

THE FREE NATIVE AFRICANS OF CHARLOTTE AMALIA IN 1803

By Aimery Caron

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In the 1790s and the early 1800s, during the French Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars, a large number of free-coloreds and some Europeans from the British, Dutch and French islands, as well as some Europeans from Western Europe, came to Charlotte Amalia, a neutral free trading port, as political and economic refugees. In so doing, they more than doubled the port's population from an estimated 2737 persons in 1790 to about 6361 persons in 1800. Thus, Charlotte Amalia became a truly international port. In this process, the newcomers must have made a strong multi-ethnic mark on the culture of Charlotte Amalia. The native and Creole African slaves, being oppressed, confined and engaged mostly in menial occupations, were held in the class with the lowest social status with limited opportunity to exercise much cultural influence. Additionally, since the Europeans, natives and Creoles, were generally more inclined to maintain the culture of their fatherland, it was primarily the free-coloreds who developed the Creole cultures—folk cultures born in the New World—as opposed to elite European cultures. At Charlotte Amalia, in the 1790s and early 1800s, all the different free-colored ethnic groups, each with their own Creole culture, quickly blended together and reshaped the somewhat insular culture of Charlotte Amalia into an all Caribbean Creole culture. It is, therefore, of interest to establish that, at that time of cultural rebirth, there was a sufficiently large number of free native Africans able to contribute significantly to the development of this unique poly-ethnic Creole culture of Charlotte Amalia, with a first hand knowledge of several African cultures.

It is estimated that, in 1790, the free-colored population of Charlotte Amalia was 350 persons and, according to the 1803 Free-Colored Census, it exploded to 1521 persons: 318 men, 668 women and 535 children¹. Among these free-coloreds, 796 were born in the Danish islands, 310 were born in the French islands, 254 in the Dutch islands, 100 in the British islands and 60 in Africa. There is no precision given in the 1803 Census concerning the exact place of birth of these 60 free Africans beyond the information that 37 were born in Guinea. This is a rather extensive area of Africa, extending

from Sénégal to Cameroun. The Moravian missionary C.G.A. Oldendorp, who resided in the Danish islands (primarily St. Thomas) from 1767 until 1769, concluded through interviews that the Africans originated from a great variety of nations within Guinea. Additionally, at the end of the 18th century it appears that many Africans were brought to St. Thomas from Equatorial Africa—the Congo, Gabon and Angola. Nevertheless, it is generally believed that the majority of Africans brought to the Danish islands came from the Danish African Company forts of Christiansborg and Frederiksborg on the Gold Coast².

According to the 1803 Census, 50% of the free-coloreds of Charlotte Amalia were born free, 40% were given their freedom, and 10% purchased their own freedom. On the other hand, the free native Africans of Charlotte Amalia had all served earlier as slaves and they were freed, either by purchasing their own freedom (11 or 18%), or through manumission by their owners (49 or 82%), mostly in wills. Most of these free Africans (53 or 88%) were freed in the Danish West Indies, three in Guadeloupe, three on St. Eustatius, and one on St. Martin. They were freed starting in 1753, but most were freed in the 1790s with peaks in 1795, 1796 and 1799, as though St. Thomas was influenced by the French revolutionary ideas and the first abolition of slavery in February 1794. Additionally, 54 out of 60 of these Africans were brought directly from Africa to St. Thomas and had been residing on island for an average time of 29 years, at least 20 years of which were served in bondage. Of the 60 free native Africans, 14 (23%) were men and 46 (77%) were women. In all, the 1803 Census lists only 27 children for the 46 African women. In 1803, the average age of the free African women and men was 42 years and 44 years, respectively; this is about 10 years older than the other free-coloreds. This might explain why free African women had fewer children living with them than the other free-colored women. In fact, 19 Africans were 50 years old or older. Of the 60 free Africans residing at Charlotte Amalia in 1803, 33 had only a first name, as was customary for slaves, and only 26 had European surnames, while possibly one, Magdalena OBA, may have had an African surname (Table I).

TABLE I

The Free Native Africans of Charlotte Amalia in the 1803 Census³

Name	Age	Occupation	Manumitter	Arrival
Alleta	40	Vendor	Friderik HANSTEN	1773
ANDREAS, Peter	26	Servant	On Guadeloupe	1798
Anthonette	50	Seamstress	Joseph de WINT	1763
BAPTISTE, Jean	50	Fisherman	Cadet SERAC	1763
Benjamin	35	Carpenter	Bought Himself	1783

Betsy	50	Laundress	J. B. CORNELIUS	1763
BÖDKER, Mathias	50	Fisherman	Cornelius BÖDKER	1763
CATHRINA, Anna	35	Laundress	Joseph BIZA	1773
CATHRINA , Maria	35	Vendor	Bought Herself	1783
Charlotte	30	Seamstress	On St. Martin	1799
<u>CHRISTOPHER, Maria</u>	40	Cigar Maker	Capt. CHRISTOPHER	1789
Clarisa	45	Seamstress	Mrs. HAXHAUSEN	1773
Debora	45	Servant	SHOLTERBRAND	1773
DORTHEA, Hanna	30	Vendor	Cathrine MADSEN	1783
<u>DUBOIS, Lucia</u>	40	Vendor	Vincent ROMANO	1788
Eliana	30	Laundress	Cashier GARTNER	1788
ELISA, Maria	25	Seamstress	James HALLMAN	1783
Elisabeth	40	Baker	Bought Himself	1773
Eulalia	50	Seamstress	In Guadeloupe	1803
Flora	50	Seamstress	Carl C. BAUR	1753
François	53	Fisherman	CHOSOME	1763
Friderica	60	Laundress	Commis. REEMKE	1766
Friderica	55	Laborer	Bought Herself	1763
GAY, Polly	30	Vendor	On St. Eustatius	1795
GRAAF, Anna van	60	Laundress	Capt. GROOF	1763
<u>Helena</u>	40	Seamstress	TUCKER	1778
Jack	40	Servant	Mme LEVY	1797
*JENNINGS, Pender	25	Seamstress	Capt. JENNINGS	1794
Ketty	40	Laundress	On St. Eustatius	1800
KIRSTINA, Anna	30	Laundress	Adam SMITH	1783
*KRAGH, Ester	55	Seamstress	Mrs. SMITH	1763
Leonard	50	Tailor	N. GRØNBERG	1765
LISBETH, Cathrina	50	Seamstress	Bought Herself	1768
LISBET, Maria	40	Vendor	Gen. VINCENT	1773
LOSIA, Rosa	40	Seamstress	Anthony MIRENDO	1799
Louisa	50	Baker	Peter HASSEL	1796
MACAK, Anthon	29	Cigar Maker	VALENTIN	1787
MAGDALENA, Maria	30	Seamstress	RENTZ	1793
Maria	45	Baker	Bought Herself	1773
MARIA, Anna	40	Cook	LOPEZ	1773
Mary	40	Vendor	On St. Eustatius	1803
Mercurius	65	Fisherman	Jean RENAU	1753
Nancy	30	Laundress	ACTON	1788
Nancy	45	Cook	Bought Herself	1773
<u>NANCY, Anna</u>	40	Vendor	An Italian	1778
NICOLAY, Jens	45	Musician	Mrs. REMKE	1770
OBA, Magdalena	40	Seamstress	J. CRINCOCHET	1803
Olive	45	Seamstress	Bought herself	1773
Persilla	40	Laundress	Tulli BEVER	1773
Petrus	60	Planter	Bought Himself	1763
<u>PETRUS, Juliana</u>	55	Baker	Capt. KAAS	1763

PHILLIPE, Jean	25	Servant	On Guadeloupe	1798
Rosa	30	Vendor	Anthony MOSUE	1783
Rosina	45	Cook	Pastor LUND	1773
Sélimène	57	Laundress	Bought Himself	1763
Sophia	40	Laundress	Johannes HUMMER	1773
<u>SUSANNA, Eliana</u>	40	Baker	Niels GRÖNBERG	1773
THERISA, Maria	40	Baker	J. POUL	1789
Vigilant	54	Fisherman	Jean RENAU	1759
William	30	Doctor	Bought Himself	1793

FULL NAME = Included in the 1803 free-colored Tax List

***SURNAME** = Included in the 1803 European Tax List

The occupations of the free native Africans were similar to those of the other free-coloreds, except that among the women there was proportionately a higher number of bakers and cooks. Among the men, there was a higher proportion of fishermen and, exceptionally, there was one musician, one doctor and one planter (Table II).

TABLE II
Occupations of the Free Africans

Women:	Men:
6 Bakers	1 Carpenter
1 Cigar maker	1 Cigar maker
3 Cooks	1 Doctor
1 Laborer	5 Fishermen
11 Laundresses	1 Musician
14 Seamstresses	1 Planter
1 Servant	3 Servants
<u>9</u> Vendors	<u>1</u> Tailor
Totals = 46	14

More may be learned about the free native Africans by looking at the annual tax list for the free-coloreds, where taxes had to be paid by the owners of slaves and of town real property for the first time in 1803⁴. Only six full names can be found in the 1803 Tax List out of 60 adult free native Africans (Table III). Because the 1803 Census and the Tax List have only mostly a first name in common, confusion between first and last name, and misspelling of names many individuals common to both lists were missed. It is, therefore, believed that there were many more than six individuals common to both lists of names. It may be noted that three out six households consist of only one woman, two households have one child each and one household included a man, three women and one child. Finally, three households and businesses owned together six slave and all but one

household or business owned a small town property with Lucia DUBOIS owning the largest property, 862 ft², but no slave.

TABLE III
Free Native Africans from the 1803 Tax List⁵

Households & Businesses	Family Members	Slaves	Prop. Feet²
CHRISTOPHER, Maria	M,3W,C	--	140
DUBOIS, Lucia	W	--	862
Helena	W,C	2M	--
NANCY, Anna	W	W	208
PETRUS, Juliana	W,C	3M	229
SUSANNA, Eliana	W	--	165

Abbreviations: C = Child; M = Man; W = Woman; Prop. Feet² = Property Square Feet.

In conclusion, more than two hundred years ago, and about fifty years before the end of slavery, there was a large influx of free-colored Caribbean immigrants at Charlotte Amalia, which brought about a rebirth of its Creole culture. At the same time, there were at least sixty free native Africans also able to make significant African cultural contributions. This process was helped by the fact that these free Africans were well integrated within the free-colored society of Charlotte Amalia and exercised occupations, such as baker, carpenter, cook, doctor, fisherman, planter, which facilitated the infusion of true African cultural features.

References

¹ David W. Knight & Laurette de T. Prime, Editors, *St. Thomas 1803: Crossroads of the Diaspora*, (St. Thomas, U.S. Virgin Islands: Little Nordside Press, 1999), pp. 186.

² Neville A.T. Hall, *Slave Society in the Danish West Indies*, (Mona, Jamaica:University of the West Indies Press, 1994), p. 70-71.

³ David W. Knight & Laurette de T. Prime, Editors, *St. Thomas 1803 ...*

⁴ *National Archives, Washington D.C.*, Selected Records of the Danish West Indies, 1672–1917, M1884, Roll 101, Section 11, St. Thomas Property & Head Tax, 1803.

⁵ *Ibid.*