eustatius, Saba, St. Thomas, St. Maarten, and St. Barts were actively engaged with illicit trade in ships, prize goods, and the transatlantic slave trade. Ships' crews, governors, and merchants took advantage of the islands' physical, political, and legal environments to effectively launder goods, ships, and people that were actively involved in these activities. St. Thomas stands out due to the longevity of its status as a regional and international hub for illicit trade at the end of Atlantic and Caribbean privateering and piracy. Within this social and political environment, this paper will unveil the tensions between international, regional, and local interests that drove merchants and colonial officials on St. Thomas to engage with illegal transatlantic slave traders, privateers, and pirates, during the early nineteenth century. Secondly, this paper will reveal the processes through which these relations occurred.

### Keywords

St. Thomas – Caribbean – maritime trade – piracy – privateering – slave trade

### 1 Preamble and Historical Context

From 1816 to the 1830s, the islands of St. Eustatius (Statia), Saba, St. Thomas, St. Maarten, and St. Barts were actively engaged with illicit trade in ships, prize goods, and the transatlantic slave trade. Ships' crews, governors, and merchants took advantage of the respective physical, political, and legal environments of each island to effectively launder goods, ships, and people that were actively

involved in these activities. St. Thomas in particular stands out due to the longevity of its status as a regional and international hub for illicit trade at the end of Atlantic and Caribbean privateering and piracy following the Cisplatin War (1825–28). This was in part due to covert sanctioning of illicit trade by Frederick VI of Denmark, despite Danish laws otherwise forbidding these activities. Within this social and political environment, this paper will unveil the tensions between international, regional, and local interests that drove merchants and colonial officials on St. Thomas to engage in the illegal transatlantic slave trade, and also with privateers and pirates, during the early nineteenth century. Secondly, this paper will reveal the processes through which these relations occurred.

Nineteenth-century piracy and privateering the Caribbean has received little attention from scholars. Some historical research has focused on Argentinian privateering, Artigan privateering, Mexican privateering, Colombian privateering, Baltimore-based pirates who masqueraded as Royalist or Republican privateers, British responses to piracy and privateering during this time, and some discussion of the role of St. Barts in the early years of Independence privateers.<sup>1</sup> These studies have largely neglected to understand or acknowledge the roles of St. Thomas, St. Eustatius, and Saba in engaging with pirates and privateers during the early nineteenth century, and their focus is limited mostly to the earlier years of the Latin American Wars of Independence. These studies also centered on narrow sets of archival material to the exclusion of others; no source material was used from the Dutch National Archives, the Curaçao National Archives, or important historical newspapers such as the *Sanct Thomae Tidende* (St. Thomas Times) and the *Curaçaosche Courant*, thereby limiting the authors' data relative to their own language proficiencies. During this time, locally and regionally-situated newspapers such as these tended to provide more reliable accounts of piracy, privateering, and other skirmishes and battles, if only due to their proximity to actual events for better vetting.<sup>2</sup>

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1 See Bealer 1937, Currier 1929, Rodriguez & Arguinguey 1996 for Argentinian privateering; Beraza 1978 for Artigan privateering; Cruz-Barney 1997 for Mexican privateering; Rivas 1944 for Colombian privateering; Head 2008 and Griffin 1940 for masquerading Baltimore-based privateers; McCarthy 2013 for British responses; and Wilson 2015 for discussion of the role of St. Barts.

2 The *Curaçaosche Courant* describes this problem relative to U.S. reporting of skirmishes and battles by Republican and Royalist forces: "We have frequently observed in the American papers extracts of letters written in this island, giving exaggerated accounts of the operations of the contending parties on the opposite continent. In a late New York paper we find also a statement of occurrences at the island of Aruba, which never existed but in the imagination of the writer. Our Readers will perceive from the subjoined articles, the inconsistency

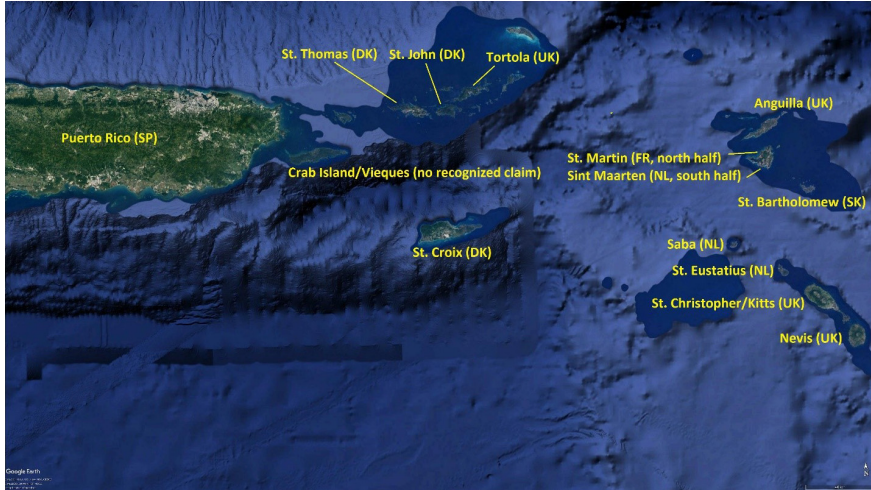


FIGURE 1 Map of the Northeastern Caribbean, 1824  
SOURCE: GOOGLE EARTH

The involvement of Royalist and Republican privateers with trade in the Dutch islands have been noted in passing by Dutch scholars but to date no study has been undertaken that had focused on their involvement in this area explicitly (Emmer 1973, 2006; Goslinga 1990; Postma 2008). Nineteenth-century archaeological research among these four islands has focused mostly on St. Thomas and Saba. These include plantations and slavery, social organization, and material culture of the upper class.<sup>3</sup> On Statia, archaeological and historical research has focused almost exclusively on the “Golden Era” of the eighteenth century, with no work centered on the century that followed except some elements of early nineteenth-century slavery by Grant Gilmore (2004).

During the eighteenth century, the Dutch, Danes, and Swedes opened legal free ports in the northeastern Caribbean. This began with St. Eustatius in the early eighteenth century, but the Dutch West Indies Company (GWC) did not fully commit to the practice until 1755, after a proposed 3 percent duty on all incoming and outgoing trade was scrapped to ensure that English merchants on the island did not leave for the Danish islands, where officials were openly

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of these communications, and how much they are calculated to mislead the public” (*Curaçoesche Courant*, February 11, 1822).

3 For plantations and slavery see Armstrong 2003, Espersen 2017, Laffoon, Mickleburgh & Espersen 2017; for social organization see Armstrong, Williamson, Armstrong & Lenik 2014 and Espersen 2018; and upper-class material culture Armstrong & Williamson 2011 and Espersen 2017.

musings with legalizing free trade (Goslinga 1985:211–12). The Danes soon followed suit, with St. Thomas declared a free port in 1764, and St. Barts in 1784, as a means for Denmark and Sweden, respectively, to emulate Statia's success. Their establishment as free ports effectively legalized some of the indiscriminate trade practices that they were otherwise practicing covertly beforehand, especially as neutral countries during periods of war between Britain, France, and Spain. The Dutch West Indies Company experimented with St. Eustatius as an open destination for slave auctions during the 1720s, and following its failure, continued to turn a blind eye to the growing regional trade centered on the island that often circumvented the mercantilist policies of other nations. This trade also included the Neutral Islands (Dominica, St. Lucia, and St. Vincent) prior to the Seven Years War (1756–63) in defiance of British and French restrictions (Espersen 2017:71). A dangerous precedent was set by St. Eustatius in 1776, when the U.S. brig *Andrew Doria* was saluted from Fort Oranje as a recognition of their status as an independent state. This in part fueled the decision of British Admiral George Brydges Rodney to sack and capture the island in 1781.

The French captured and occupied St. Eustatius in 1795 and Saba at the outset of the Napoleonic Wars, and imposed taxation and trade restrictions which resulted in the flight of Statia's merchants to St. Thomas, St. Barts, and Curaçao. British naval forces began successively occupying French Caribbean islands and those belonging to European nations allied with France as a means to restrict and eventually eliminate French Atlantic trade. This eventually included all six Dutch possessions in the Caribbean, the Danish Virgin Islands, and Swedish St. Bartholomew. St. Thomas and St. Barts were intermittently occupied by the British between 1801–2, and St. Thomas again from 1807–15. This left St. Barts as the only free port in the region between 1802–15. This action on the part of the British disrupted previously established regional trade networks between the islands, resulting in widespread shortages of food and other essential goods. At the end of the Napoleonic Wars, the British restored captured islands to the Dutch and Danes, but while St. Thomas resumed its status as a free port, St. Eustatius did not.

Meanwhile, during the first two decades of the nineteenth century, independence movements broke out across Latin America, notably within New Spain (1808), Buenos Aires (1810), and in New Granada (1810). For the islands of St. Thomas and St. Barts, this permitted the resumption of their previous roles as regional and international depots for open trade, and once again created an opportunity to take advantage of their status as neutral parties during a period of war. When the Dutch regained Statia in 1815, restrictions on trade and import/export taxes were reinstated, and remained in place until 1828, when

the island was once again established as an open trade destination with low taxation. On Saba, the effects of British occupation had little effect on the domestic economy, as the island consisted mostly of subsistence agriculturalists, and seafarers engaged as sailors and captains in regional trade, often under the Dutch, British, and Swedish flag.

Following the end of the Napoleonic Wars in 1815, Spain was free to turn its focus to its rebellious colonies in the Americas. However, having no sizeable navy to mount their own campaigns, Spain began issuing letters of marque to privateers to cruise against republican vessels. Along with Spain, the republicans also lacked their own navies, and responded in kind by issuing their own letters of marque, including Mexico, New Granada,<sup>4</sup> Buenos Aires, Chile, and from the Banda Oriental, who were known as Artigas privateers. The demand for privateer crews and vessels was readily met as there were surpluses of former soldiers and navy crews from the Napoleonic Wars and the War of 1812, particularly among Americans, and particularly from Baltimore (Head 2008). Privateers were war vessels that were financed, outfitted, and crewed by private individuals; but most importantly, they were granted a letter of marque by a nation to engage on war on their behalf for a defined time. Possession of active and genuine letter of marque by the ship's captain legally distinguished them as privateers rather than pirates. If privateers were captured during their cruises, they were considered prisoners of war. Without a genuine and active letter of marque, they were considered pirates rather than prisoners, and would probably meet the gallows after a trial.

The rush of privateers cruising for emerging states into the Atlantic, Caribbean Sea, and even the Pacific also created excellent cover for piracy by posing as a privateer. This was facilitated through blank or expired commissions.<sup>5</sup> This approach served to induce less regional panic than outright piracy, and provided a means of plausible deniability for pirate crews when captured, and in some occasions for the conscience of their crews as well.<sup>6</sup> This form of piracy,

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4 Later Gran Colombia in 1819, but Colombia and Venezuela are often used synonymously in documentation during this time.

5 "Of all these Buenos Ayrean privateers, hardly anyone has seen or been in Buenos Aires. Most of them are equipped in North America, ... [from] Baltimore, where they, as well as elsewhere, hold the papers, as the forms are hundreds of them from Buenos Aires. These Papers give abandonment to any captain's condemnation, thereby making them all-what they, without exception, seem to be all—pirates" (Danish National Archives, Virgin Islands History No. 133: January 9, 1828).

6 The surgeon and Spanish crew member of the pirate *Las Damas Argentinas* objected to the captain on several occasions to the capture of prizes unrelated to Brazil and Brazilian shipping during the Cisplatine War, despite that the crew themselves were fully aware that they

along with legitimate privateering, flourished during the first half of the Latin American Wars of Independence, and lasted into the early 1830s with additional cover provided by renewed privateering opportunities through Buenos Aires during the Cisplatine War against the Empire of Brazil (1825–28). This war saw the United Provinces of the Rio de la Plata against the Empire of Brazil over the Banda Oriental, an area north of the Rio de la Plata controlled earlier by José Artigas. While Brazil had its own modest navy, both parties sought privateers. Brazil successfully blockaded Buenos Aires throughout the conflict, but privateers under Buenos Aires saw great successes at sea against Brazilian shipping. The blockade of Buenos Aires had made it exceedingly difficult for privateers to base themselves out of that port, let alone return to it with prizes, thereby forcing them to dispose of their prizes in foreign ports through their own means. This situation had the secondary effect of making privateering under Buenos Aires more lucrative, as they had no effective legal oversight of prize captures, or the division of spoils.

Stacks of blank commissions for privateering under the flag of Buenos Aires, whether original or forged, were sent by unknown individuals to islands such as St. Eustatius and St. Thomas for purchase by any interested parties, especially in the latter part of the 1820s.<sup>7</sup> The relative lawlessness that defined the Caribbean Sea during the early nineteenth century was also taken advantage of by legitimate privateers to engage in piracy. In one example, the Spanish privateer *Famoso Indiano* captured an American vessel going from St. Barts to Curaçao, but upon finding that his course was not to a Republican (independent) destination, the captain of privateer held a gun to the head of the captain of American vessel, threatening “if you don’t sign me a paper that you are bound to Maracaybo, I will blow your brains out.”<sup>8</sup> Indeed, as in previous centuries, in many cases it is quite difficult to differentiate between piracy and privateering during this time, which has been noted both by academics and residents due to the number of foreigners involved, the issuance of letters of marque by unrecognized countries, and the often overlapping practice of piracy while legitimately privateering, and privateering while being a pirate.<sup>9</sup>

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were cruising on an expired letter of marque from Buenos Aires (Wood 1828:12, 15–17; 35–36; 42–43).

7 British Foreign and State Papers (BFASP) vol. 18:502.

8 *Curaçaosche Courant*, March 11, 1821.

9 See Head 2008 and McCarthy 2013. An exchange of editorials between residents of Curaçao in 1821 highlights this well: “that the master of the *Famoso Indiano* protested ... that all vessels bound to or coming from that dependency, would be made prizes of, as Aruba is looked upon by him as an entrepôt for vessels trading with the independent possessions; which circumstance induced several traders on their arrival at Aruba, to land their cargoes and proceed

Even the Admiral of Simón Bolívar's navy, Luis Brión, had to make efforts to hunt down and prosecute pirates that were posing as privateers by sailing under Republican flags.<sup>10</sup>

A recurring problem for merchants and privateers during the Latin American Wars of Independence was the delay in receiving relevant news while at sea, especially for extended periods. Port cities on the Spanish Main such as Cartagena, Maracaibo, and La Guaira were at risk of capture by the enemy, and returning to port with prize ships was a risk that could prove disastrous without new and reliable intelligence.<sup>11</sup> Therefore, a safer alternative was to dispose of prize ships and cargoes in neutral ports such as Haiti, St. Thomas, St. Bartholomew, St. Eustatius, and Saba. However, this posed its own set of issues for Colombian and Buenos Airean privateers, as their letters of marque explicitly stated that their prizes must be disposed of in Republican ports. This technicality was often ignored by privateers both for security, and the cover it afforded to dispose of prize cargoes for personal profit.

Abolition of the transatlantic slave trade by Denmark (1803), Britain (1807), the Netherlands (1814), Spain (1818), France (1826), Sweden (1827), and the Empire of Brazil (1830) fostered a thriving illegal transatlantic slave trade.

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in ballast to this port: and is not Aruba practically blockaded? ... here within the reach of our bare eyes, did not the Rosa, in sailing form this port, bear down upon one of our vessels, the Roosenboom, which was beating up close in shore, to make her share the same fate as the former victim, and withal to add to the number of her booties, *for the impudence of a Dutch vessel to beat up from leeward alongside of a Dutch coast*, probably as the Don would forthwith presume, from an insurgent place? And is not our coast actively blockaded? ... the Spanish authorities ought to have set a better example of regard for constituted laws; their sovereign is in terms of amity with ours; their emigrants have been treated with brotherly cordiality in this place. But we are informed, and it is passing strange indeed, that general La Torre has not authorized the blockade; yet what is of an equal import, he countenances and thus tacitly sanctions it: he never issued even a sham proclamation to prevent its continuance: he never, that we know of, remonstrated against the aggressors" (*Curaçaosche Courant*, October 27, 1821).

10 *Curaçaosche Courant*, September 6, 1817; July 4, 1818; July 11, 1818; March 6, 1819.

11 (Extract from a dispatch from Admiral Brion to the Commandant at St. Thomas's dated the 1st ult) "I ... inform your government that the ports of Cumana, La Guayra, Puerto Cabello, and Maracaybo, &c. in the possession of the Royalists, are declared in a state of blockade, so that your Excellency may give notice of the same to the merchants of your island. One Hoodson has armed and fitted out privateers, without any authority from the Venezuelan government, I therefore declare him a pirate, and as it would be very desirous that he should be apprehended I shall give directions to my cruizers to intercept him. I therefore communicate this information, wishing to preserve harmony with the different Governments in amity with the Independents of South America" (*Curaçaosche Courant* July 11, 1818).

While illegal transatlantic slave trading occurred throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, especially to circumvent national monopolies on the trade, it boomed in the early nineteenth century following successive abolitions by European states, since the institution of slavery itself remained legal within these nation's colonies until later in the century. Demand for enslaved Africans in Cuba and Puerto Rico rose into the nineteenth century as sugar and coffee production expanded, which further incentivized transatlantic slave trade smugglers. Planters on the French islands of Martinique and Guadeloupe also continued to purchase enslaved Africans from illegal transatlantic traders, and likewise, Dutch planters in Suriname continued to purchase them as well. Havana became the most infamous destination for slavers to outfit vessels, collect crews, obtain a Spanish passport and ship register and flag for cover. However, the islands of St. Thomas, St. Barts, and St. Eustatius often served as a second, often unrecorded destination from slavers departing Havana for the coasts of Africa in order to further outfit their vessels for smuggling and legal posturing.<sup>12</sup> A common course for Cuban slavers was to purchase a ship in Havana at auction (often of questionable origins), then subsequently obtain Spanish ships' papers from Havana, a Spanish captain, and a skeleton crew, ostensibly to trade as merchants on the coast of Africa. They would then set an undocumented course for St. Thomas, where they would purchase a forged set of French ships' papers, and collect a French-speaking crew along with a Frenchman who would serve as captain for the voyage to Africa, usually to the Portuguese island of Principe. The former Spanish captain served as the supercargo, and as captain in case they had to fly Spanish colors.<sup>13</sup> The same process could be repeated at St. Barts for Swedish papers, or Dutch papers and a Dutch crew via St. Eustatius, though in the latter case the papers were not forged, but purchased directly from the governor. French illegal slave traders followed a similar pattern, whereby they fitted out at Guadeloupe or Martinique, and then proceeded to St. Thomas to purchase false documentation and requisite goods to fit out as a slaver on the coast of Africa, then proceeded to Cuba where they were able to arm their "merchant" vessel as a pretense against aggression from pirates.<sup>14</sup>

Upon arriving upon the west coast of Africa, when the captain believed they had sufficient time and cover, the ship's interior would be renovated with lum-

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12 *New York Gazette*, October 10, 1819; *Morning Post*, September 20, 1821; *Leeds Mercury*, May 18, 1818; BFASP vol. 13; *Morning Chronicle*, October 3, 1825 and June 18, 1827; Emmer 2006:122–24.

13 BFASP vol. 16:36–39.

14 BFASP vol. 17:500–1.



ber and other materials acquired in St. Thomas or St. Barts to refit the merchant vessel as a slave ship. They would then have to quickly load up the vessel with enslaved Africans to minimize their time spent on the coast, in order to avoid detection by antislaving cruisers. Next, as observed by the British-Dutch commission, “the practice now universally adopted is, never to embark the slaves until the vessels are quite ready for sea; the shipment only occupies a short time, and is generally done towards night, under cover of which they may very easily escape, even if a cruiser should be in the neighborhood, as the superior class of vessels that are employed by the Spanish slave dealers are so well calculated for sailing, that very few of the Men of War have much chance of overtaking them at sea.”<sup>15</sup> After delivering cargoes of enslaved Africans to their intended destinations, usually upon a remote beach, illegal slave trading vessels arrived back in their home ports in ballast.

These processes provided cover for the privateer crews by providing a superficial air of legitimacy for their enterprise on harbor masters records, and also several means for cover if they were boarded and inspected, depending on the nation of the boarding ship. British vessels, and to a lesser extent Dutch vessels, cruised the west coast of Africa against illegal slave traders, as part of the joint Anglo-Dutch commission based in Sierra Leone. A similar British-Swedish commission was also established there in 1824. France had no such joint commission, and therefore French vessels were required to be tried at a court in Senegal. The incomplete cooperation between nations to suppress the illegal transatlantic slave trade thereby created opportunities to avoid capture by possessing multiple sets of flags and ships papers that were opportunistically produced to the captain of the detaining vessel. Vessels cruising against slave traders as part of the joint British commissions were not authorized to detain French, Spanish, or Portuguese vessels unless enslaved Africans could be found on board of them.<sup>16</sup> Similarly, the French cruisers were not permitted to detain Spanish or Dutch vessels, and Portugal observed no such abolition of the slave trade south of the equator.

## 2 Legal and Political Environment

Governors of St. Thomas, St. Eustatius, and St. Barts found themselves in precarious states of policy balance during the early nineteenth century, involving

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15 BFASP vol. 13:38.

16 BFASP vol. 13:38.

the diverse interests of their islands' respective burghers, merchants and governing officials. While St. Eustatius thrived as an open port during the eighteenth century, it was a colony of the republican United Provinces, therefore engaging in trade and recognizing another emerging republican state fighting for their independence, such as the United States, did not expose any glaring contradictions in governance among officials and island's residents. After 1816, St. Thomas, St. Bartholomew, and St. Eustatius were all colonies of Denmark, Sweden, and the Netherlands, respectively, which also happened to be monarchies who engaged in trade with both Spanish Royalists and Republicans during the Latin American Wars of Independence. Engaging in indiscriminate trade during periods of war required careful political maneuvering by colonial officials on these islands. On one hand, their mother countries did not recognize the independence of the republican states in Spanish America, and thus could not openly engage in trade relations with them as it would be a de facto recognition of such. Indeed, during the Latin American Wars of Independence, the governors of St. Thomas were surely keen to avoid the response that Statia received by the British for recognizing U.S. independence in 1781. Trade with Republican vessels and others posing as them, therefore, was kept covert out of necessity both for public safety, and for continuity with the foreign policies of the mother country. A fine balance had to be struck by governors to temper official policy from their mother countries to the realities of local and regional governance, especially the divided loyalties and political leanings of their multinational citizens.

Threats of republican revolutions among the populace loomed in policy-making among Caribbean colonies of European kingdoms, following the successes of the American and Haitian Revolutions, and the ongoing Latin American Wars of Independence. On Curaçao in 1822, a group of American citizens were apprehended on the island after they tried to force American vessels to carry them to Puerto Rico in order to foment a republican revolution there.<sup>17</sup> In September of the same year, several vessels from American ports arrived on St. Barts,

each having about twenty passengers, mostly creoles and negroes. After being some time in port, they commenced recruiting men, issued proclamations, and avowed their intention to revolutionize Porto Rico. In consequence of which several persons in that island, among whom were two merchants, had been arrested on suspicion of being concerned in the

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<sup>17</sup> *Curaçaosche Courant*, July 12, 1822.

above expedition. The vessels had left St. Bartholomews, with the exception of one, a schooner, which was seized by the government before the informant sailed.<sup>18</sup>

Within this environment, official policy and private actions by governors often became contradictory in the public arena, but more nuanced in terms the realities of local governance and the benefits to social stability by appeasing conflicting parties within their own island and abroad. This played out most significantly in the conflicting interests between merchants and colonial officials in an increasingly liberalized market. It also occurred between colonial officials toward pirates and privateers that plied regional waters and called into port either openly or clandestinely. For governors of St. Thomas, any potential for instability in nearby Puerto Rico would have been closely watched, both to protect their trade interests, and avert the possibility for republican revolutions to break out on St. Thomas itself.

The cosmopolitan populations of St. Thomas fostered frayed relationships and trust between colonial officials and foreign-born citizens relative to their loyalties during periods of war and regional instability. The neutrality of these islands during the conflict also led them to become havens for refugees from the Spanish Main,<sup>19</sup> further contributing to complexities in residents' loyalties. Some of these immigrants profited as merchants and traders in St. Thomas, and were counted among the wealthiest residents on the island (Knox 1852: 105). Spain's loss of trade with the Spanish Main was compensated in part through Puerto Rico, both through an influx of refugees from the war, and from the resulting increased trade and production (Knox 1852: 105). For St. Thomas, Puerto Rico served as their most important trading partner. In 1821, of a total of 4,197 incoming ships from 142 different ports of origin, those from Puerto Rico accounted for 26 percent of all vessels.<sup>20</sup> Merchant houses from both Puerto Rico and St. Thomas sprung up on both islands to represent their own interests, especially after 1815 when Spain allowed foreign merchants to settle on Puerto Rico. For Puerto Rican merchants on St. Thomas, this also afforded them opportunities to engage in clandestine trade with Republican vessels away from direct oversight of Royalist colonial officials. Despite the strong trade relation between Puerto Rico and St. Thomas, Puerto Rico was also a center for

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18 *Curaçoesche Courant*, July 12, 1822.

19 In 1821, for example, a Danish royal brig, the *Mercury*, convoyed 15 sail of Spanish and Dutch ships to Puerto Cabello to transport any residents to St. Thomas who wished to flee the Patriots (*Curaçoesche Courant*, March 6, 1821).

20 DNAVH 701:25.4.1.

Spanish privateering. In many cases, such as with the *Famoso Indiano*, their privateers were notorious across the Caribbean for also engaging in piracy. The island of Vieques, then commonly known as Crab Island across the non-Hispanic Caribbean, was a common haunt for both Royalist and Republican privateers preying upon shipping centered on St. Thomas and Puerto Rico.<sup>21</sup> Puerto Rican merchants on St. Thomas were also outfitting Royalist privateers while other merchant houses simultaneously outfitted Republican privateers, creating a powder keg for potential conflict on land and at sea.<sup>22</sup>

Maintaining a strict embargo in practice against Republican trade, both open and clandestine, while engaging in brisk trade with Royalist Puerto Rico was fraught with difficulty. It would have exposed trading vessels flagged from St. Thomas, St. Barts, and St. Eustatius to capture by legitimate republican privateers to any destination (rather than just to Spanish possessions), while open trade with them would similarly expose them to threats from Royalist privateers and pirates. Royalist privateers sometimes made their presence known *en force* as an escort for merchant ships. On February 5, 1821, the Spanish frigate *La Ligera*, 44 cannon, and the galleon *Jena*, 18 cannon, called into St. Thomas escorting five Spanish schooners and one brig from Puerto Cabello and La Guaira, all flagged under Spain, loaded with coffee, cotton, and tobacco.<sup>23</sup> Meanwhile, throughout 1821, at least 18 ships recorded as Republican vessels called into St. Thomas, either unladen or with cargoes from the Spanish Main such as hides, cacao, cotton, and wood. On three occasions, Republican and Royalist ships were in port together the same day. This would clearly cause the potential for consternation, and even objections from Royalist captains to the governor. Officially, though, all Royalist and Republican vessels were recorded in the St. Thomas Harbour Master's records as Spanish, at least for the year 1821, which is the only surviving record for the period concerned. Republican vessels were sometimes distinguished by a small "I." prefixed before "Spansk" under the column for vessel flags, allowing for some degree of plausible deniability on official records relative to accusations of acknowledging Republicans as independent statesmen.

By law, privateers of any nation could not call into Danish ports unless under stress, damage, or under pursuit by enemies. These were repeated via Royal Decrees issued from Denmark in 1823 and 1825. The 1823 Decree additionally

21 Ingekomen brieven van St. Eustatius en St. Maarten (Dutch National Archives [NA] 1.05.13.01 #539) June 6, 1818; *Curaçaosche Courant*, August, 15, 1818 and August 20, 1818; *Sanct Thomae Tidende*, March 16, 1825.

22 BFASP 1821-22:980-81.

23 DNAVH 701:25.4.1, April 8, 1821; BFASP vol. 9:983.

stated that no prize goods from these vessels could be offloaded and sold, even if the vessel was in distress and needed funds for repairs, and Danish burghers were forbidden to purchase them, thereby closing an old and often abused loophole in Caribbean contraband trade. Foreign men-of-war were permitted entry to port, but were under identical restrictions relative to the trade of prize goods.<sup>24</sup> Regardless, the repercussions of these restrictions were evidently insufficient to halt clandestine trade with pirates in St. Thomas, which prompted a second Royal Decree in 1825. The first two points of seven were clear in their severity:

1. Whoever is found to have entered into a connexion, the object of which is the fitting out of a vessel for piratical purposes, to have served on board of such, or whoever has given information to a pirate of a prize, or who has in any other manner effectually promoted or tried to promote piracy, shall be punished with the gallows, which punishment shall be increased for those convicted as principals in the arming of piratical vessels or commanders of them, as well as for those who in the actual commission of piracy against a vessel, have been accessories in murder or personal ill-treatment, so that the criminal shall be hanged on a point of the land to be selected by our governor-general, in an iron chain, without their bodies being taken down from the gallows and interred.
2. Those on the contrary, who in a less effectual mode have made themselves guilty of participation in the crime, shall be sentenced to work at the fortifications for a number of years or agreeably to circumstances for life-time.<sup>25</sup>

Despite the gravity of these laws, only two men were tried and executed for piracy between 1816 to 1830,<sup>26</sup> while a few wanted ads were placed in the *Sanct Thomae Tidende* for others.<sup>27</sup> In all these cases, the accused were individuals or crews of vessels engaged in piracy. Individuals and crews accused of piracy were rarely afforded mercy in their acts, except certain cases such as being held as a prisoner and forced into a crew member's duties, or by being a child among the crew. Merchant houses on St. Thomas that "entered into a connexion" and outfitted (questionable) privateer vessels were never brought to domestic trial. This was nearly the case for Cabot & Co. during the *Las Damas Argentinas* incident in 1828. The owners, however, fled St. Thomas after being privately urged to do so by Governor Scholten, whereby a few days after their departure, he issued

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24 *Sanct Thomae Tidende*, July 9, 1823.

25 *Sanct Thomae Tidende*, July 16, 1825.

26 *Sanct Thomae Tidende*, September 14, 1825.

27 *Sanct Thomae Tidende*, July 9, 1818 and July, 12, 1818.

a reward of 500 pieces of eight for their capture.<sup>28</sup> The means through which merchant houses outfitted and financed these vessels provided plausible deniability if it engaged in acts of piracy. This extended to governing officials as well.

### 3 Bounds and Tolerances of Illicit Trade on St. Thomas

Trade on St. Thomas proceeded in a way that attempted to observe international policy set by the Crown while governing according to local realities, especially relative to the profits available to both merchants and government officials through indiscriminate trade. Essentially, like pirates posing as legitimate privateers, merchants and government officials wanted their illicit engagements to look like otherwise legal activities. This is known as “legal posturing” (Benton 2010:112–14). Engaging with privateers and pirates with no means of plausible deniability could have resulted not only in unavoidable arrest and prosecution, but also contributed toward destabilization among ideological or national lines among St. Thomas burghers. Potential repercussions also included retaliation by legitimate Republican or Royalist privateers, and a loss of legitimate and indiscriminate trade to St. Barts as the security of these economies on St. Thomas became compromised. For governing officials in St. Thomas, therefore, the best trade policy within the realities of regional security and the local economy was to conduct open trade according to Danish Royal prerogatives, while implicitly negotiating the risks relative to profit in the island’s indiscriminate trade. This policy was a more conservative approach than that of nearby St. Barts, whereby privateers could more openly dispose of their prize goods and provision themselves,<sup>29</sup> which tilted the burden of legal posturing increasingly toward government officials alone.

While piracy and privateering during Latin American Wars of Independence and the Cisplatine War were profitable and lucrative, an obstacle to participation by interested parties was obtaining initial financing for a ship, crew, and provisioning cruises. Merchant houses, such as some in St. Thomas, recognized this opportunity, and acted as financiers for captains of illegal slave traders, privateers, and pirates, with the important stipulation that they, rather than the captain, were the recognized prize masters. This meant a substantial reduction in potential profits for captains and crews as spoils were divided. Crews of pirate and privateer vessels were compensated for this loss by as the merchant

<sup>28</sup> *Baltimore Gazette*, January 15, 1829.

<sup>29</sup> DNAV1H No. 126: November 6, 1829.

houses would launder their goods, and ships if necessary, back into legal markets. These crews were therefore assured a ready and reliable means to dispose of their prize goods, which helped to ensure their safety.

This trade clearly occurred with the awareness and implicit sanctioning by Scholten and probably by previous governors of St. Thomas. Scholten provided some measure of insurance for himself and governing officials in St. Thomas by requiring a bond to be paid by merchant houses that outfitted illicit expeditions. In the example of the *Las Damas Argentinas*, Cabot & Co. paid Scholten a bond of 10,000 pieces of eight to the customs house in St. Thomas as a countermeasure against depredations by the privateer within sight of the island. This process also ensured that the privateer would return to St. Thomas with its prize goods in order to collect the bond, after they were laundered through St. Eustatius and Saba.<sup>30</sup> Demanding bonds from vessels against privateering was also a means of ensuring that peace was kept with St. Thomas' waters between Royalist and Republican pirate and privateer vessels that were sponsored and outfitted through merchant houses in St. Thomas.

Here it is also noteworthy to describe the manner in which Peter von Scholten rose to his position as governor of St. Thomas. Scholten began as chief scalesman in St. Thomas by direct appointment by King Frederick VI in 1814, after requesting him personally for the position. He quickly ascended to mayor of Charlotte Amalia in St. Thomas, to "Commissioner of Customs", then to Commander-in-Chief of the militia, then soon to governor of St. Thomas, all the while keeping his position as chief scalesman through permission of the King (Hansen 2009:317–19). Effectively, Scholten was in complete personal control of all trade in Charlotte Amalia throughout his tenure as governor. Contemporary observers who had inside knowledge of Frederick VI's personal relationships understood that Scholten was a means to funnel cash from St. Thomas to a

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30 John Shaw of the merchant house Cabot & Co. publicly described the bond process in detail, including the connivance of St. Thomas' government in sanctioning privateers, after Scholten issued his public arrest warrant: "The design of these bonds, usually required in such cases from some responsible merchant of the place, it will readily be perceived was not only to prevent privateering; for they are demanded only where the vessel going to sea is known to be a privateer; and are therefore rather evidence of the encouragement given by the local authorities to that branch of trade. For if it be illegal, and contrary to the Governor's pleasure, he has the power to prevent these vessels from fitting out in his jurisdiction or going to sea at all; and if the real character and ultimate destination of the vessel are known, the bond does not alter the one, or control the other beyond a few hours sail ... So that the bond is nothing more in effect than a privateer security to the Governor, that the privateer shall as soon as may be, take a new departure from his neighbor's territory and commit no depredation in the meantime ... and the bond good prima facie evidence for the Governor in case of difficulty" (*Baltimore Gazette*, January 15, 1829).

secret bank account in London which served as a trust fund for his illegitimate children (Hansen 2009:323–24). This account accrued over one million rixdaler after the death of Frederick VI, which was discovered by his successor, King Christian VIII, and appropriated for the state. Scholten's luxurious lifestyle in St. Thomas was thereby a cover for this arrangement, as he was often unable to pay his expenses; indeed, he died in 1854 with very little for his heirs to inherit.

These efforts by Scholten required close collaboration with the island's merchants. When the *Las Damas Argentinas* affair began to circulate in international newspapers, he privately informed members of its sponsoring merchant house, Cabot & Co., to leave St. Thomas. Very soon after their departure, Scholten issued public warrants for their arrest, with a reward of 500 pieces of eight for their capture. John Shaw of Cabot & Co., while safely back in the U.S., publicly accused Scholten of profiting from the monies derived from privateering that accrued at the customs house in a long and scathing letter published in the *Boston Gazette*:

But the truth is that the local Governors are well content to enjoy their share of the emoluments accruing to them at their Custom House, for this business of South American privateering; provided it can be done without the knowledge of the Government at home; which could not be; if the privateers of these unacknowledged nations were permitted to cruise directly from St. Thomas and return thither directly with their prizes.<sup>31</sup>

Within the customs house itself, under the auspices of Scholten, intentional opaqueness in their operations provided additional security to ships seeking to circumvent trade restrictions, especially regarding their nationality. During the 1820s, customs officials in St. Thomas continually refused to forward copies of ships registers and other papers from American vessels entering port to the American consulate on the island. Despite repeated requests from U.S. consul Nathan Levy, the customs house replied that they received a lack of instruction on this matter, despite declarations by Levy that it was “the pivot upon which the Consular System moves ... [and] leaves open a variety of avenues by which the flag of the United States may be used to cover numberless, nefarious proceedings.”<sup>32</sup> In other cases, due to the high profits in piracy, merchant ships at

<sup>31</sup> *Boston Gazette*, January 15, 1829.

<sup>32</sup> National Archives, United States of America (USNA), Record Group Number (RG) 59, Despatches from U.S. Consuls in St. Thomas, Virgin Islands, 1804–1906, Roll 2, October 1, 1826.



anchor in St. Thomas were often seduced to re-outfit in port as a pirate posing as a privateer either immediately or upon news concerning the outbreak of new wars.<sup>33</sup> The cover provided by the customs house on St. Thomas to consulates benefitted captains, merchant houses, and local officials, but left ships' crews open to abuse due to a lack of official documentation forwarded to the respective consulates. Often in the cases of ships engaged in illicit trade, captains dodged financial obligations to care for sick crew members by marooning them on St. Thomas, and recording them in their own log books as runaways.<sup>34</sup> This also provided a means for captains re-outfitting in port as a pirate to purge their ships of uncooperative crew members. Among merchant vessel crews themselves, captains were hard pressed to retain their crews once in port at St. Thomas, St. Eustatius, and St. Barts. Indeed, one U.S. official observed that between these islands, "our Merchant vessels can scarcely keep a man on board, they being seduced either by the Guineamen or Privateers."<sup>35</sup> Even consuls took advantage of the trade on St. Thomas to further their own ends. The U.S. consul on the island before Nathan Levy was Stephen Cabot, who was the founder of the aforementioned merchant house Cabot & Co.

Despite the array of inducements and protections available on St. Thomas for illicit trade, these must also be framed within the context of threats and retribution by privateers and pirates themselves toward merchants, officials, and other residents of the island. Puerto Rico not only dispatched legitimate Royalist privateers to cruise against Republicans and Republican-bound shipping, but their actions sometimes verged on piracy, directed particularly at St. Thomas. Some Puerto Rican coastal villages in particular, such as Foxardo (Fajardo), served as bases for outright piracy (Beale 1825). The threats of reprisal by Puerto Rican pirates hung heavy across St. Thomas by 1824:

that, upon those whose morals had not been corrupted by the traffic of piracy, an awful dread of piratical power and vengeance, had imposed a mysterious silence; a silence which they dared not break either to justify themselves, or to accuse the pirates: that this dark and lowering cloud of fearful mystery was not confined to the seat of piratical power, at Foxardo, but even overshadowed the independent island city of St. Thomas: where persons, of the highest standing in society, and above all suspicion of

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33 USNA, RG59, Despatches from U.S. Consuls in Antigua, vol. 1, March 14, 1827.

34 USNA, RG 59 Despatches from U.S. Consuls in St. Thomas, Virgin Islands, 1804–1906, March 27, 1827.

35 USNA, RG 59, Despatches from U.S. Consuls in St. Bartholomew, vol. 1, July 22, 1828. A "Guineaman" referred to a transatlantic slave trading ship.

connivance; indeed the complaining victims of atrocious piracy, find it necessary to adopt the precaution of concealing the names of their agents and informers; whom they have no means of protecting against piratical revenge: where even an American citizen, though resident at St. Thomas, finds it prudent to require the concealment of his name.

BEALE 1825:106

The fear of retribution from Puerto Rican pirates extended as far up to Scholten on St. Thomas. During Commodore David Porter's investigations into the state of the influence of Puerto Rican pirates on St. Thomas, a witness requested that his name be kept secret, "as the government uses every means in their power to keep the true state of things from coming to the ears of the public, supposing it will be detrimental to the trade of the place" (Beale 1825:93). The secrecy demanded by the government is not surprising, for beyond measures of personal and social security, sufficient public concerns about piracy would compel them to act against it, thereby potentially compromising their own dealings. In this sense, Scholten was fortunate that Commodore David unilaterally decided to capture pirates based from Fajardo, and proceeded to attack the town as a means to suppress piracy. This resulted in his subsequent court-martial back in Washington.

#### 4 Regional Network of St. Thomas for Illicit Trade

On its own, St. Thomas did not serve as a one-stop destination for privateers and pirates. While ships could be covertly financed, outfitted, and crewed at St. Thomas, its governors would not allow vessels to dispose of their prizes on the island directly, either overtly or covertly. This is in marked contrast to St. Barts, where prize goods from these vessels were sometimes openly offloaded and sold, with full knowledge and protection of the governor.<sup>36</sup> Governors of St. Thomas were more prudent, and ensured that legal and illicit prize goods were first laundered through St. Eustatius and Saba before entering its mar-

36 "At St. Barts they have lately sold the goods from on board the Portuguese prize brought there by privateers under Artigas's commission. One of the most respectable merchants there (Mr. S.) remonstrated with the government in a strong memorial, about the impropriety and dangerous consequences of permitting this traffic, so openly in the face of day, &c. The governor had him immediately imprisoned on a charge of high treason; his trial was to come on today. It has put St. Barts in a state of fermentation and disturbance" (*Curaçoesche Courant*, October 24, 1818).

kets. While using St. Eustatius and Saba as laundering destinations for prize ships and goods created “clean” documentation for the customs house and merchants in St. Thomas, this bureaucratic masquerade had no effect on the resident population; they were very aware that the same vessels engaged in legally questionable trade entered and re-entered port under different flags and names.<sup>37</sup> Nonetheless, the laundering process created cover for governors and customs officials relative to trade with pirates and privateers, and shifted the burden of culpability to Saba and St. Eustatius instead.<sup>38</sup>

Direct trade and relations with Republican privateers and pirates became a lucrative source of revenue in Saba and St. Eustatius, with involvement reaching the upper echelons of government. Government involvement in this activity is not surprising to due the poor state of both islands’ economies at this time, which persisted throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. As the citizens of St. Eustatius were well aware, with a lower annual rainfall than neighboring Caribbean islands, the economy of St. Eustatius could not rely on agriculture to support itself, which by consequence made Statia reliant upon a trade-based economy (Gilmore 2004). Following Statia’s decline as an international trading hub after 1795, the island’s government would have been pressured to pursue ulterior means to keep Statia’s trade-based economy alive. Following the end of the British occupations during the Napoleonic Wars, the governor of St. Eustatius from 1816 to 1822 was A. de Veer, who had previously served as harbor master of Curaçao during the early stages of the independence wars on the Spanish Main. He often dealt with prizes from privateers brought to Curaçao, and depredations of pirates and privateers off the waters of Curaçao concerning alleged Spanish cargoes or trade with Spanish islands. Therefore, he was already familiar with the stock and trade concerning them as he assumed the post of governor of Statia. He was promoted to governor of Suriname in

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37 The awareness of St. Thomas residents relative to the brazen laundering in port was described well by John Shaw: “But it was notorious to the officers of the Government, and the merchants of the place, that the goods with Cabot & Co. imported from St. Eustatius, and entered at the Custom-house, and afterwards disposed of, were the prize goods of the very schooner then lying in the harbor under her Dutch Register and flag, adopted because her former American register had been cancelled and returned to the United States, and because the Buenos Ayrean flag, not being recognized by the Danish government at home, could not be openly received by its public servants at St. Thomas. Whether under the American or Dutch flag, she was equally known by the whole community at St. Thomas as the Buenos Ayrean privateer which had captured the Brazilian ship” (*Baltimore Gazette*, January 15, 1829).

38 John Shaw stated this explicitly: “It is a convenient arrangement by which St. Thomas may enjoy the profits of the trade and St. Eustatius answer for its consequences” (*Baltimore Gazette*, January 15, 1829).

1822, and replaced by W.A. van Spengler, who continued his predecessor's clandestine policies with privateers and pirates. Saba during this time was governed through St. Eustatius. From 1816 to 1819, Saba was governed by Edward Beaks Sr., and after 1819, his son Edward Beaks Jr. The post of lieutenant governor of Saba, which was the highest public office, did not receive a wage until 1870. This would have encouraged the lieutenant governors to seek a means of obtaining a wage while performing the required duties of office.

St. Eustatius' and Saba's trade relations with privateers and pirates began at least by 1818, but concerted documentation of the processes of their relationships only came to light following the *Las Damas Argentinas* affair, which is an excellent example of legal posturing that was closely interwoven with piracy during this period. The incident centered on a Baltimore schooner of 90 tons that was funded by Cabot & Co. of St. Thomas, and captained by Joseph Lazaro Buysan, who renamed it from the *Bolívar* to the *Las Damas Argentinas*. It was sailing on an expired privateering commission from Buenos Aires dated 1826, originally in the possession Mr. John D. Quincy, who sailed it in 1827 from Baltimore to St. Thomas<sup>39</sup> and transferred it to Mr. George Styles of Cabot & Co., who subsequently passed it on to Buysan (Wood 1830:6). The vessel was outfitted as a privateer on St. Thomas through Cabot & Co.<sup>40</sup> Buysan obtained his crew from St. Eustatius, St. Barts, and St. Thomas, and in front of the crew aboard the vessel, asked if they would fight for and defend the flag of Buenos Aires, to which all gave three cheers (Wood 1830:11). He then changed the "6" in the original date to an "8" in order to make it valid for 1828, and began capturing prizes in the eastern Atlantic the same year. This included the Liverpool coppered brig *Carraboo*, which was brought to Saba, and left abandoned at anchor. It was discovered by British officials in St. Kitts, which set of an investigation into the matter that culminated with the execution of 28 of the original crew from *Las Damas Argentinas*.

The initial process of offloading prize goods at St. Eustatius was described by Lt. Col. Thomas Harper of the British Navy:

The agreement was made with their agents here, was, that whatever was sent in by them should lay off till they boarded them; and in the event of their bring boarded by any other person, the prize-officer ... was to state, that his vessel was in a leaky condition, and that he wished to enter the port, to sell part of his cargo to repair. They hoisted a private signal,

39 *New York Gazette*, December 9, 1828.

40 *New York Gazette*, December 9, 1828.

and communicated with the shore. In the evening of the same day, having taken several persons on board, they sailed from St. Eustatius to Saba, an island about twenty miles to the west, and under the same government ... Here the American and seven Spaniards left the vessel, and proceeded to St. Bartholomew's. She was taken possession of by the Dutch authorities, and carried back to St. Eustatius, under the pretext of her being abandoned.

WOOD 1830:20–21

Harper also describes the laundering process in detail:

I am happy in being able to acquaint your honor that many of the old and respectful inhabitants of this island are justly indignant at the system of plunder which is in operation by the privateers and their agents at this port, but their dread of the influence which these persons have with some of those in authority makes them afraid to give me all the information they are in possession of.

I can however collect that depredations to a very great extent have been for some time carried on by these privateers, under cover of the Buenos Ayrean Flag that after an average five or three large vessels are sent in here every week. That the cargoes are sometimes transhipped and sent for hence to St. Thomas, St. Barths, & the vessels destroyed. In a few instances the goods have been unpacked ashore, and the barrels, casks, or other packaging cases filled with stones, so shipped and sunk with the vessel. A brig came in on Saturday morning which was admitted to be a prize; and said to be loaded with pig lead. She lay too here all day. At night several boat loads of apparently light which were loaded from her in the very face of the guard and on Sunday morning she had disappeared. It is said she has been sunk. The crew who were on board of her sailed yesterday for St. Barts and St. Thomas with passes from the authorities here.<sup>41</sup>

Destroying captured ships was a common occurrence as a means to hide evidence of piracy. The sheer number of ships being brought into St. Eustatius would be difficult to launder and resell regionally without drawing unwanted attention. In the case that prize ships themselves were to be resold for profit, they were brought over to Saba and left abandoned at anchor, most often at

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41 NA 1.05.08.01 #727: August 22 1828, N5.

Wells Bay.<sup>42</sup> The ship was repaired as necessary by Saban carpenters, with efforts made to remove evidence of the ship's origins, such as its name and place of manufacture. This could also include painting the ship to make it look different than its former self. Usually, the ship would then be claimed by a merchant in St. Eustatius, who would claim that his ships papers were lost or destroyed by the pirates who captured it. A new set would be furnished by the lieutenant governor of Saba, the ship would sail for St. Eustatius, and it would be resold, most often in St. Thomas or St. Barts.

Merchant houses in St. Thomas that sponsored the cruises also managed payments of commissions to parties involved in the laundering process. In the case of the *Admiral Pacheco*, another prize from the *Las Damas Argentinas*, Cabot & Co. paid a 12 percent commission to St. Eustatius Governor Van Spengler and John Martins for receiving and transshipping its prize goods at St. Eustatius to Saba. Charles Mussenden, an island council member of St. Eustatius and chief of police, took the prize ship to Saba, where it was repaired and had its identity concealed by Saban shipwrights. Cabot & Co. then paid Van Spengler 150 pieces of eight to provide a new Dutch register for the *Admiral Pacheco*, which was renamed the *Elizabeth*. The lieutenant governor of Saba received 500 dollars in undisclosed currency, along with coffee and sugar, for these acts. If these sums were not paid to the lieutenant governor, then permission to transship and launder the prize ship at Saba would not have been granted. George Shaw of Cabot & Co. then sailed with the *Las Damas Argentinas* to St. Barts to procure a crew and several small vessels to transship the prize goods from Saba to St. Thomas. The crew of the *Las Damas Argentinas* were paid in St. Eustatius by George Stiles of Cabot and Co., while the officers of the vessel were paid in St. Thomas by the merchant house.<sup>43</sup>

The wide and public exposure stemming from the *Las Damas Argentinas* affair culminated in the replacement of Van Spengler and Beaks from their offices in St. Eustatius and Saba respectively, though Beaks was reinstated several years later. The smuggling and laundering network between St. Thomas, St. Eustatius, and Saba appear to have ceased afterward relative to privateers and pirates. By 1829, authorities on St. Thomas began seizing suspect vessels at port for irregularities, and in some cases resold them at public auction; nonetheless, these vessels were often purchased for re-use in illicit trade.<sup>44</sup> Despite the clampdown on trade relations with pirates and privateers in the region, St. Thomas, St. Eustatius, and St. Maarten continued to support French

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42 DNAVH #143.

43 *New York Gazette*, December 9, 1828 and *Baltimore Gazette*, January 15, 1829.

44 BFASP vol. 18:502–503.

and Spanish slave traders, especially from Havana, as destinations to procure crews, along with Danish and Dutch ships papers. St. Thomas and Havana in particular continued to supply ships papers and passports to illegal transatlantic slave traders at least until 1844.<sup>45</sup> Whether governing officials in St. Thomas were involved in the later years of engagements with illegal slave traders is unclear. St. Thomas became regionally recognized by this time as a destination for forged ships papers for other nations, such as France, therefore it is more likely that merchants were involved in these activities due to the diplomatic fallout that would result should it be revealed to have originated from Danish government officials themselves.

## 5 Conclusions

St. Thomas prospered as a regional and international trade destination during the early nineteenth century for both legal and illicit goods and services. St. Thomas served as a port where pirates, privateers, and illegal slave traders could outfit ships, obtain crews along with Danish ships papers, forged foreign ships papers, and Republican privateering commissions. It also served as a resale hub for illegal prize goods that were often laundered through St. Eustatius and Saba. This represented a legally opaque interpretation and continuation of its status as an “open trade” port from the late eighteenth century. This occurred as a result of a tensions between international, regional, and local interests that drove merchants and colonial officials on St. Thomas to engage in the illegal transatlantic slave trade, and also with privateers and pirates, during the early nineteenth century. Following the collapse of trade in St. Eustatius in 1795, merchants from the island relocated their enterprises to St. Barts and St. Thomas to take advantage of these islands similar policies of open trade. St. Thomas’ status as one of the nineteenth-century “neutral islands” in the eastern Caribbean provided a degree of cover from oversight by powerful colonial powers such as France and Britain. Its proximity to Puerto Rico fostered a strong legitimate trading relationship with Spain, with 25 percent of inbound ships to St. Thomas originating from the island. The island soon supported a cosmopolitan population of burghers of many different former nationalities, drawn in by the economic boom the island was experiencing. Meanwhile, the Latin American Wars of Independence and Cisplatine Wars resulted in a flood of privateers and pirates into the Atlantic and Caribbean. Lucrative ventures

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45 BFASP vol. 33:17.

were also created by successive abolition of the transatlantic slave trade by European states during this time, without outlawing the institution of slavery itself, created a thriving black market for enslaved Africans. For Republican privateers, uncertainty in the security of their home ports on the Spanish Main consequently made small, less defensible islands an attractive prospect for disposing of their prizes. For privateers from Buenos Aires during the Cisplatine War, this was a necessity as the city was blockaded by the Empire of Brazil throughout the conflict. Both Republican and Royalist privateers frequented St. Thomas. Royalist privateers escorted Spanish merchant ships for security at sea, while Republican privateers and pirates could trade their prizes covertly in St. Thomas through the smuggling and laundering rings via St. Eustatius and Saba. Officials on St. Thomas could not overly or overtly support or favor Republican privateers for fear of reprisal by Royalist pirates, privateers, and Puerto Rican burghers, but simultaneously could not suppress the demand for trade with emerging Republican states, and the profits derived from illicit trade. Effectively, as Victor Wilson observed relative to illicit trade in St. Barts, “enforcing the law was more of a threat to communal peace than connivance” (Wilson 2015:44). Requiring bonds from known pirates and privateers sponsored and outfitted through St. Thomas merchant houses became a means of guaranteeing the security of St. Thomas’ waters from their actions. Importantly, it also ensured that any illegal actions by these vessels occurred outside of St. Thomas’ waters, thereby giving governing officials a means for plausible deniability of these activities.

For illegal transatlantic slave traders, St. Thomas was a port of convenience for outfitting vessels for conversion into slave ships upon reaching the coast of West Africa, in addition to obtaining official Danish ships papers and forged documents. St. Thomas’ cosmopolitan population guaranteed that captains could find crewmen to match the nationality of their collections of different ships papers on board their slaver. This allowed them to re-arrange their hierarchies according to the most favorable nationality relative to the nationality of the ship stopping them at sea for inspection upon suspicion of illegal slave trading. In this the political and economic environment during the Latin American Wars of Independence, Danish colonial officials on St. Thomas could not entirely count on the loyalties of their citizens, especially those who became burghers through mere expedience for economic benefit. Colonial officials therefore had to govern based upon social and economic realities of the island and the region, which at times directly conflicted with Royal law and policy. Scholten’s direct involvement in fostering St. Thomas’ illicit trade became a means of cover for Frederick VI to profit from these activities. Scholten’s successive promotions by the king provided him the prestige and power associated



with these offices, but it appears that much of the profits earned as a result of Scholten's clandestine activities were funneled to the king himself. Scholten therefore appears to have been given implicit permission by the king to conduct illicit trade through St. Thomas as a means to secretly enrich the king so he could support his illegitimate children. Scholten meanwhile relied heavily on loans from others, and died leaving little to his heirs. The king could claim ignorance of illicit activities in St. Thomas, with Scholten to serve as his scapegoat. This occurred despite Danish law stating that their Caribbean colonies could not engage in trade with privateers, pirates, or participate in directly or indirectly in the transatlantic slave trade.

Regardless of the actual stance of Frederick VI and the state regarding these activities, severe laws enacted in St. Thomas did not dissuade merchants and officials from participating in illicit trade, which reflects the lucrative profits in these activities. While the potential for large profits incentivized participation in illicit trade, in other cases some were coerced into it by force. Threats of reprisal in St. Thomas by pirates, especially from Puerto Rico, also contributed to the hushed climate of illegal activities. The neutral islands were ill-armed with vessels to deal with the threat of reprisals by pirates, which for example led to Commodore David of the U.S. navy to dealing with the threat posed to St. Thomas by pirates based in Fajardo, Puerto Rico, without U.S. Congressional approval.

The uncertainty of nationhood among the emerging Republican states during the Latin American Wars of Independence created a corresponding uncertainty to the validity of letters of marque (privateering commissions) as a whole. The legal validity of letters of marque depended on their recognition by European powers and the U.S., but while they did not recognize them as independent until the close of the war, their citizens did, and joined Republican armies and navies, along with pirates posing as Republican privateers, in a de facto recognition of their statehood. The social legitimacy of letters of marque were further eroded as some originated from individuals rather than emerging states; those privateering for the Banda Oriental were rather known as "Artigas privateers," named after General José Gervasio Artigas, who was campaigning for independence from both Spain and Buenos Aires. While the legal status of Republican privateering commissions were clear, the social status of them was not. This fostered the practice of legal posturing by all parties involved in illicit trade as it provided a means of cover for their activities, and for some, their consciences, even if it meant changing a "6" to an "8" on an 1826 privateering commission in front of the crew itself. This occurred even though the actual illegal nature of these relationships were known to all, from crewmen, burghers, merchants, to colonial officials. Unlike St. Barts, St. Thomas was com-

mitted to legal posturing relative to illicit trade, and merchant houses went to great lengths to ensure that illicit prize goods were laundered through a network through St. Eustatius and Saba to mask their origins. Frequent changes in the name and nationality of the same ship also served to provide cover for illicit trade in official documentation such as harbor masters records, even though the actual nature of the vessel was known to colonial officials and burghers alike. In particular, the act of legal posturing among pirates to pose as privateers was so strong that at times their actions at sea and nationalist fervor were indistinguishable. Desertion to pirate vessels was a serious problem in St. Thomas for merchantmen crews, no doubt encouraged in part by the strong efforts to pose as privateers to assuage the conscience of deserters that they were “not pirates.”

Through a practice of connivance over law enforcement for communal peace, established legal trade networks, eroding interpretations of statehood and privateering commissions, periodically enforced participation in illegal trade by pirates, a reliable regional network for laundering illicit trade goods, and strong practice of legal posturing by all parties involved, St. Thomas prospered as a port for both legal and illicit trade following its return to Denmark from Britain in 1815 to the 1830s. This extended into the 1840s for its continued participation in the illegal transatlantic slave trade. This research has shed light on a poorly understood era in the northeastern Caribbean relative to the roles of St. Thomas and the Dutch islands during this period of lawlessness in the Caribbean Sea and Atlantic Ocean during the early nineteenth century. In particular, these revelations stress the need to understand local politics through a regional understanding, rather than as insular islands. Additionally, these findings stress the need for more nuanced understandings of the archaeological records of the neutral islands during this time due to the scale of illicit trade goods circulating between them. It also highlighted the need for a maritime cultural heritage management strategy for St. Eustatius and Saba, given the strong potential for many intentionally sunken wrecks as part of the laundering process in the deep territorial waters between the two islands.

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