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Maritime Maroons: *Grand Marronage* from the Danish West Indies

N.A.T. Hall

THE islands of St. Croix, St. Thomas, and St. Jan—now the Virgin Islands of the United States—were Denmark's outpost of empire in the Caribbean. Denmark was a late entrant in the seventeenth-century scramble for West Indian colonies. Its colonization of St. Thomas, beginning in 1671, and of St. Jan in 1718, occurred at a time when England, France, and Holland had long since broken, *de facto* and *de jure*, Spain's monopoly in the hemisphere and were consolidating their New World gains. Denmark's choice was limited in the extreme; its acquisition of St. Thomas and St. Jan was determined not by choice but by lack of feasible alternatives. St. Croix, bought from France in 1733, was the last of the Lesser Antilles to come under European rule, and the purchase has the dubious distinction of bringing to a close the first century of non-Hispanic colonization in the Caribbean. The acquisition completed Denmark's territorial empire in the New World. Apart from two British occupations during the Napoleonic Wars, in 1801 and again from 1807 to 1815, the islands remained in Denmark's possession until 1917, when they were sold to the United States.¹

Mr. Hall, who teaches history at the University of the West Indies, is at work on a book-length study of slavery in the Danish West Indies. A version of this article was presented at the XVIth annual conference of the Association of Caribbean Historians, Bridgetown, Barbados, April 1984. Acknowledgments: I would like to thank Teresita Martínez Vergne and Richard Price for their helpful suggestions of additional material relating to Puerto Rico, Julius Scott and Lorna Simmonds for material relating respectively to St. Domingue and Jamaica, Poul Olsen for identifying the William Gilbert letter, Dahlia Riedel for translations from the German, and the Department of Geography, University of the West Indies, for assistance with the map. Their generosity in no way implicates them in any shortcomings the article may have.

¹ Useful introductory material on the Danish West Indies published in English can be found in Isaac Dookhan, *A History of the Virgin Islands of the United States* (Epping, Eng., 1974); Jens Larsen, *Virgin Islands Story* (Philadelphia, 1950); Florence Lewisohn, *St. Croix under Seven Flags . . .* (Hollywood, Fla., 1970); and Waldemar Westergaard, *The Danish West Indies under Company Rule (1671-1754) . . .* (New York, 1917).

The geological origins of the Lesser Antilles fall between the Eocene and Pliocene intervals of the Tertiary Period, when tectonic activity produced the collision of the floors of the Atlantic Ocean and Caribbean Sea that created an inner arc of volcanic islands to which the Danish West Indies belonged. These islands, unlike those of the outer arc such as Antigua or Barbuda, are characterized by serrated ridges and rugged peaks. St. Thomas and St. Jan rise respectively to 517 meters (1,700 feet) and 396 meters (1,300 feet). St. Croix has a range of hills along its northern coast rising to 367 meters (1,200 feet) in its northwestern corner but contains in its center and south an area of flat and fairly well-watered land totaling about 100 square kilometers (39 square miles) that is particularly well adapted to agriculture. This fact, combined with its greater area of 217 square kilometers (84 square miles), determined that neither St. Thomas, with an area of 72 square kilometers (28 square miles), nor St. Jan, 52 square kilometers (20 square miles), ever rivaled St. Croix in sugar production.²

Sugar integrated these tropical islands into the economy of their metropolitan center, and it was notoriously labor intensive. Although the use of white indentured workers was attempted,³ African slave labor soon became the exclusive basis of the monocrop culture of each island. As Table I demonstrates, the eighteenth century was a period of almost unvaryingly upward growth in the number of slaves, which peaked at the turn of the nineteenth century, coincident with Denmark's decision in 1792 to abolish the transatlantic slave trade in 1802 and with consequent feverish importations during that ten-year grace period.⁴ Relatively and absolutely, the increments of growth were largest for St. Croix. As the nineteenth century progressed, however, all the Danish islands experienced a gradual decline of slave populations as rates of mortality exceeded those of birth.⁵

But even as their numbers dwindled, slaves remained in the majority, a

² See John Macpherson, *Caribbean Lands: A Geography of the West Indies*, 3d ed. (Kingston, Jamaica, 1973), 3, 123, and P. P. Sveistrup, "Bidrag til de Tidligere Dansk-Vestindiske Øers Økonomiske Historie, med særligt Henblik paa Sukkerproduktion og Sukkerhandel," *National Økonomiske Tidsskrift for Samfundsspørgsmaal Økonomi og Handel*, LXXX (1942), 65, 87.

³ J. L. Carstens, "En almindelig Beskrivelse om Alle de danske Amerikanske eller West-Indiske Eylande," ed. H. Nielsen, *Danske Magazin*, III, No. 8, pts. 3 and 4 (1960-1970), 260-261.

⁴ Svend E. Green-Pedersen, "The Economic Considerations behind the Danish Abolition of the Negro Slave Trade," in Henry A. Gemery and Jan S. Hogendorn, eds., *The Uncommon Market: Essays in the Economic History of the Atlantic Slave Trade* (New York, 1979), 407-408, and "Slave Demography in the Danish West Indies and the Abolition of the Danish Slave Trade," in David Eltis and James Walvin, eds., *The Abolition of the Atlantic Slave Trade: Origins and Effects in Europe, Africa, and the Americas* (Madison, Wis., 1981), 234.

⁵ Green-Pedersen, "Slave Demography," in Eltis and Walvin, eds., *Abolition of the Atlantic Slave Trade*, 245.

TABLE I
SLAVE, WHITE, AND FREEDMAN POPULATIONS OF THE DANISH WEST INDIES, 1688-1846

Year	St. Croix			St. Thomas			St. Jan		
	Slaves	Whites	Freedmen	Slaves	Whites	Freedmen	Slaves	Whites	Freedmen
1688				422	317				
1691				547	389				
1715				3,042	555				
1733				**	**	**			
1755	8,897	1,303*		3,949	325	138	1,087	208	**
1770	18,884	1,515	**	4,338	428	67	2,031	213*	**
1789	22,488	1,952	953	4,614	492	160	2,302	118	**
1797	25,452	2,223	1,164	4,769	726	239	2,200	167	16
1815	24,330	1,840	2,480	4,393	2,122	2,284	1,992	113	15
1835	19,876	6,805*		5,315	8,707*		2,306	157	271
1846	16,706	7,359*		3,494	9,579*		1,943	532*	
							1,790	660*	

* These figures include freedmen as well as whites.

** No data.

Note: Between 1688 and 1715, neither St. Jan nor St. Croix had been acquired by the Danes. St. Jan was acquired in 1718 and was Danish at the time of the slave uprising there in 1733.

Sources: Forskellige Oplysninger, VI, General Toldkammer, Rigsarkiv, Copenhagen; Oxholm's "Statistik Tabelle over de danske Amerikanske Eilande St. Croix, St. Thomas og St. Jan, 1797," Dokumenter vedkommende Kommissionen for Negerhandelen, *ibid.*; "Viidsomsbog," Diverse Dokumenter, Vestindiske Sager, *ibid.*; Originale Forestillinger fra Kommissionen angaaende Negernes Stilling, *ibid.*; Westergaard, *Danish West Indies*; J. O. Bro-Jørgensen, *Vore Gamle Tropekolonier* (Copenhagen, 1966); Hans West, *Beretning om det dansk eilande St. Croix i Vestindien* (Copenhagen, 1791).

position held almost from the outset of each island's exploitation. Even after 1835, when freedmen, having obtained their civil liberties, were enumerated with whites in the category "free," slaves never lost numerical superiority vis-à-vis nonslaves. St. Thomas, however, had become an exception in this regard by 1835, and the explanation inheres in that island's large number of freedmen, who then composed well above 70 percent of the entire population.⁶

The increase of freedmen was closely related to the expansion of mercantile activity in St. Croix's port towns of Christiansted and Frederiksted and, most dramatically, in St. Thomas's port of Charlotte Amalie. That growth also greatly enlarged the number of slaves in those towns. By 1838, slaves composed some 26 percent of Charlotte Amalie's population. Many were women, engaged mostly as domestics and constituting, in St. Croix, some 62 percent of the urban slave population in 1839.⁷ The data for male slaves do not permit quantification of their employment, although it is a fair assumption that most were occupied in maritime work—loading and unloading vessels, driving the wains that delivered or removed cargo, and laboring in warehouses or as crew in interisland or other seagoing traffic. As market centers the towns drew slaves from the countryside to sell fruit, vegetables, poultry, grass, and firewood.⁸ At least in St. Thomas and St. Croix, almost the entire slave population was thus in constant contact with the port towns.

The sex distribution of slaves reflected, for the eighteenth century, a general preference for males in plantation America, since planters assumed that females were less able to withstand the rigors of labor. Indeed, the Danish Slave Trade Abolition Commission, in order to redress the imbalance and promote self-sustaining growth, exempted female slaves imported after 1792 from the usual taxes.⁹ For St. Croix, for example, the bias against females and its reversal over time is indicated by a comparison of the sex composition of that island's slave population of 1792 (when abolition was announced), 1804 (when the trade had just ended), 1815, 1835, and 1840, eight years before emancipation. Table II shows a dramatic half-century shift from a ratio of 85.8 female slaves to 100 males in 1792 to a ratio of 109 to 100 in 1840.

This change does not appear to have resulted in larger numbers of females than males among the slaves who escaped from the islands. Maroons from the Danish West Indies, as from Jamaica, Surinam, and

⁶ N.A.T. Hall, "The 1816 Freedman Petition in the Danish West Indies: Its Background and Consequences," *Boletín de Estudios Latinoamericanos y del Caribe*, No. 29 (1980), 56.

⁷ N.A.T. Hall, "Slavery in Three West Indian Towns: Christiansted, Frederiksted and Charlotte Amalie in the Late Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth Century," in B. W. Higman, ed., *Trade, Government and Society in Caribbean History, 1700-1920: Essays Presented to Douglas Hall* (Kingston, Jamaica, 1983), 18.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 23.

⁹ Green-Pedersen, "Economic Considerations," in Gemery and Hogendorn, eds., *Uncommon Market*, 408.

TABLE II
SEX DISTRIBUTION OF THE SLAVE POPULATION
OF ST. CROIX, 1792-1840

Year	Female	Male	Total	Ratio of Females per 100 Males
1792*	7,364	8,579	15,943	85.8
1804	10,475	11,601	22,076	90.2
1815	12,250	12,080	24,330	101
1835	10,423	9,453	19,876	110
1840	9,714	8,891	18,605	109

* Figures do not include disabled and runaway slaves, numbering 96 and 2,082 respectively.

Sources: Oxholm's "General Tabelle for St. Croix, 1792," Dokumenter vedkommende Kommissionen for Negerhandelen, General Toldkammer, Rigsarkiv; Forskellige Oplysninger, VI, *ibid.*; "Extract af General Tabellerne over Folkmængden paa de danske vestindiske Øer, den 1^{ste} Oktober 1835," Originale Forestillinger fra Kommissionen angaaende Negernes Stilling, *ibid.*; G. W. Alexander, *Om den moralske Forpligtelse til og den hensigtsmæssige af strax og fuldstændigt at ophæve Slaveriet i de dansk-vestindiske Kolonier* (Copenhagen, 1843).

Brazil, were preponderantly male.¹⁰ The reason was not that women were physically less resilient or robust than men, but, more probably, that men were more likely to have acquired skills needed to survive in forests, swamps, or at sea, while, in addition, women were rendered less mobile by pregnancy or the responsibilities of maternity. In the Danish West Indies, moreover, women began to predominate in the slave population at a time when the creolization of that population was well advanced. (See Table III.) By the nineteenth century, creole slave women were arguably further deterred from deserting by attachments of family, sentiment, or a sense of place.

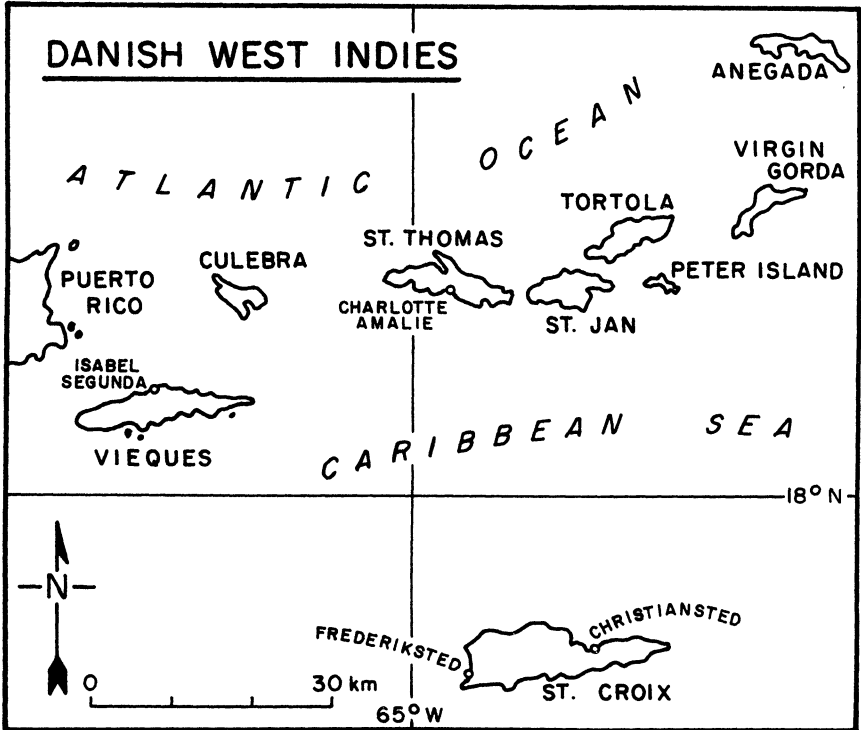
The three islands lie within sight of each other just east of Puerto Rico and at the northern end of the eastern antillean chain as it curves gently westward in the vicinity of 18 degrees north latitude. Under Danish

¹⁰ Richard Price, ed., *Maroon Societies: Rebel Slave Communities in the Americas* (New York, 1973), 9.

TABLE III
CREOLES AND AFRICANS IN THE SLAVE POPULATION
OF THE DANISH WEST INDIES, 1804-1805

	Creoles	Africans	Total	% Creoles
St. Croix	11,530	10,546	22,076	52.2
St. Thomas	2,096	1,248	3,344	62.7
St. Jan	1,521	896	2,417	62.9
Total	15,147	12,690	27,837	54.4

Source: Raw data from *Forskellige Oplysninger*, V, General Toldkammer, Rigsarkiv.



administration, they constituted a wedge, as it were, between Spanish Puerto Rico with its dependencies to the west and Britain's Virgin Islands to the east. This factor of insular proximity in a patchwork of national properties had an important bearing on how *grand marronage* from the Danish West Indies developed. There were significant differences from the pattern in the rest of the hemisphere, where aggregates of single fugitives created discrete communities that threatened the plantation system militarily and economically. Irrespective of their location, the viability of such communities, as Richard Price has noted, was a function of topography.¹¹ Natural barriers such as jungle, swamp, and hardly penetrable mountain fastnesses enabled maroon communities to develop in isolation and successfully defend themselves against attack. Slaves on the Danish islands enjoyed none of these advantages. The extensive cutting of forests to make way for sugar plantations removed nature's only benefaction from which maroons could profit. The experience of the Danish West Indies therefore provides empirical foundation for a theo-

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 3.

rem: that in small islands where geographical factors were hostile to the formation of permanent maroon communities, *grand marronage* tended to mean maritime *marronage*.

Grand marronage was the most viable of alternatives to servitude short of the supreme act of rebellion. From the beginning of Danish colonization to the time of emancipation in 1848, this form of resistance was continuous, indicating that its incidence was not significantly affected by the degree of acculturation or creolization of the slave population or by the changing proportions of male and female slaves. The numbers involved, however, were never very great. Hans West, a Danish pedagogue in St. Croix, reported 1,340 slaves at large in 1789, when the slave population stood at 22,448—a mere 5.9 percent.¹² P. L. Oxholm, a military engineer who later became governor-general, identified 96 deserters in 1792, only 0.5 percent¹³ of St. Croix's 18,121 slaves. In St. Thomas the 86 known deserters in 1802 constituted 2.7 percent of the slave population of 3,150.¹⁴

The evidence indicates that *grand marronage* commenced shortly after the settlement of St. Thomas and the beginnings of that island's development as a plantation colony, which Waldemar Westergaard dates at 1688.¹⁵ During the governorship of Johan Lorentz in the 1690s, proclamations were issued on the subject of runaways,¹⁶ and the Privy Council of St. Thomas resolved early in 1706 to take action against *grand marronage*. Accordingly, it was ordered on October 2 that all trees on the island from which slaves could make canoes were to be cut down; a proclamation of December 30 offered a reward of fifty *Rigsdaler* for the return of any slave dead or alive who had escaped to Puerto Rico.¹⁷

The proclamations of 1706 demonstrate two factors that had an important bearing on the phenomenon of *marronage* immediately and over time: environment and geography. In the early years of settlement, before the apotheosis of sugar, the primeval forest provided superb cover and supplied wood for canoes in which slaves could seek freedom in nearby islands. The "marine underground" to Puerto Rico and Vieques (Crab Island), and farther afield to islands in the northern Leewards and elsewhere, ultimately became a major route of escape.

¹² That number is not to be taken at face value since West made no distinction between *petit* and *grand marronage*. West, *Beretning*, "Mandal Optaget for 1789."

¹³ Oxholm's General Tabell, St. Croix, 1792, Dokumenter vedkommende Kommissionen for Negerhandelens bedre Indretning og Ophævelse, samt Efterretninger om Negerhandelen og Slaveriet i Vestindien, 1783-1806, General Toldkammer, Rigsarkiv.

¹⁴ Recapitulation of the State of the Different Quarters of the Island of St. Thomas, May 13, 1802, Den Engelske Okkupation 1801, 1807, General Toldkammer, Rigsarkiv.

¹⁵ Westergaard, *Danish West Indies*, 121.

¹⁶ Copies of Orders Issued during Governorships, 1672-1727, Bancroft Papers, Z-A 1, 3, University of California, Berkeley.

¹⁷ Kongelig Secretaire Schwartkopp's Report, Oct. 13, 1786, *ibid.*, Z-A 1, 48.

When the expansion of the plantations removed the forest cover, in St. Thomas and St. Jan by the 1730s and a generation or so later in St. Croix,¹⁸ the best chances for permanent escape lay overseas, although, as we shall see, the islands' towns, as their populations grew, also provided havens. J. L. Carstens, who was born in St. Thomas in 1705 and died there in 1747, noted in his memoirs that in those early years runaways occupied the island's coastal cliffs, where they sheltered in almost inaccessible caves. Those first maroons chose well, with a keen strategic eye, for the cliffs could not be scaled from the seaward side and vegetation obstructed the landward approaches. Such refugees went naked and subsisted on fish, fruit, small game such as land turtles, or stolen provender. Slave hunts, organized three times a year, could neither loosen their grip on freedom nor dislodge them from the cliffs.¹⁹

Regrettably, Carstens recorded nothing of the size and social organization of this early community or its relationship with plantation slaves. It was the only such community that St. Thomas ever had, and it did not last long. The Danish authorities could ill afford to stand idly by, especially when St. Thomas was not yet self-sustaining.²⁰ During the War of the Spanish Succession they began to organize the *klappe jagt* or slave hunt more effectively, using planters, soldiers, and trusty slaves.²¹ The forests then became less safe, while at the same time the agricultural exploitation of St. Thomas, peaking in the 1720s,²² reduced the vegetational cover. As a result, slaves turned to the sea. Their line of escape led west, with favorable northeast trade winds and currents, toward Puerto Rico and other islands, none of which lay more than sixty kilometers from St. Thomas. Slaves had opportunities to become familiar with the surrounding waters on fishing expeditions for sea turtles around Vieques, and the same boats they manned on their masters' behalf could be used to make a break for Puerto Rico.²³ In 1747, nineteen slaves deserted from St. Croix, and the following year forty-two seized a sloop there and sailed to comparative freedom among the Spaniards.²⁴

Puerto Rico, which became their preferred destination, was sparsely

¹⁸ In the case of St. Croix, contemplated legislation in 1783 against illegal felling of trees was justified on the basis that "since almost all the forests have been cut down, illegal felling of trees is of greater importance than previously" (Udkast og Betænkning angaaende Neger Loven med bilag 1783-1789, No. 24, Pt. 1, Article 48, General Toldkammer, Rigsarkiv).

¹⁹ Carstens, "En almindelig Beskrivelse," ed. Nielsen, *Danske Magazin*, III, No. 8, Pts. 3 and 4 (1960-1970), 225, 259.

²⁰ N.A.T. Hall, "Empire without Dominion: Denmark and Her West Indian Colonies, 1671-1848" (seminar paper, University of the West Indies, Mona, 1983), 3-10.

²¹ Bro-Jørgensen, *Vore Gamle Tropekolonier*, 225.

²² Westergaard, *Danish West Indies*, 160.

²³ *Ibid.*, 161.

²⁴ Arturo Morales Carrión, *Albores Históricos del Capitalismo en Puerto Rico* (Barcelona, Spain, 1972), 83.

populated before the *Cédula de Gracias* of 1815, and its authorities, perhaps for this very reason, looked leniently if not encouragingly on runaways from the Danish islands. As early as 1714, Gov. Don Juan de Rivera organized eighty deserters from Danish and other islands into a community at San Mateo de Cangrejos east of San Juan, gave them public land, and required them to function as an auxiliary militia.²⁵ The Spanish government ratified these arrangements in *cédulas* of 1738 and 1750, and in the latter decreed freedom for runaways who embraced Catholicism.²⁶ Eugenio Fernández Méndez has argued that the Spanish acted largely from religious motives.²⁷ But there was also an element of calculating realpolitik: in addition to providing manpower, maroons were potential sources of useful intelligence in the event of hostilities. It is instructive to note that slaves from South Carolina found an equally agreeable haven in Spanish Florida in the early eighteenth century and were used by the Spaniards in border incursions that kept the British colony in a state of apprehension.²⁸

Early legislative prescriptions against *grand marronage* authorized such physical deterrents as leg amputations, hamstring attenuation, and leg irons or neck collars.²⁹ Such measures hampered but did not prevent escape by water. Later laws elaborated rules for access to and use of boats. Even before 1750, legislation limited the size of canoes and barges that whites could keep and specified conditions of ownership.³⁰ Although mutilations and hardware such as neck irons fell out of use *pari passu* with the disappearance of the forests,³¹ regulation of boats persisted until the very end of the era of slavery. The ordinance of October 2, 1706, was the forerunner of many, the necessity for which was proof of the problem they sought to eradicate. But despite a flurry of laws in the 1740s and 1750s,

²⁵ Luis M. Diaz Soler, *Historia de la Esclavitud Negra en Puerto Rico* (Rio Piedras, Puerto Rico, 1974), 233, 236.

²⁶ Cayetano Coll y Toste, ed., *Boletín Histórico de Puerto Rico* (San Juan, Puerto Rico, 1914), I, 16, 20.

²⁷ Fernández Méndez, *Historia Cultural de Puerto Rico, 1493-1968* (San Juan, Puerto Rico, 1971), 165.

²⁸ Peter H. Wood, *Black Majority: Negroes in Colonial South Carolina from 1670 through the Stono Rebellion* (New York, 1974), 305-307.

²⁹ Westergaard, *Danish West Indies*, 162. See also C.G.A. Oldendorp, *Geschichte der Mission der evangelischen Brüder* (Barby, Germany, 1777), I, 496, and Neville Hall, "Slave Laws of the Danish Virgin Islands in the Later Eighteenth Century," *New York Academy of Sciences, Annals*, CCXCII (1977), 174-186.

³⁰ Gov.-Gen. Walterstorff's Placat of Nov. 21, 1791, quoting earlier proclamations of 1742, 1744, 1750, and 1756, Bancroft Papers, Z-A 1, 52.

³¹ Oldendorp mentions amputations for which the definitive slave code of 1733 made provision (*Geschichte*, I, 396). But by the 1780s there were already voices critical of the code's provisions as barbaric. See, for example, Judge Colbiørnsen's Opinion, Sept. 3, 1785, Miscellaneous Papers, Udkast og Betænkning, General Toldkammer, Rigsarkiv, and General Toldkammer Skrivelse to Danish West Indian Government, Dec. 23, 1782, Kommissions Forslag og Anmærkning angaaende Negerloven, Bind 1, 1785, *ibid.*

probably inspired by the beginning of the agricultural exploitation of St. Croix, *grand marronage* could not be suppressed.

Reimert Haagensen, who lived in St. Croix in the 1750s, noted in an account of that island that planter families were being ruined by the running away of slaves in groups of as many as twenty to twenty-five in a single night. He instanced occasions when slaves seized boats by surprise attack and forced their crews to sail to Puerto Rico. Many plantation owners, Haagensen complained, had "*capital staaende iblandt de Spanske, hvoraf dog ingen Interesse svares*."³² It was commonly supposed in the Danish islands that a year in the service of the Spanish crown brought freedom. This Haagensen said he could neither confirm nor deny; but he had personal knowledge of slaves who had escaped to Spanish territory, lived well and in freedom, and sent back messages of greeting to their former masters and slave companions.³³ Similarly, C.G.A. Oldendorp, a Moravian missionary inspector, writing in the 1760s, noted that Maronbjerg—Maroon Mountain, in the northwestern corner of St. Croix—was no longer a secure retreat, and that as a result the proximity of Puerto Rico and the promise of freedom there acted as powerful stimulants. The still largely African-born slave population demonstrated the same levels of inventiveness and daring that Haagensen observed in the previous decade. Slaves secretly built canoes large enough to accommodate whole families, commandeered when they could not build, forced sailors to take them to Puerto Rico, and, when all else failed, bravely swam out to sea in hope of accomplishing the same objective.³⁴

Legislation dealing with *marronage* at the end of the eighteenth century and in the early years of the nineteenth shows a continuing preoccupation with the problem. Gov.-Gen. Ernst von Walterstorff attempted to introduce a boat registry in St. Croix in 1791 and insisted that all canoes must have bungs that were to be put away, along with oars and sails, when the canoes were not in use. All craft were to be stamped with the royal arms and bear a registration number as well as the owner's name; none was to be sold or rented outside the towns' harbors.³⁵ In 1811 the police chief of Christiansted announced a fine of ten *pistoles* for employing slaves on the wharves or on boats in the harbor without a police permit.³⁶ The Danish West Indian government in 1816 expressed concern at the persistence of escapes by boat and contemplated introducing regulatory measures such as prohibition of boat ownership except in towns.³⁷ Finally, as late as

³² "Capital invested among the Spaniards that yields no interest" (Haagensen, *Beskrivelse over Eylandet St. Croix i America i Vestindien* [Copenhagen, 1758], 42).

³³ *Ibid.*, 43.

³⁴ Oldendorp, *Geschichte*, I, 396-397. Oldendorp did not say whether he knew of any slaves who managed to reach Puerto Rico or adjacent islands by swimming.

³⁵ Gov.-Gen. Walterstorff's Placat, Nov. 21, 1791, Bancroft Papers, Z-A 1, 52.

³⁶ *St. Croix Gazette*, Mar. 12, 1811.

³⁷ Akter Vedkommende Slaveemancipation, Frikulørte 1826, 1834, Dansk Vestindisk Regerings Deliberations Protocoller, Apr. 30, 1816, General Toldkammer, Rigsarkiv.

1845, three years before emancipation, Adam Søbøtker, the acting governor-general, promulgated a decree permitting plantations to keep only flat-bottomed boats, as slaves were unlikely to try to escape in such craft.³⁸ By then, however, the marine underground had other destinations than Puerto Rico, as will be shown below.

Over time, legislation to cauterize the hemorrhage proved only minimally effective. The failure of preventative measures prompted a search for other solutions. The absence of a formal extradition convention had enabled runaways to Puerto Rico to cock their snooks at former owners, a form of salutation that Haagensen for one found less than amusing.³⁹ The establishment of such a convention, it was thought, would resolve the difficulty. Accordingly, a series of cartels between Spain and Denmark in 1742, 1765, 1767, and 1776 established that deserters would have to be claimed within one year by their owners; that the latter would pay the expenses of their slaves' maintenance for that period; that reclaimed fugitives would not be punished; that those who embraced Catholicism would be allowed to remain in Puerto Rico; and, finally, that a Catholic church and residence for its priest would be built in St. Thomas at Denmark's expense.⁴⁰

These diplomatic initiatives, however, proved disappointing. The cartels applied to future deserters but not to slaves already in Puerto Rico. The Spanish authorities, moreover, were less than expeditious in dealing with claims. The Danish West India Company filed a claim in 1745 for the return of some 300 deserters known to be in San Mateo de Cangrejos, but twenty-one years passed before it was adjusted.⁴¹ Less than a decade after the 1767 convention, Gov.-Gen. Peder Clausen was engaged in a brisk correspondence with Don Miguel de Muesos, captain general of Puerto Rico. Several slaves had decamped from St. Thomas early in 1775, but the envoy sent to claim them was met by Spanish professions of ignorance of their whereabouts.⁴² *Grosso modo*, the Spaniards showed little inclination to cooperate in the matter of runaways. Occupation of the Danish West Indies in the early years of the nineteenth century by Spain's wartime ally England appears to have made little difference. The British lieutenant governor of St. Croix in 1811, Brig. G. W. Harcourt, issued a proclama-

³⁸ Søbøtker to Christian VIII, Dec. 13, 1845, Record Group 55, Box 9, National Archives, Washington, D.C.

³⁹ Haagensen, *Beskrivelse*, 43.

⁴⁰ Oldendorp, *Geschichte*, I, 396-397; E. V. Lose, *Kort Udsigt over den danske-lutherske Missions Historie paa St. Croix, St. Thomas og St. Jan* (Copenhagen, 1890), 22-23; Diaz Soler, *Historia de la Esclavitud*, 234-236; Morales Carrión, *Albores Históricos*, 67; Kommissions Forslag, Bind 2, fols. 74, 89, General Toldkammer, Rigsarkiv.

⁴¹ Westergaard, *Danish West Indies*, 161. Diaz Soler is of the view that the settlement of the claim under the 1767 convention was facilitated by the demise of the Danish West India Company, whose illicit trading with Puerto Rico had always been an obstacle to negotiations (*Historia de la Esclavitud*, 234).

⁴² Clausen to de Muesos, July 4, 1775, Bancroft Papers, Z-A 1, 43.

tion asserting that slaves had been carried off in Puerto Rican boats and declared that such boats found illegally four weeks thereafter in any harbor except Christiansted and Frederiksted would be seized and confiscated.⁴³ Two months later, the British authorities invited persons who had recently lost slaves and believed them to be in Puerto Rico to submit information on the slaves' age, sex, appearance, and time of desertion.⁴⁴

As late as 1841, the "long-standing difficulties" with Puerto Rico were the subject of exchanges between the Danish West Indian governor-general and King Christian VIII, each hoping that the new Puerto Rican captain general, Mendez Vigo, would be more disposed to "friendly conclusions" than some of his predecessors had been.⁴⁵ An incident reported by Van Dockum in the early 1840s reveals the nature of the difficulties. Acting on information that two slaves had been spirited away to Vieques in boats from that island, the authorities in St. Croix sent the frigate on patrol duty in the West Indies to reclaim them. When the frigate arrived at Isabel Segunda, the main town of Vieques, that island's governor, though full of conviviality and consideration, would admit only that a boat had in fact taken slaves from St. Croix to Vieques.⁴⁶ It appears that the shortage of labor in the Spanish islands after the legal suspension of the slave trade in the 1820s bred illegal trafficking, often with the collusion of Spanish authorities.⁴⁷ The episode to which Van Dockum referred seems to have been an instance of labor piracy willingly embraced by the slaves of St. Croix as an avenue of *grand marronage*.

Taking refuge in forested hills and fleeing to Puerto Rico or Vieques were the most dramatic early acts of *grand marronage*. While slaves continued to escape by water, the disappearance of primeval vegetation prompted others to find ways of deserting without leaving the islands. Sugar served their need and turn. Harvesting began in late December or early January when the canes approached maturity and had grown high enough to conceal even the tallest person. Until the end of the "crop" or reaping season in July, therefore, each unreaped field provided an artificial forest in which slaves could continue to conceal themselves over a six-month period. The work of these months of harvest made the most

⁴³ *St. Croix Gaz.*, Feb. 8, 1811.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, Apr. 9, 1811.

⁴⁵ Von Scholten to Christian VIII, Jan. 13, 1841, in which reference is also made to an unfiled letter of Nov. 18, 1840, Originale Forestillinger fra Kommissionen angaaende Negernes Stilling i Vestindien med Resolutioner, General Toldkammer, Rigsarkiv. See also Christian VIII to von Scholten, Oct. 7, Dec. 4, 1840, Aug. 1, 1841, Privatarkiv 6795, Rigsarkiv.

⁴⁶ C. Van Dockum, *Livserindringer* (Copenhagen, 1893), 74-77.

⁴⁷ Andrés Ramos Mattei, *La Hacienda Azucarera: Su Crecimiento y Crisis en Puerto Rico (Siglo XIX)* (San Juan, Puerto Rico, 1981), 23-24. Demand for labor inspired the decree of 1849 establishing an obligatory work regimen for free labor in Puerto Rico. See *ibid.*, 24, and Labor Gomez Acevedo, *Organización y Reglamentación del Trabajo en el Puerto Rico del Siglo XIX* (San Juan, Puerto Rico, 1970), 449-453.

strenuous and exacting demands on slaves' endurance. This was also the dry season, before high summer brought the heavy showers associated with the movement of the intertropical convergence zone. A slave thus had multiple inducements: he could find cover, escape the period of hardest labor, and keep dry. A Danish official in the late eighteenth century noted that the expansion of plantations on St. Croix made it difficult for runaway slaves to find shelter in forests that were disappearing or in fields that no longer contained scrub. The alternative, he observed, rendered them secure but posed a constant fire hazard: "Fleeing to the cane fields in which the cane and leaves can exceed a man's height, they put down poles of about a meter and a half and make a bower over these with the leaves of the nearest canes plaited together. In this way they form a little hut about four and a half feet high by six to seven feet around. Having cleared the ground in the hut of dry leaves and left an opening, they then use the place to lie up, to store whatever ground provisions they can, and as a fireplace."⁴⁸ The existence of maroon hideouts in the cane fields was authenticated by discoveries of corner posts, ashes, and coal. A causal link between such hideouts and cane fires was also established by remnants of pork and other meat abandoned to and partially consumed by fires out of control.⁴⁹

Another variant of *grand marronage* was desertion to the coastal towns. Christiansted and Frederiksted in St. Croix, and Charlotte Amalie in St. Thomas, grew in population and commercial importance in the prosperous years of the late eighteenth century: plantations flourished, trade expanded, and Charlotte Amalie was established as a free port.⁵⁰ For slaves on islands as small as the Danish West Indies, towns offered advantages of comparative anonymity; a prospect of work on the wharves, in warehouses, and aboard coastal or other vessels; the likelihood of finding a sympathetic reception and succor in the areas of these towns designated by law for free persons of color; concealment, incongruously enough, by whites; and the chance of using the town as a staging post in what might become a step-migration to freedom.

Anonymity was enormously enhanced when a slave on the run shipped from one Danish island to another. One cannot quantify this type of *marronage*, but it was known to have taken place, and as the bustle of free-port commerce in Charlotte Amalie arguably rendered that town a more impersonal place than either Christiansted or Frederiksted, it must be presumed that the tendency would have been toward St. Thomas. Newspaper advertisements appear to support such a hypothesis, although

⁴⁸ Etats Raad Laurbergs Erindinger, Jan. 12, 1784, Kommissions Forslag, Bind 2, fols. 10-11, General Toldkammer, Rigsarkiv. Cf. *ibid.*, Bind 1, fol. 326.

⁴⁹ It is possible that cane field deserters were simply engaging in short-term absenteeism. The length of absence and the construction of shelter that made absence of that duration possible would suggest, more plausibly, an intention to remain at large and ultimately leave the island.

⁵⁰ Hall, "Slavery in Three West Indian Towns," in Higman, ed., *Trade, Government and Society*, 19-20.

there is also evidence of *marronage* from Charlotte Amalie to St. Jan and St. Croix. Most notorious was the case of Jane George, who in an advanced state of pregnancy escaped from St. Thomas in a canoe with a white man early in September 1815 paddling for St. Jan or St. Croix.⁵¹ Another runaway, James Dougharty, an artisan apprentice, headed for St. Jan in 1822. A reward of \$20 was offered for information, "as it [was] not likely [he] had walked all the way."⁵² By and large, however, advertisements for maroons in St. Thomas over the first fifteen years of the publication of the *Sankt Thomæ Tidende* (1815-1830) show approximately twice as many desertions to St. Thomas as to St. Croix or St. Jan from St. Thomas.

The variety of employment in the growing towns facilitated *grand marronage* into them, and the anonymity they offered was compounded by the notorious laxity of the Danish West Indian police,⁵³ so that it was possible for runaways to sustain a livelihood in wharf-related work or itinerant vending without too great a risk of discovery.⁵⁴ Fugitives enjoyed the normally supportive presence of freedmen in their legally prescribed areas of residence, the Free Guts. With freedmen, urban slaves, and poor whites, deserters composed a demimonde of the marginalized. Governor-General Clausen in St. Croix in the 1770s and Lt. Gov. Thomas de Maleville in St. Thomas in the 1780s expressed only more explicitly than most the sense of community that prevailed among runaways and freedmen in the Guts.⁵⁵ Poor whites involved in petty retail trading or artisan trades were known to consort with and provide shelter for runaways. The latter were potential sources of stolen goods and, if they had an artisanal skill, could be hired out to earn an income for their protectors. Throughout the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, therefore, one finds legislation aimed at curtailing the mutually reinforcing liaison of fugitives and their patrons, especially in the towns. The preamble to an ordinance issued by Gov.-Gen. Adrian Bentzon in 1817 spoke of the long history of this liaison; the ordinance prescribed severe penalties for whites and free persons of color who either hired or hid slaves on the run.⁵⁶ As late as 1831, Adam Søbøtker, acting as governor-general, was still vainly attempting to curb that sort of collusion.⁵⁷

For runaways, the coastal towns were above all a porthole of opportuni-

⁵¹ *Sankt Thomæ Tidende*, Sept. 16, 1815.

⁵² *Ibid.*, Mar. 5, 1822.

⁵³ Hall, "Slave Laws," N.Y. Acad. Sciences, *Annals*, CCXCII (1977), 184.

⁵⁴ Hall, "Slavery in Three West Indian Towns," in Higman, ed., *Trade, Government and Society*, 27, 29, 30.

⁵⁵ Clausen's Placat, 39, July 29, 1775, Udkast og Betænkning . . . No. 27, General Toldkammer, Rigsarkiv; de Maleville's Anmærkning, Apr. 7, 1784, and de Maleville's Betænkning, Oct. 19, 1787, Kommissions Forslag, Bind 2, fols. 33, 84, *ibid.*

⁵⁶ Bentzon's Ordinance of Sept. 11, 1817, Forskellige Oplysninger, V, fol. 315, General Toldkammer, Rigsarkiv.

⁵⁷ Søbøtker's Proclamation of July 22, 1831, *ibid.*, VI, fol. 216.

ty to a wider world. *Marronage* overseas to foreign destinations, before the significant growth of the towns, had been limited to Vieques and Puerto Rico. However, as towns grew, they attracted an increasing number of vessels from distant ports, widening the escape hatch for slaves. The schooners, brigs, sloops, yawls, and snows that called at these towns, especially Charlotte Amalie as it became a Caribbean entrepôt, brought St. Domingue/Haiti and Jamaica in the Greater Antilles, the islands of the Leewards and Windwards, the North American continent, and even Europe within reach, though after 1802 Denmark ruled itself out as a haven for escapees. A Supreme Court decision that year in the case of the slave Hans Jonathan decreed that the free soil of the mother country did not confer freedom on the enslaved.⁵⁸

Access to avenues of flight depended in some measure on the collusion of masters of vessels. Service at sea in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries was such as to suggest a parallel between masters of vessels and slave masters, between ships and regimented slave plantations, between crews and enslaved estate labor. Ship masters, not surprisingly, had their own problems of *marronage* in the form of desertion. It was not unusual for crewmen, singly or in numbers, to jump ship in West Indian waters. One Swedish sloop, the *William*, Capt. Joseph Almeida, lost five hands in St. Thomas harbor on February 5, 1827.⁵⁹ Such incidents meant that additional or substitute crews were often needed, and since the white population of Caribbean coastal towns was too small to meet the need, it was unlikely that runaway slaves who offered themselves would be interrogated closely, if at all, about their status. Black crewmen were therefore commonplace. Many of Almeida's men were Africans of unspecified status, and slave shiphands were by no means extraordinary. One such, Jan Maloney, deserted from a vessel of British registry in St. Thomas in 1819.⁶⁰

In 1778 regulations were adopted to obstruct this avenue of *grand marronage* by forbidding shipboard employment of any slave without a sailor's pass and written permission from his owner. Significantly, it was considered necessary to reissue these regulations in 1806.⁶¹ The 1833 royal proclamation of Frederik VII, by offering the extravagant reward of 1,500 *pistoles* for information on masters of vessels secretly exporting slaves, suggests that the problem still persisted even at that late date.⁶² The size of the reward indicated the seriousness with which the problem was viewed, particularly at a time when the slave population of the Danish islands was steadily declining.⁶³

⁵⁸ A. S. Ørsted, "Beholdes Herredømmet over en vestindisk Slave, naar han betræder dansk-europæisk Grund," *Arkiv for Retsvidenskaben og dens Anvendelse*, I (1824), 459-485.

⁵⁹ *Sankt Thomæ Tidende*, Feb. 9, 1827.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, Mar. 9, 1819.

⁶¹ *Dansk Vestindisk Regerings Avis*, May 15, 1806.

⁶² *Sankt Thomæ Tidende*, Mar. 9, 1833.

⁶³ Green-Pedersen, "Slave Demography," in Eltis and Walvin, eds., *Abolition of the Atlantic Slave Trade*, 245. See also Alexander, *Om den moralske Forpligtelse*, 5-7.

Some ship captains, even before the end of the eighteenth century, were free persons of color. One such was Nicholas Manuel, whose ship, the *Trimmer*, plied between St. Thomas and Jeremie, St. Domingue, in 1796.⁶⁴ In such a vessel, arguably, a slave could find the maritime equivalent of a house of safety in a Free Gut. The legislation directed at captains thus took into account a potential collaborator, the colored shipmaster, while it also expressed the paranoia prevailing after the revolution in St. Domingue and accompanying disturbances in the French West Indies. Vulnerability to revolutionary contamination from these trouble spots was a recurring concern of Danish West Indian authorities, who lived in constant fear that their slaves would emulate the St. Domingue example. The years from 1791 to about 1807 were therefore punctuated by measures to establish a *cordon sanitaire* against St. Domingue. These involved, inter alia, the confiscation of any boats arriving from St. Domingue/Haiti and the imposition of a fine of 1,000 *Rigsdaler*.⁶⁵ Yet there is evidence to suggest that such prophylaxis achieved only indifferent results. The traffic to St. Domingue/Haiti, especially from St. Thomas, continued, and in the early 1840s Governor-General von Scholten felt moved to remark on the "significant" number of "unavoidable" desertions to that island.⁶⁶

Legislation could not prevent desertions, for the movement of interisland maritime traffic depended to a degree on slave crews, and the law permitted slaves with seamen's passes to be so engaged, making a pragmatic virtue out of necessity, considering the shallowness of the white labor pool.⁶⁷ Engaged as crews in their island of origin, slaves embraced the opportunity to escape on reaching a foreign port. Jamaica was one such destination in the western Caribbean at which goods from the emporium that was St. Thomas were arriving well before the end of the eighteenth century. Both the *Royal Gazette* and the *Jamaica Courant* carried information that confirms that slaves considered any port a station in the maritime

⁶⁴ Calendar of Records, High Court of Vice Admiralty, Jamaica, 1796, fol. 17, Jamaica Government Archives, Spanish Town. Freedmen sometimes also owned their own vessels. The brothers Jacob and August Dennerey jointly owned a boat in St. Thomas in 1820. See Hall, "1816 Petition," *Boletín de Estudios Latinoamericanos*, No. 29 (1980), 70.

⁶⁵ General Toldkammer Skrivelse to Dansk Vestindisk Regering, Nov. 23, 1793, and Dansk Cancelli to General Toldkammer, Aug. 8, 1807, enclosure 4, Oct. 29, 1805, Akter Vedkommende Slaveemancipation Frikulørte 1826, 1834, General Toldkammer, Rigsarkiv. For further examples of boat legislation directed at St. Domingue/Haiti see N.A.T. Hall, "Forslag til Ordning af Vestindisk Forfatningsforhold Angaaende Negerne med Mere," Bureau of Libraries, Museums and Archaeological Services—Department of Conservation and Cultural Affairs, Occasional Paper No. 5 (1979), 3, 7, n. 16.

⁶⁶ Von Scholten's comments on G. W. Alexander's "Anmærkninger til Kongen af Danmark m.h.t. de danske Øer" [n.d.], Akter Vedkommende Slaveemancipation 1834-1847, II, General Toldkammer, Rigsarkiv.

⁶⁷ The scarcity of white labor was a continuous problem, especially for plantations, forcing von Scholten to pass deficiency legislation in the 1830s. See Hall, "Empire without Dominion," 26.

underground. The St. Thomas sloop *Martha*, Capt. John Simmons Blyden, arrived in Kingston in August 1788 and promptly lost Jack, a sailor aged twenty-five, and Tony, twenty-three, described as a "waiting man and occasional fiddler." Another St. Thomas sloop, the *Hope*, Capt. John Winfield, lost George, aged nineteen, at about the same time.⁶⁸ Joe, twenty-five, jumped ship in Kingston from the schooner *Eagle*, registered in St. Croix, in May 1806.⁶⁹ Not all the deserting slave seamen from the Danish West Indies appear to have made it to freedom. Some like Sam, a St. Thomas creole who arrived in Kingston on a sloop commanded by Captain Capp in 1797, were apprehended.⁷⁰ No doubt a reasonable competence in an English creole tongue must have helped a slave negotiate the narrows of early freedom in a strange English-speaking island, and in this regard slaves from St. Croix may have enjoyed an advantage. In that island, step by step with the creolization of the slave population, there developed an English-based creole lingua franca, whereas in St. Thomas it was Dutch-based.⁷¹ Having an employable skill in addition to seafaring would also have helped. Another Sam, for example, who deserted from a Danish island schooner in Kingston late in 1793, was a hairdresser by trade. Since he was American-born and spoke good English,⁷² he stood a doubly good chance of getting past the exit turnstiles of this station in the maritime underground.

In the Caribbean, the same flows of trade that took vessels to St. Domingue/Haiti or farther away to Jamaica also took Danish West Indian vessels to the Lesser Antilles in the opposite direction. These flows presented like opportunities to slaves for employment as crew, and such employment, legitimate or illegitimate, created chances for desertion to the Leewards, Windwards, and elsewhere. That traffic, moreover, complemented the trade originating to leeward of St. Thomas and St. Croix, thereby widening the possibilities for maritime *marronage*. This branch of eastern Caribbean intercourse in the early nineteenth century was part of the expanding seaborne commerce into St. Thomas⁷³ and opened a major escape route for runaways to St. Thomas from islands in the northern Leewards and from as far away as Curaçao and Barbados.⁷⁴ Danish slaves were not slow to exploit the situation. One reported example from St. Thomas in 1819 indicates that eight slaves—seven men and one woman—probably crew on the seventeen-ton interisland schooner *Waterloo*, stole the ship when it arrived in St. Vincent in the British Windwards.⁷⁵

⁶⁸ *Royal Gazette*, Supplement, Aug. 8-15, 1788.

⁶⁹ *Jamaica Courant*, May 17, 1806.

⁷⁰ *Royal Gaz.*, Dec. 2-9, 1797.

⁷¹ Hall, "Empire without Dominion," 18.

⁷² *Royal Gaz.*, Nov. 7, 1793.

⁷³ The total tonnage of shipping into St. Thomas, 1821-1830, doubled that of the previous decade. There was an annual average of 2,890 vessels with a total tonnage of 177,441. See Westergaard, *Danish West Indies*, 252.

⁷⁴ Hall, "Slavery in Three West Indian Towns," in Higman, ed., *Trade, Government and Society*, 30.

⁷⁵ *Sankt Thomæ Tidende*, Apr. 10, 1819.

This episode is remarkable for its daring and also for the fact that it is the only incident of running away to the non-Danish islands of the eastern Caribbean, excluding Tortola, that the newspapers report. Though one of the best sources for the study of all forms of *marronage*, the Danish West Indian newspapers are in fact less helpful than one would like on maritime *marronage* to the foreign islands of the eastern Caribbean—perhaps understandably so, for the logical place in which to advertise for deserters was the terminus a quo or point of escape. The Danish West Indian papers therefore report desertions from other islands more fully than desertions from the Danish islands. The local advertisement placed in the *Sankt Thomæ Tidende* by James Hazel, owner of the above-mentioned *Waterloo*, was thus unusual. Recovery of his lost schooner and slaves would have been better served by insertions in the foreign press. But perhaps the size of his loss—schooner, cargo, and eight slaves—obliged him to issue, in modern police parlance, an all points bulletin.⁷⁶

From the inception of Danish colonization, slaves showed their capacity for creating possibilities for *grand marronage* overseas from each new set of circumstances. They responded ingeniously to the openings presented by the islands' ecology, the proximity of the Spanish islands, and the growing volume of traffic to and from the Danish ports. But of all the circumstances affecting *grand marronage*, none appears to have had a more quickening effect than emancipation in the neighboring British Leeward Islands, particularly Tortola. Desertions to Tortola began to increase from 1839, the year after the post-emancipation period of apprenticeship ended in the British West Indies.⁷⁷ Especially in St. Jan, no more than a cannon shot's distance from Tortola, the urge to run away then appears to have become irresistible.

Slaves were well aware that once they set foot on Tortola their freedom was secure, for the effect of the British Emancipation Act of 1833 was to confer on them on arrival the free status that the West Indian slave James Somerset had acquired in England in 1772 only after litigation at the highest level. For example, in reporting the incident of the early 1840s involving the two slaves from St. Croix, Van Dockum noted that before proceeding to Vieques they had requested to be taken to Tortola, where they went ashore. The authorities in Vieques used this fact to explain why they could not return persons who were in law free men.⁷⁸ The difficulties that British West Indian emancipation posed for the Danish authorities were practically insurmountable. Louis Rothe, an observant judge of probate who came to St. Croix in the 1840s, noted that desertions from St.

⁷⁶ The newspapers of the Leewards, Windwards, Barbados, and elsewhere in the eastern and southern Caribbean can be expected to be good sources for *marronage* from the Danish West Indies. It has not been possible at this writing to consult such sources.

⁷⁷ Louis Rothe, "Om Populations Forhold i de danske vestindiske Colonier og fornemlig paa St. Croix" [n.p.], *Neger Emancipation Efter Reskript af 1847*, General Toldkammer, Rigsarkiv.

⁷⁸ Van Dockum, *Livserindringer*, 74-77.

Jan were almost impossible to control—and not only because of the proximity of Tortola. Overlooked by precipitous cliffs, St. Jan's innumerable bays made coastal patrols for the most part ineffective. Moreover, the patrols were too few to police bays that, even when contiguous, did not permit observation of one from another. Deserters crossed the straits by boats and improvised rafts from St. Jan. Boats also originated from Tortola; some even came by appointment to fetch a slave or group of slaves. In Tortola, Rothe observed, "all classes receive them with open arms and emissaries await with tempting offers of money and free transportation to larger islands, and promises of high wages and little work." For the years 1840 to 1846, he reported desertion by 70 slaves.⁷⁹ Though the total seems insignificant, it was more than double the number of runaways from St. Thomas over the same period.⁸⁰ If Rothe was correct—and he admitted that no official records were kept—an important fact emerges. St. Jan's slave population declined from 1,970 in 1840 to 1,790 in 1846.⁸¹ The 70 slaves therefore represented nearly 40 percent of the decline over that period.⁸²

As the 1840s began, the Danish West Indian government sought to close this route to freedom by using frigates on the naval station. Governor-General von Scholten's orders were apparently to shoot to kill, although his long-term objective, as expressed in a letter to Christian VIII, was to reduce the attractions of desertion by progressive amelioration of conditions for slaves.⁸³ In 1840, a slave woman attempting to reach Tortola by canoe was killed by naval fire. Two others in the party, a mother and child, were apprehended, but two escaped by swimming.⁸⁴ In Denmark, the newspaper *Fædrelandet* observed in righteous indignation that "blood ought not to be shed to compensate for an inability to reconcile the slaves to their existence" and found a sinister significance in the recent erection of "an enormous prison" in St. Croix.⁸⁵ Von Scholten and the authorities were for the moment impervious to such voices of humanitarian protest, but it was another matter when pursuit of slaves involved firing upon them in ill-defined territorial waters claimed by the British. An ensuing British protest led to an investigation in 1841 by a

⁷⁹ Rothe, "Om Populations Forhold" [n.p.], *Neger Emancipation Efter Reskript*, General Toldkammer, Rigsarkiv.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

⁸¹ The figures for 1840 are derived from Alexander, *Om den moralske Forpligtelse*, 7. Those for 1846 are from Sveistrup, "Bidrag," *National Økonomiske Tidsskrift*, LXXX (1942), 78-79.

⁸² Rothe did not make any attempt to quantify the effects of *grand marronage* from St. Jan, but he did state that *marronage* to Tortola would have a "conclusive influence upon the structure of [St. Jan's] slave population" ("Om Populations Forhold" [n.p.], *Neger Emancipation Efter Reskript*, General Toldkammer, Rigsarkiv).

⁸³ Von Scholten to Christian VIII, Jan. 15, 1841, *Originale Forestillinger fra Kommissionen angaaende Negernes Stilling*, General Toldkammer, Rigsarkiv.

⁸⁴ Alexander, *Om den moralske Forpligtelse*, 15.

⁸⁵ *Fædrelandet*, Dec. 15, 22, 1840.

senior Danish naval officer, Hans Birch Dahlerup. Formal charges were brought against a Lieutenant Hedemann for the killing of the woman and violation of British waters. The investigation ended in a court martial in Copenhagen and two months' imprisonment for Hedemann—"more to satisfy England and its then powerful abolitionist lobby," Dahlerup concluded, "than for the offence with which he was charged."⁸⁶

The year 1845 was a particularly successful one for slaves bidding for freedom in Tortola. The administration's preoccupation, if not panic, was by then plain. Acting Governor-General Søbøtker reported to the crown in tones of anguish a sequence of escapes. On October 26, six slaves—five men and a woman⁸⁷—from plantations on St. Croix's north side, got hold of a fishing canoe and made it to Tortola, although police and fire corps went in immediate pursuit. The Tortolan authorities returned the boat but not the people. Of particular interest is the fact that the leadership of this escape was attributed to a seasoned maritime maroon who some years previously had deserted from Dutch Saba and had been recaptured and resold in St. Croix.⁸⁸

Less than a month after this incident the most spectacular episode of *grand marronage* from St. Jan to Tortola occurred. On the night of November 15, thirty-seven slaves, including six from one plantation, deserted from southside St. Jan in two English boats sent from Tortola for that purpose. The maroon patrol, such as it was, was based on the island's north side, closest to Tortola, leaving the south side unguarded. For some time planters in St. Jan had been allowed to get their supplies of salt from Tortola in boats from that island, but they were less than vigilant in this instance. No satisfaction was to be expected, Søbøtker felt, as the government of the British Leeward Islands was unlikely to make reparations and would take no action against the two Tortolan boatmen who were accessories. "The established principle since emancipation," he pointed out, "was that no one who had helped an unfree person to gain freedom could be punished for it." The best the frustrated Søbøtker could do was to issue stern warnings to plantation owners, increase night patrols by his inadequate militia, and make new regulations respecting planters' ownership of boats.⁸⁹

⁸⁶ Dahlerup, *Mit Livs Begivenheder* (Copenhagen, 1909), II, 270, 289, and "Skizzer fra et kort Besøg paa vore vestindiske Øer i Sommeren 1841," *Nyt Archiv for Sovæsnets*, I (1842), 1.

⁸⁷ Statistics on the sex distribution of deserters or groups of deserters are not abundant, but the available data do point to a heavy preponderance of males. For example, of the 86 deserters in St. Thomas in 1802 (see above, n. 14), 73 were male and 13 female. The 7 men and 1 woman in the incident in 1819 (see above, n. 75) represent a not dissimilar proportion. The party of 5 in 1840 (see above, n. 84), assuming the two escapees were men, appears to be almost evenly balanced. But that distribution, on the basis of other evidence, can be considered unusual.

⁸⁸ Søbøtker to Christian VIII, Nov. 11, 1845, no. 3, Copies of Letters Sent to the King, Record Group 55, Box 9, fols. 2-3, Natl. Archs.

⁸⁹ For letters reporting the incident see Nov. 28, Dec. 13, 1845, Jan. 27, 28, 1846, nos. 4-7, *ibid.*

Grand marronage by Danish West Indian slaves lasted from the beginning of colonization, when the slave population was exclusively African-born, until slavery's end in 1848, when it was largely creole. In the decade or so before that date, emancipation in the British West Indies, particularly in neighboring Tortola, stimulated desertions on a scale that, especially in St. Jan, threatened to destabilize the slave system. In the 1840s such desertions, though they may have robbed the slave population of its potentially most revolutionary leadership, nevertheless prefigured and arguably acted as a catalyst for the successful rebellion of 1848.

Later commentators, like earlier observers, rationalized *grand marronage* in a variety of ways, some self-serving, others perceptive. These included depravity, overwork, fear of punishment or impending trial, arbitrary owners, the attractions of a work-free Sunday on other islands, and scarcity of food.⁹⁰ Whenever the occasion arose, officials were given to asserting, in an access of obtuseness or arrogant self-satisfaction, that fugitives would willingly return if only they could enjoy more discretionary time.⁹¹ One of the thirty-seven who fled to Tortola in 1845 seized a boat and did indeed return to St. Jan early in 1846. The records do not disclose his reasons but do report him as having said that others were equally ready to return, "which was not improbable," the authorities smugly concluded, "having regard to the prevailing destitution in Tortola."⁹² But there is no evidence that these escapees came back to St. Jan, nor did this one swallow make a summer. On the occasion of the 1759 slave conspiracy in St. Croix, the examining magistrate, Engebret Hesselberg, made the surprisingly enlightened observation that "the desire for freedom is an inseparable part of the human condition."⁹³ Oldendorp, no libertarian himself, concurred, although with less generosity of spirit. "It is extraordinarily difficult," he noted, "to convince the . . . Negroes that the rights their masters exercise over them are their due rights. They follow their uncontrollable nature and consider every means of gaining their freedom justified. . . . [T]hey run away from their masters . . . and seek violent means of escaping from their service."⁹⁴

⁹⁰ For examples see Gardelin's Placat, Sept. 5, 1733, Udkast og Betænkning . . . No. 4, General Toldkammer, Rigsarkiv; Walterstorff to General Toldkammer, July 20, 1802, Akter Vedkommende Slaveemancipation, Frikulørte, 1826, 1824, *ibid.*; Laurbergs Erindringer, Jan. 12, 1784, Kommissions Forslag, Bind 2, *ibid.*; and von Scholten to Christian VIII, May 14, 1842, Originale Forestillinger fra Kommissionen, *ibid.*; Søbøtker to Christian VIII, Jan. 28, June 12, 1846, nos. 7, 19, Record Group 55, Box 9, Natl. Archs.; and Haagenen, *Beskrivelse*, 35.

⁹¹ Von Scholten to Christian VIII, May 14, 1842, Originale Forestillinger fra Kommissionen, General Toldkammer, Rigsarkiv.

⁹² Søbøtker to Christian VIII, Jan. 28, 1846, no. 7, Record Group 55, Box 9, Natl. Archs.

⁹³ "Species Facti over den paa Eilandet St. Croix Intenderede Neger Rebellion Forfattet efter Ordre af Byfoged Engebret Hesselberg" [n.p.], Udkast og Betænkning . . . No. 3, General Toldkammer, Rigsarkiv.

⁹⁴ Oldendorp, *Geschichte*, I, 394.

By running away as they had always done, and in the numbers they did to Tortola, slaves reinforced the truth of Hesselberg's observation. In the 1840s they began to press the issue of their freedom by bringing the metropolitan authorities urgently to consider concrete measures for emancipation. Their initiatives helped embolden liberal opinion in Denmark, already critical of absolute monarchy and colonial policy and favorably disposed to emancipation on economic as well as humanitarian grounds.⁹⁵ The newspaper *Fædrelandet*, organ of the opposition, declared it "impossible for all practical purposes to place limits on the longing for freedom."⁹⁶

Indeed, when a deserted slave spoke into the record, he gave poignant endorsement to *Fædrelandet's* sentiments. Such a man was William F. A. Gilbert, the only escaped slave from the Danish West Indies from whom we have a personal written testament. We do not know when or how he reached Boston, Massachusetts, but it was from that city on August 12, 1847, a year before emancipation, that he addressed to Christian VIII an impassioned plea not only on his own behalf but for every member of his race who had ever been or was still oppressed by slavery:

To His Supreme Magistrate, King Christian VIII, Copenhagen, Denmark. Sir: I taken my pen in hand a runaway slave, to inform your excelcy of the evil of slavery. Sir Slavery is a bad thing and if any man will make a slave of a man after he is born free, i, should think it anoutrage becose i was born free of my Mother wom and after i was born the Monster, in the shape of a man, made a slave of me in your dominion now Sir i ask your excelcy in the name of God & his kingdom is it wright for God created man Kind equal and free so i have a writ to my freedom I have my freedom now but that is not all Sir. i want to see my Sisters & my Brothers and i now ask your excelcy if your excelcy will grant me a free pass to go and come when ever i fail dispose to go and come to Ile of St. Croix or Santacruce the west indies Sir i ask in arnist for that pass for the tears is now gushing from mine eyes as if someone had poar water on my head and it running down my Cheak. Sir i ask becose i have some hopes of geting it for i see there your Nation has a stablished Chirches and Schools for inlightning the Slave. that something the American has not done all though she is a republican my nam is Frederick Augustus Gilbert now i has another name thus

W^m F. A. Gilbert

Sir, when i see such good sines i cannot but ask for such a thing as

⁹⁵ For a detailed discussion of opposition liberal and other positions on the emancipation debate in Denmark see Grethe Bentzen, "Debatten om det Dansk-Vestindisk Negerslaveri 1833-1848 med særligt Henblik paa de igennem Tidsskriftpressen og Stænderdebatterne udtrykt Holdninger" (M.A. thesis, Aarhus University, 1976).

⁹⁶ *Fædrelandet*, Jan. 5, 1841.

liberty and freedom for it is Glorius. Sir i make very bold to write to a King but i cannot helpit for i have been a runaway slave i hope your excelcy will for give me if i is out in order Please to sind you answer to the Deinish Council in Boston

His withered hands he holds to view
 With nerves once firmly strung,
 And scarcely can believe it true
 That ever he was yong,
 And as he thinks o'er all his ills,
 Disease, neglect, and scorn,
 Strange pity of himself he feels
 That slave is forlane

William F. A. Gilbert.⁹⁷

⁹⁷ Henlagte Sager, Vestindisk Journal, No. 141, 1848, General Toldkammer, Rigsarkiv.