

The World in a Grain of Sand: Archival research in Dominica



“Notes and papers are in disarray,” noted the clerk of Dominica’s House of Assembly in January 1791, “making it difficult—if not impossible—to accurately manage the island’s business.” Heat and humidity had wreaked havoc on governmental paper trails, with “storms and hurricanes destroying whole sets of documents,” while “seasonal rains and insects eat away at what remains.” Complicating matters further, Dominica, a small eastern Caribbean island, had changed hands between Britain and France no fewer than four times before 1791. To combat these “erosions of important colony and government papers,” House committee members proposed that “a sum be immediately set aside to provide suitable archival accommodation.” In 2004, the National Archives of Dominica still waits for that recommendation to be implemented.

Most North American archives and libraries face problems of funding, conservation, and access, but—while not minimizing the obstacles U.S. institutions face—their problems pale in comparison to those of their West Indian counterparts. Small, often government-dependent organizations, many Caribbean archives remain unknown and unused by regional and overseas scholars. K. E. Ingram’s *Manuscript Sources for the History of the West Indies* provides the best overview of the region’s research resources, and is invaluable for scholars looking beyond the Public Records Office in their study of the British Caribbean, but his survey has limits. Ingram’s directorship of the West Indies Special Collections at the University of the West Indies, Mona, Jamaica, enabled him to scour that island’s archives and records thoroughly, and subsequent editions have added important information about Barbadian and Trinidadian archives, as well as Caribbean research materials in North America, Britain, New Zealand, and South Africa. But Ingram’s compendium only scratches the surface of what survives elsewhere in the West Indies.



Fig. 1. Renita Charles outside the National Archives of Dominica, Roseau. Photograph by the author.

My dissertation uses the history of coffee—its cultivation, trade, and consumption—as a means for exploring the social, economic, and political relationships between North America and the Caribbean in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Ingram’s volume was invaluable during my nine months of research in Jamaica two years ago, but of little use for planning my two weeks in Dominica this past April. Instead, I disembarked on the island a blank slate and spent my first day in Dominica getting the lay of the land, with periodic calls to one Lennox Honychurch, a man everyone in Dominica—from the guesthouse staff, to the local diner waitress, to the museum curator—said would be able to tell me everything I wanted to know about Dominica and the National Archives. Honychurch, who served in Dominica’s House of Assembly from 1975 to 1979 and assisted in negotiations for the island’s independence from Britain in 1978, was educated in Dominica, Barbados, and Oxford, and currently serves on the faculty of the University of the West Indies School for Continuing Studies in Dominica. When I finally tracked him down, my first question was, “Where in the world is Dominica’s National Archive?” This is a harder question than it might seem, for while most Dominicans knew of Honychurch, most scratched their heads when asked about the archive. Some were unaware they had an archive. I could not find it listed in the telephone directory, there is no sign above the door proclaiming “National Archives,” or even “archive,” or even a street number, for that matter. Honychurch told me to look for a small, white, one-room building on Independence Street, with an orange-tiled roof, across from the adult shoe store (as opposed to the children’s shoe store, which is one block west).

The archive does not have an online or printed catalogue, which is probably why its visitors’ sign-in book has so few entries. More the pity, since it is one of those rare places with a collection broad enough to cater to a wealth of interests, and yet manageable enough to really work through. Those interested

in colonial governance might look at the *Laws of Dominica* (1775-1841), *Minutes of the Privy Council* (1775-1892), *Minutes of the House of Assembly* (1787-1892), as well as correspondence from past island governors and London agents. Scholars of plantation agriculture or land use could examine *Grants, Conveyances, Leases, Mortgages* (1763-1843) for all island parishes, and the *Book of Wills* (1774-97, partial). Information about enslaved laborers and manumissions is available in the *Register of Slave Returns* (1817-1831), triannual reports of all enslaved laborers by name, occupation, age, sale, relocation, births, or deaths, as well as the *Register of Manumissions* (1794-96). Finally, Dominica's strategic position between two French islands, both as a military outpost and as a potential smuggling hub, is traceable in the records of the *Court of Vice Admiralty* (1792-1838). An in-house list of collections can get you started, but your best asset is archivist Renita Charles, who diligently wades through boxes of materials arranged on industrial steel shelves in the one-room building (unlike most archives, there are no mysterious trips to behind-the-scenes rooms of stored materials; Dominica's historic documents collection is all there in the room with you, along with one desk occupied by Ms. Charles and a second for visiting scholars).



Fig. 2. Clouds Bar, Point Michel, Dominica. Photograph by the author.

The archive, however, is just one of Dominica's research opportunities. At the end of my first week, I offered Ms. Charles a ride home. She lives about six miles south of Roseau in Point Michel. The car ride not only let me repay the enormous debt I had been accruing by monopolizing her time each day, but gave her a chance to talk about her country, her job, and her hopes for future training (as I write, Ms. Charles is participating in an archival training and certification program for six weeks in Belize). As further proof of my thanks, I invited Ms. Charles to join me for a rum punch and we retired to the Clouds Bar where I met the owner, Ms. Melvina Boyer.

Ms. Boyer is not a historian, but she is an important member of her community and likes to make visitors feel welcome. After a bit of small talk, Ms. Boyer asked what I was studying. When I mentioned coffee, she turned to Ms. Charles and asked if I had met any of the older men in town. Coffee is a dying industry in Dominica; it has been in decline for some time, superseded by sugar and then

limes by the mid-nineteenth century. But farmers continue to grow it even today, on the same plots of land, with the same estate names, as those found in eighteenth-century accounts. Most have shifted from arabica to robusta beans, but a few older trees can still be found scattered around. We finished our drink, said our thanks, and departed, but instead of walking back to the car, Ms. Charles continued two more blocks, explaining that Mr. Toussaint, who now specialized in root vegetables and donkey manure, used to plant coffee and might be willing to tell me what he knew. This was how, at eight o'clock at night, we were knocking unbidden on his door. Toussaint was happy to help, but since he did not have a car I would have to drive to his farm, five miles up the mountain road. He asked me to come back in the morning. "Be sure," he admonished, "to bring transport with 4 x 4."



Fig. 3. Mr. Toussaint on his farm above Point Michel, Dominica. Photograph by the author.

True to his word, Mr. Toussaint was waiting when I arrived in a jeep the following morning. Dominica is only twenty-nine miles long and sixteen miles wide. What most guide books fail to tell you, however, is that Dominica, the most mountainous island in the Caribbean, is about fifty miles of vertically sheer cliffs high—or at least that is how it feels on the back roads of the island interior. As recently as five years ago, Mr. Toussaint, now eighty-six, grew coffee for profit, selling his beans to the Dominica-based Bellot P.W. & Co. Ltd. for roasting and grinding. But while some Caribbean countries' specialty coffee markets have been revitalized—notably Jamaica's and Puerto Rico's, and on a much smaller scale Haiti's—Dominica's has continued to decline. The income from a pound of beans, Mr. Toussaint lamented, is no longer worth the labor he would employ to pick it. As a result, Toussaint has let his trees go feral. Instead of being topped at five or six feet—the comfortable height for picking coffee cherries—his now tower over ten feet high, and the air is sweet from the fermenting berries that litter the ground around them.

He showed me the outlines of the stone walls that formerly marked the entrance to this eighteenth-century estate, and the cisterns for catching rainwater. In addition to being the most mountainous, Dominica also boasts a higher rainfall and more rivers than any other Caribbean island. These precipitation levels, along with high elevations, made it ideal for coffee cultivation in the first place. Records of Toussaint's farm, formerly part of Morne Rouge Estate, show it was a thriving coffee plantation in the early nineteenth century.

The *Register of Slave Returns* list sixty-nine slaves, thirty-eight male and thirty-one female, working the property in 1817. Twenty-four laborers are listed as Africans, and forty-five as creole. At that time, Morne Rouge was owned by Jean Louis Bellot, ancestor of the founders of today's Bellot Company, and was a sizable estate in a colony where most coffee farms averaged fewer than thirty slaves.



Fig. 4. Bois Cotlette near Soufriere, pictured here in 1905, is one of the oldest surviving coffee farms in the Caribbean. Private collection of Michael Didier.

Thanking Mr. Toussaint for his time, and for the enormous bag of carrots, callaloo (similar to spinach), tania, and dasheen (both root vegetables like yams) that he had harvested and pressed into my hands, I took him back down the hill and headed off for Bois Cotlette Estate, another former coffee plantation located in St. Mark's Parish. Bois Cotlette is the pride and joy of Mr. Michael Didier, who is painstakingly restoring the plantation. The house has been in the Didier family for generations, and was still used as the family home by his grandfather, pictured here with his wife and children in front of the house in 1905. Two generations of neglect, however, have given the surrounding rain forest more than enough time to reclaim the land. To date, Mr. Didier has restored the animal-powered pulping mill and stabilized the exterior of the main house. The remains of a small windmill still stand among the trees, as do the boiling pots and kettles that provide evidence of small-scale sugar production.

Bois Cotlette also appears in the *Register of Slave Returns* in 1817 with seventy-eight slaves. In 1823, however, the owner, Charles Port, died, and Jean Baptiste Dupigny, manager of Bellot's Morne Rouge Estate, purchased the property. Dupigny could afford the land, but not the maintenance of so large a labor force. To help finance the debt he acquired buying Bois Cotlette, he sold

the majority of the estate's slaves by 1826, reducing the number of enslaved laborers to twenty. He continued to grow limited amounts of coffee, however, and retained two skilled slaves—a carpenter and a cooper—to construct the hogsheads and barrels needed to ship his much diminished crop to port.

It is one thing to read about the place or track down published and manuscript sources of its history in metropolitan repositories. It is quite something else to see Dominica on the ground. On a map, the distance from Toussaint's coffee farm or Bois Cotlette to Soufriere Bay, the nearest port town, is less than five miles. The journey—even by car—takes over an hour. Imagine the same distance on foot or by mule two hundred years ago.



Fig. 5. Bois Cotlette, May 2004. Photograph by the author.

This began as an essay on the riches of Dominica's National Archives, but it is difficult to separate what survives on paper with what exists on the island. Dominica, like many Caribbean nations, bears the imprint of its plantation and slave-dependent past in ways that are difficult to fathom in North America. It is a place where history lives, not in reconstructed villages or museums, but in the names and places that still dot the landscape, and in crumbling coffee farm houses and outbuildings threatened more by the encroaching wilderness than by developmental sprawl. It is a place of pride and generosity, and it returns more than the cost of an airline ticket. I look forward to returning as soon and as often as I can.

The National Archive is part of Dominica's National Documentation Center and Public Library, Victoria Street, Roseau, Dominica Commonwealth.

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Further Reading:

K. E. Ingram, *Manuscript Sources for the History of the West Indies: With*

Special Reference to Jamaica in the National Library of Jamaica and Supplementary Sources in the West Indies, North America, and United Kingdom and Elsewhere (Barbados, 2000), and *Sources of Jamaican History, 1655-1838: A Bibliographical Survey with Particular Reference to Manuscript Sources* (Zug, 1976). For a less up-to-date volume that moves beyond Jamaica, Barbados, and Trinidad, see Edward Cecil Baker, *A Guide to the Records of the Leeward Islands* (Oxford, 1965), and *A Guide to the Records of the Windward Islands* (Oxford, 1968). For the history of Dominica, see Thomas Atwood, *The History of the Island of Dominica: Containing a Description of its Situation, Extent, Climate, Rivers, Mountains, Natural Productions, & c.* (London, 1791, reprinted, London, 1971); Lennox Honychurch, *The Dominica Story: A History of the Island* (Oxford, 1975, reprinted 1984); Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Peasants and Capital: Dominica in the World Economy* (Baltimore, 1988). For the history of coffee in Dominica and the Lesser Antilles, see Michel-Rolph Trouillot, "Coffee Planters and Coffee Slaves in the Antilles: The Impact of a Secondary Commodity," in Ira Berlin and Philip D. Morgan, eds., *Cultivation and Culture: Labor and the Shaping of Slave Life in the Americas* (Charlottesville, 1993); B.W. Higman, *Slave Populations of the British Caribbean, 1807-1834* (Baltimore, 1984); and Simon Smith, "Accounting for Taste: British Coffee Consumption in Historical Perspective," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* (Autumn, 1996): 183-214.

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