CHAPTER 6

Controlling the Slave Trade

The increasing reliance of colonization efforts on enslaved African labor accelerated the integration of the Atlantic world through ties of migration, shipping and finance. While colonists and the West India Company were the main actors in the slave trade in the late seventeenth century, their role was taken over by private slave-trading companies and investment bankers during the eighteenth century. The financialization of the plantation system was the result of the increasing scale of the plantation economy and the liberalization of the slave trade. Metropolitan control was undermined in three ways, first by the smuggling of slaves, which mainly occurred as long as the WIC held on to its exclusive trading rights. The growing dominance of investment funds from the metropolis resulted in a more local smuggling practice whereby goods were exchanged outside the formal accounts sent to the investors in the Dutch Republic. Lastly, the devastating defeat of Dutch maritime power during the Fourth Anglo-Dutch War (1780–84) meant that plantation managers and owners began to look for other ways to be supplied with slaves, including smuggling.

At the time of the founding of the Suriname Company in 1683 the slave trade was still officially the monopoly of the WIC (for Suriname until 1738). Between the founding of the Suriname Company and the end of the War of the Spanish Succession (1713) plantation owners typically still resided in the colony and relied on personal and often familial ties across the Atlantic. Around the turn of the century Suriname changed decidedly into a plantation colony, and its connections to the Atlantic world stabilized. The organization of the slave trade in this early period shows how Paramaribo, with regard to the slave trade, was primarily a shipping point. The slave trade did not yet demand services beyond the supervision of the delivery of human cargo and the securing of payment by the planters. The formal organization of the WIC in the colony was small; it was represented by one or two commissioners. Before the shipping connection had been stabilized, plantation owners tried to secure the shipping of slaves by the WIC through the making of contracts with the company. The largest contracts were made by Samuel Cohen Nassy, whose considerable contracts with the WIC served to reinvigorate the trade when the WIC seemed to be shying away from it. Other private parties were also trying to secure deliveries, although these never represented a substantial share of the trade, and this strategy was abandoned once shipping became more regular.
In the first decades of the eighteenth century the connection between the plantations and the market in Europe was organized through two or three types of mediators: two in cases where there was a straightforward relationship between a plantation owner in the colony and a commissioner overseas, and often three when the (affluent) owner resided in the Republic and used both a plantation director as well as an administrator to manage multiple properties. Three new actors on opposite sides of the Atlantic came to play their parts in the connection between Suriname and the Dutch Republic in the middle decades of the eighteenth century: the negotiatie (investment fund) director in the Dutch Republic, in the colony the agendaris representing the investment fund (both after 1753) and thirdly a correspondent representing private slave-trading companies (after 1738). The investment funds were an important new player, pumping a staggering 36.6 million guilders into the plantation economy between 1753 and 1794.¹ The other new players were the private slave-trading companies who came to dominate the slave trade to the colony, with the WIC all but ceasing its slave-trading activities to the Americas. These functions frequently overlapped, and the people holding these positions often chose to reside in Paramaribo to control their portfolios.

The private traders who took over the slave trade after 1738 demanded short lines of credit from the planters. This need for credit was solved in the early 1750s when the so-called negotiatie bundled capital from a broad range of investors, which in turn was used as credit for one or more plantations. This system resulted in a speculative bubble in the late 1760s, which burst in 1773, but meanwhile this negotiatie system did make the expansion of Suriname’s plantation production possible. The system was closely connected to the slave trade, which could expand based on the capital available through the system.

When Dutch power overseas started faltering during the Fourth Anglo-Dutch War (1780–84) plantation owners and slave traders became embroiled in a conflict over how to continue the slave trade now that the war had diminished Dutch power overseas and crippled its slaving fleet. The slave traders argued that the States General should protect what they called the “National Slave Trade” and warned against the rampant interloping that would ensue once non-Dutch traders were allowed to sell their human cargo in the colonies. However, the plantation managers and plantation owners voiced the opinion that it was vital to protect the plantation system, even if this meant they had to rely on British and North American slavers. Their argument, as will be discussed in chapter 6, was that allowing non-Dutch traders to deal in basic provisions in the past had not resulted in large-scale interloping. They willfully

¹ Van de Voort, Westindische plantages, 265.