Voices of Resistance: Slavery and Post in the Caribbean

Large-print Guide

Please do not remove from the museum.

Contents

Voices of Resistance: Slavery and Post in the Caribbean

Working with a range of partners, we have learned about the lives and legacies of people forced into slavery. Despite the brutality of their lives, enslaved people and their descendants found ways to survive. This exhibition honours their voices of resistance.

‘Parts of our history and part of even our ancestral souls, we are collecting them all back. We will continue enjoying each and every part that we uncover, of our soul, of our ancestry, of our history.’

Marie Paul, Virgin Islands culture bearer

This exhibition includes descriptions of the violent and harsh conditions faced by enslaved people. Historical documents using racist terms to describe enslaved people are on display.

The postal service enabled and benefited from the forced labour of enslaved Africans.

Mail sent between Britain and the Caribbean allowed plantation owners to keep up to date with business news, while living thousands of miles away from the horrors of slavery.

After the Slavery Abolition Act in 1833, the postal service exploited enslaved coal workers. Ships carrying mail sailed to the island of St. Thomas to be refuelled by enslaved people.

Explore this history and discover the legacy of enslaved people who we honour and remember today.

Community partners: Caribbean Social Forum

We have partnered with a group of people from the Caribbean Social Forum in London, who describe themselves as ‘matured children’ of the Windrush Generation.

Supported by creative designer Tabara N’Diaye, the group joined creative workshops blending historical awareness with creative expression. Inspired by photographs of the baskets used to carry coal onto the Royal Mail Steam Packet Company ships, participants worked together to recreate a basket for display. Smaller individual baskets have also been produced as creative responses to the rich legacy of the coal workers.

‘As women we are used to carrying heavy loads. History has shown this. Although history has tried to wipe out their story and struggles, we will remember them.’

Project participant

Image captions

Top:

Forum members with artist and museum staff: (left to right) Laura Gibbs, Barbara Thompson, Vivienne Hawthorne Collins, Brenda Benjamin, Evamae Bennett, Richard Joseph, Angela Beale, Carol Briscoe, Tabara N’Diaye, Beulah Lewis and Sharondeep Jawanda.

Middle:

Tabara N’Diaye, teaching weaving techniques to the group.

Bottom:

Weaving baskets: (right to left) Angela Beale, Evamae Bennett and other members of the Caribbean Social Forum weaving.

Community partners: Royal Mail culture bearers

We have partnered with a group of African, Caribbean and Black diaspora women working for Royal Mail in London.

Supported by artist Ella Phillips, they worked to give voice to two enslaved women, Elizabeth Haigle and Nancy Brown. Their experiences on a plantation feature in a collection of letters recently resurfaced in the archive. Through archival research, textiles and text, this project celebrated resilience, creativity, and the power of storytelling to connect us with the past.

‘The workshops made me reflect deeply on the resilience and strength of the women during the slave trade period. It was inspiring to think about their contributions and sacrifices, which are often overlooked.’

Serena O, Royal Mail culture bearer

Image captions

Top:

Royal Mail culture bearers workshop: (left to right) Ella Phillips, Asmeret, Serena O, Sylvia Lartey, Medinat Bolaji, Ernestine, Carol and L. Aikens.

Middle:

Writing on the ribbons: (left to right) Ernestine, Ella Phillips, Asmeret, Medinat Bolaji and Carol.

Bottom:

Sewing the ribbons: (left to right) Serena O, Asmeret and Sylvia Lartey.

Community partners: Dollar fo’ Dollar Culture & History Committee, Inc.

In creating this exhibition, we have partnered with Dollar fo’ Dollar Culture & History Committee, Inc.

This cultural organisation is based on St. Thomas, part of the Virgin Islands of the United States, in the Caribbean. It is committed to honouring the triumphs of the coal workers of St. Thomas.

They have co-curated large parts of the exhibition, enriching the presentation of the Royal Mail Steam Packet Company, the island of St. Thomas and the lives and legacies of the coal workers. We invite you to join Dollar fo’ Dollar and experience their annual history and culture tour.

‘Virgin Islanders have a legacy of fortitude and resolve. From one of the first and longest revolutions led by enslaved people in the Western Hemisphere to demanding their own freedom, they have continually fought for self-determination. The labour of Virgin

Islands coal workers powered ships that sailed between Britain and the Caribbean. Their struggle for better wages and working conditions, along with their enduring spirit, remains a defining force. The connection between these two places continues today.’

Ayesha Morris, Dollar fo’ Dollar co-founder

Image captions

Top:

Dollar fo’ Dollar co-founders after another successful event: (left to right) DaraMonifah Cooper, Ayesha Morris and Jahweh David.

Image courtesy of DaraMonifah Cooper.

Middle:

Introducing an annual tour from Emancipation Garden, St. Thomas: (left to right) Ayesha Morris and Jahweh David.

Image courtesy of Aisha-Zakiya Boyd

Bottom:

At the Market Square, the site where striking coal workers had their demands for better pay met, another annual tour is opened: (left to right) Ayesha Morris and Jahweh David.

Image courtesy of Aisha-Zakiya Boyd

Turn left for:

The Postal Museum's Research

(Turn to page 15)

Since 2019, The Postal Museum has studied links between our collections and transatlantic slavery. One discovery has been a collection of letters which focus on the business of running Jamaican plantations.

They reveal glimpses of the lives of enslaved men, women, and children, whose lives we seek to honour. We have found how letter writing is one way that public perception of slavery was created, shared and maintained. We are also sharing the story of the Royal Mail Steam Packet Company, a postal service that exploited enslaved labour in the Caribbean. Our understanding has been enriched through community partnerships in London and St. Thomas.

This exhibition includes descriptions of the violent and harsh conditions faced by enslaved people. Historical documents using racist terms to describe enslaved people are on display.

Turn right for:

What happens at a Dollar fo’ Dollar Culture and History Tour?

(Turn to page 91)

Dollar fo’ Dollar Culture & History Tours invite participants on an interactive journey to re-enact the triumphs of coal workers. Culture bearers include storytelling tour guides, drummers, conch shell blowers, bamboula dancers, singers, musicians, actors and tradition bearers. Together they share cultural performances telling the history of St. Thomas, the wider Virgin Islands, the coaling industry, and themes of freedom and resistance.

The names of coal workers are called to remember and respect their contributions. Water is poured, and prayers offered in a ceremonial act of libation. This acknowledges the existence of the coal workers, their connections to the living, and expresses gratitude for paving the way forward.

Transatlantic trafficking of enslaved Africans

For hundreds of years Africans were forcibly taken from their homes. Families were separated and transported across the Atlantic Ocean on big ships packed full of kidnapped people.

The journey took weeks and millions of people died. Those who survived faced a harsh life. They were forced to work long hours for no money, in unfamiliar places. By enslaving these people, Britain built its wealth and power, becoming the largest empire in the world. Children and adults were controlled by the constant threat of violence and death. Despite this, people bravely found ways to keep their cultures alive. New communities formed, supporting each other to survive and resist. Legacies of resistance are celebrated today.

Royal Mail culture bearers

The Royal Mail culture bearers researched Virgin Island coal workers and two women enslaved in Jamaica: Elizabeth Haigle and Nancy Brown. These stories inspired the creation of a reimagined map made by the group.

‘The project was a form of diversity, people from different cultures working together to analyse four main topics of food, culture, resistance and freedom.’

Carol, Royal mail culture bearer

Object caption:

‘Ribbons, Unfolding’

Royal Mail culture bearers' Reimagined Map, 2025

Royal Mail culture bearers, Asmeret, Carol, Ernestine, L. Aikens, Medinat Bolaji, Serena O, and Sylvia Lartey, created a reimagined map. Their ambition was to show the ancestral traditions and values important to them around food, culture, resistance and freedom.

Freestanding object case 1 – plantations and slave registers

Plantations were large farms, where enslaved Africans were imprisoned and forced to carry out hard labour. Britain profited from this system, both within and outside its Empire. Here affordable sugar was produced, to be enjoyed by the British public.

The letters sent from Jamaica to Britain speak of life on the plantations. Through close reading, we can learn about those enslaved and their acts of resistance.

Object captions (side furthest from framed painting):

1. Slave Register, on loan from The National Archives, UK, 1826

T71/54

After the Abolition of the Slave Trade Act, enslavers were required to provide lists of the people they forcibly held. This was to try and prevent the illegal sale of enslaved people. Frances Gordon was the mother of Elizabeth Haigle. She was freed from slavery in 1826, at the age of 42, through manumission, like her daughter

and grandchildren. She is listed on the register for Perrin's plantation in the decrease column, showing as a loss to the estate.

2. Slave Register, on loan from The National Archives, UK, 1832

T71/56

This register for the Perrin's estate shows that Elizabeth Haigle, age 30, and her two children were freed from slavery. Elizabeth and her daughter Jane's names are written on this page. They appear in the decrease column of the document - a loss for the estate.

3. Slave Register, 1817, on loan from The National Archives, UK, 1817

T71/145

When she was 13 years old, Nancy Brown appears to have been listed as ‘Eleanor alias Nancy Brown’ on this register for the estates Grange Hill and Blue Mountain. The oldest person enslaved with Nancy was 71 year old William Burnell. Among the 93 enslaved children, some were babies under 12 months old.

Object captions (side nearest framed painting):

1. Perrin's Estate Document, 1825

PH(L)03/23

This document reports the number of men and women who were born and died on the Perrin's plantation in a single year. On the opposite side of the document is the same listing for livestock. The enslaved, like livestock, were treated as part of the owner’s property.

2. Letter from Andrew Cook at Shady Spring, 3 August 1833

PH(L)03/36

The Slavery Abolition Act passed in 1833, though enslaved people would not be free for a further five years. This letter explains that a plantation overseer, the man managing the day to day running of the plantation, would need to change his violent habits to meet the new rules.

3. Cover containing Dundee Estate Document, May 1818

PH96/09

Sent on the packet ship ‘Chesterfield’ this cover contained a valuation of the Dundee Estate in Jamaica (PH(L)03/24 below).

4. Dundee Estate Document, 18 February 1818

PH(L)03/24

Plantations were prisons for enslaved women, men and children of all ages. This document gave a monetary value to the people forced to work on the plantation, along with the animals and buildings.

Key to communication

By the 1830s, 80% of sugar plantations in Jamaica were owned by people who did not live on the island.

Many owners never visited their plantations but they benefitted from the profits made. British plantation owners used the mail to communicate with their managers in the Caribbean. Letters were exchanged across the ocean on sailing boats, called packet ships. The journey lasted weeks. Postal communication was an important part of managing these money-making businesses. The postal service allowed enslavers to distance themselves from the plantations' violence.

By the 1830s, 80% of sugar plantations in Jamaica were owned by people who did not live on the island.

Packet Services

The Packet Service was part of the postal system, carrying mail across the sea on sailing ships powered by wind.

Falmouth, England, was the main port due to its deep harbour, which allowed large ships to dock safely. The 35-day journey from Jamaica to Falmouth was slow and unreliable. As the number of British-owned plantations grew in the 1700s, this connection was vital. One person who understood the impact of delayed mail was 19 year old James MacQueen. While managing a plantation in Grenada, he often waited weeks for letters from Britain. Soon, a new technology would transform sea transport: steamships. MacQueen came up with an idea for a faster mail service powered by steam.

Image caption:

Contract to build, supply, maintain and operate three packet boats, 1748

POST 12/1

Object captions:

Left:

Photographic Print, 1900s

E14760/12

A wagon transported bullion (gold or silver) from Falmouth to London, after it was unloaded from a packet ship.

Top:

‘Mail Packet off Eastbourne’, Victor Tolubioff Howes, 1800s

2005-0102

This packet ship is caught in stormy seas at night. Transporting mail across the sea was a dangerous job. Can you see the lifeboat on deck and the cannons pointing out of holes in the side of the ship?

Bottom:

‘Loading the Transatlantic Mail at Falmouth 1833’, Harold Sandys Williamson, 1934

POST 109/204

Mail was sorted in London before being transported to Falmouth. There, it was loaded onto ships destined for the Caribbean and other ports.

Plantations in Jamaica

Plantations were large farms, where enslaved Africans were forced to work.

Many plantations in Jamaica grew sugar cane which was shipped to Britain and turned into sweet treats. Plantation owners gained wealth from the forced labour of enslaved Africans, justifying their actions with racist ideas. Enslaved people were considered enslavers' legal property, just like land, buildings and animals. Postal communication allowed many plantation owners to live in Britain. Most of the letters in our collection discuss business, weather and crops. Some of the letters mention enslaved people, their names, experiences, violent treatment and resistance.

Object caption:

Letter sent on HMS ‘Mutine’, 26 March 1834

PH97/22

Families of enslaved men, women and children were often split up. This letter lists the names of individuals who were moved between two plantations, both owned by Sir Henry FitzHerbert. The list identifies peoples' relationships to each other.

What did an enslaver look like?

Not all plantation owners were men. One woman plantation owner was Mrs Susannah Jane Dickson, who inherited Moore Hall plantation from her brother.

She owned the estate and enslaved all those forced to work there from 1810 to 1820. Records show that in 1817, there were 95 enslaved men and 84 women captive on her plantation. Moore Hall would later be left to her cousin Edward Beeston Long. Most plantation owners and managers were white, which they thought gave them the right to enslave Black people.

Image caption (bottom):

‘Taking Tea’ by Joy Gregory

Image courtesy of the artist, 2020

This embroidery is based on a painting by Carl Holsøe, of his wife reading a letter. Letters kept enslavers in touch with plantation managers.

Image caption (top right):

'Haughton Court, Hanover, Jamaica' by James Hakewill, 1820-1821

Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection

Images of Jamaican plantations were made to disguise the violence and backbreaking work. Enslaved people were often shown to be relaxing, playing and dancing. Sometimes sugar cane was even removed from the picture, hiding the profitable business being carried out.

Object caption:

Letter to Mrs Dickson, 1810

PH97/04

Mrs Dickson owned Moore Hall plantation in Jamaica. This letter, sent by her plantation manager, discusses the size of the sugar crop but not the enslaved people forced to grow it.

The Long Family

The Long family owned plantations in the Caribbean for several generations. They profited from the forced labour of enslaved Africans, while living privileged lives.

Many of the letters in our collection are addressed to Edward Beeston Long or his son Henry Lawes Long. Between them, they owned three plantations: Longville Park, Lucky Valley and Moore Hall. The family received over £2,000 from the British government in exchange for freeing the people held captive. That is approximately £250,000 today.

A Racist Legacy

In 1774, Edward Long wrote a book called ‘The History of Jamaica’, defending the exploitation of enslaved people on plantations. He claimed that white and Black people were not equal and should be treated differently. Disguising his racism as science, he contributed towards constructing a hierarchy based on skin colour.

Letters in our collection reveal how skin colour was used to justify the horrific treatment of enslaved people.

Sadly, the racist ideas, language and stereotypes he promoted exist today - a haunting echo through time.

Object caption (left):

Letter to Henry Long, 15 December 1832

PH96/02

People forced to work on plantations lived in horrendous conditions. Some took the dangerous risk of trying to escape rather than endure this continued treatment. This letter to Henry Long describes the use of the militia to capture those who had broken free.

Object captions (right):

Top:

‘Sugar Mill’ by Joy Gregory

On loan from the artist, 2020

Centre:

‘Bangles’ by Joy Gregory

On loan from the artist, 2020

Bottom:

‘Sugar Cane’ by Joy Gregory

On loan from the artist, 2020

Joy Gregory

The artist uses a process called cyanotype, incorporating her hair. This makes connections across the piece, echoing the links between Britain and the Caribbean.

'I think my job as an artist is to actually create a curiosity so people want to dig deeper, but also to make something that is very beautiful to talk about an ugliness.'

Joy Gregory

Reading against the grain

How do you read a historical record against the grain? The lives of enslaved people were not regularly recorded in historical documents. We can understand more about individuals' lives by reading records 'against the grain', but how do you do it?

1. Think about who wrote the record, why, and what else was happening at the time.

2. Remember, most records leave out the experiences and memories of enslaved people.

3. Consider who and what has been left out.

4. Try to put the people excluded from the records at the centre of the story.

Our letters were mainly sent to share business news. Reading against the grain reveals clues about how enslaved people were treated. This information allows us to build up a picture of these people, their actions and resistance. We have identified two of the enslaved

people discussed in these letters in the 'Slave Registers' kept by British officials. Bringing this information together allows us to build a picture of the lives of two enslaved women: Elizabeth Haigle and Nancy Brown.

Nancy Brown

Nancy Brown was born around 1804, although we don't know exactly when her birthday was. We also do not know how she became trapped in slavery.

She may have been kidnapped from her home as a child. If her mother was enslaved while pregnant, the enslaver would have considered Nancy their property from birth. Nancy was forced to live and work on a dangerous sugar plantation in Jamaica. When Nancy was three years old, the British government made it illegal to buy and sell enslaved people within the British Empire. The new law did nothing to protect or free already enslaved people, like Nancy. In 1817, we think Nancy was living on Grange Hill plantation, under the name 'Eleanor alias Nancy Brown'.

Reading against the grain

Nancy and the other people enslaved by Sir Henry FitzHerbert had to wear poor quality clothing from the plantation manager. Clothes gave some protection from the difficult conditions, but in 1826 not enough cloth was provided for everybody. Nancy, then aged 22, bravely

protested against the lack of cloth and the manager's threat to illegally sell people on the plantation. As punishment, Nancy was imprisoned in a 'dark hole', all day and night. Nancy stood up for her community and we remember her resistance.

Object caption:

Letter to Sir Henry FitzHerbert, 1826

PH(L)03/35(a)

This letter exposes the violence inflicted on enslaved people. The letter casually describes the abuse of Nancy Brown, an enslaved woman on the Grange Hill Estate. It was sent by an estate manager to the owner in England.

Interactive exhibit: what can letters tell us about the lives of enslaved people?

By looking at this extract of a letter and asking a series of questions, we can build a picture of some enslaved peoples' lives.

You can find the original letter in this display.

Reading against the grain

Blue Mountain

June 1, 1826

My Dear Sir Henry

I wonder we have not yet had an open Rebellion – I served our cloth on the 26th the people thanked me but said in that next year they hoped I will give them more. I told them I could make no promise but I could tell them that if sugar did not sell better next year that their master would have to sell half of them to pay Taxes, this of course put a stop to the demand and one woman of the name of Nancy Brown threw up her cap in the air but I had the lady seized and confined in the dark Hole which I have now made.

I remain Dear Sir Henry your sincere and faithful servant

Ch Lewsey

When was the letter written and who was Nancy Brown?

Turn the page to discover

‘June 1, 1826’

‘Nancy Brown’

Nancy Brown was a woman enslaved on a sugar plantation in Jamaica.

She was born around 1804, although we don’t know exactly when her birthday was. When this letter was written Nancy was about 22 years old.

What does this letter tell us about unfair treatment on plantations?

Turn the page to discover

‘I served our cloth… …they hoped I will give them more.’

In 1826, not enough clothing was provided for all of the enslaved people on the plantation.

‘…if sugar did not sell better next year that their master would have to sell half of them…’

Even though it was illegal to buy and sell enslaved people after 1807, some enslavers continued trafficking people.

‘…but I had the lady seized and confined in the dark Hole which I have now made.’

Plantation managers regularly attacked enslaved people. The letters in our collection show that plantation owners in Britain knew about managers’ violence in Jamaica.

Turn the page

How did Nancy protest against unfair treatment on the sugar plantation she was enslaved on?

‘…Nancy Brown threw up her cap in the air…’

Nancy is described as throwing her cap in the air. We can only imagine what she said, how her actions inspired the people enslaved on the plantation with her, and the courage it took for her to protest.

What else does the letter tell us about resistance?

‘I wonder we have not yet had an open Rebellion…’

Some form of uprising by enslaved people took place in most colonies around every 20 years.

Please return to the front page for the next visitor

Elizabeth Haigle

The letters in our collection reveal the story of Elizabeth Haigle and her family. Elizabeth, her mother and her children were enslaved on Perrin's plantation, in Jamaica.

Like millions of other enslaved children, six year old Jane was forced to work in the fields, for no money. Two year old John might have been cared for by the enslaved elders, while his mother worked. Elizabeth also had another child, Thomas, who died soon after birth. Many children died on plantations because of the harsh conditions. In 1832, Elizabeth and her two surviving children were freed from slavery. Their freedom was bought from their enslavers, through a rare process called manumission.

Reading against the grain

It seems £130 was given to an accountant working for the enslaver and plantation owner, Sir Henry FitzHerbert. We don’t know how Elizabeth afforded freedom for herself and her children. Enslaved people were able to sell things they grew at market and do extra jobs for money. However, the amount of money paid for Elizabeth's freedom was very high. After freedom, Elizabeth and her family disappear from the records. We can only imagine what their lives were like.

Object caption:

Letter to Sir Henry FitzHerbert, 1831

PH97/29

Freedom from slavery was difficult and rare. This letter informs the plantation owner that Elizabeth Haigle wants to manumit – the process of freeing herself and her two children.

Escapes and Uprisings

Enslaved people suffered terrible violence at the hands of their captors. Some tried to escape and break free.

Our letters speak of enslavers' orders to re-capture escapees. Newspaper articles listed the names and descriptions of escapees, so that they could be found and returned. Escape was often an individual act, but uprisings by groups sometimes took place. In December 1831, 60,000 enslaved Africans in Jamaica rose up against their captors. They were led by Samuel Sharpe, a Baptist preacher, who organised a strike for better conditions and freedom. The peaceful protest was met with a brutal response by the authorities. The letters in our collection refer to the hundreds of enslaved people who were killed or executed.

Image caption:

‘Cane Cutters’ by Joy Gregory

Image courtesy of the artist, 2020.

Object caption:

Letter to Henry Long, 6 February 1832

PH98/13

During the Christmas period of 1831, about 18 months before abolition, many enslaved people in Jamaica took a stand against their treatment. This letter describes the violence of the confrontation, through the lens of the white writer.

Deep Injustice

People made enormous amounts of money from enslaving Africans. They did not want to lose this if transatlantic slavery ended.

In 1837, the British Parliament decided that enslavers should be given money in exchange for freeing the people they held captive. Together, they were given £20 million, worth billions today, for giving up 'their property'. The wording of the law treated enslaved women, men and children not as people but 'things', like the buildings and animals owned by enslavers. The government did not have the money to pay all of the compensation straight away, so they had to borrow. It took until 2015 for this debt to be paid off. No money was given to the people enslaved. The legacy of injustice is still felt today and many people are campaigning for governments to make up for this unfair treatment.

Malachi Thomas, Virgin Islands culture bearer

‘How I live my life everyday is a ritual, every moment is a spiritual experience.

I'm inspired to continue living my life in a way that honours freedom fighters and honours the experience of Africans in the Atlantic world and the systemic oppressive systems that we're still subjected to.’

Royal Mail Steam Packet Company – The price of freedom

These 10 men were among the more than 40,000 British enslavers given compensation by the government.

They were awarded over £300,000, in exchange for freeing the enslaved people they held captive, estimated to be worth over 35 million pounds today. Just a few years later, they invested significant sums of money to create the Royal Mail Steam Packet Company.

Centre:

James MacQueen

Clockwise from top:

Thomas Baring

Russell Ellice

George Hibbet Junior

James Cavan

Andrew Colville

Henry Davidson

John Irving the younger

Patrick Maxwell Stewart

John Irving the elder

Fighting for freedom

Ending Transatlantic slavery took years of protest and resistance. Across empires there were daily and daring acts of resistance.

On plantations there were uprisings where enslaved people fought for their freedom. In Britain, free Black people and white supporters led campaigns to raise awareness of the horrors of slavery. These efforts, combined with decreasing profits, fear of rebellion and moral outrage compelled change. In 1807, Britain passed a law banning the forced movement of enslaved people from Africa across the Atlantic. Slavery remained legal in other parts of the Americas, and Britain continued to profit from the commodities produced. In 1833, Britain passed a new law: the Slavery Abolition Act. This did not mean enslaved people were free. They continued to be trapped in similar or worse conditions and forced to work. The 'Apprenticeship System', as it was known, lasted until 1838. Even after this, there were attempts by those in power to control newly freed people. This included when they could work and how they could live.

How is transatlantic slavery remembered?

Virgin Island culture bearers speak of the challenges faced when trying to find and understand the experiences of their enslaved African ancestors. ‘To me it's the ability to give voice to persons whose voices have not been heard, persons who have been removed or haven't been acknowledged in the text books. Normally when you're researching this history you're getting a colonial perspective, you're getting the view of those who were the merchants, who were the authorities at the time.’

Ayesha Morris, Dollar fo' Dollar co-founder

Object caption:

Anti-Slavery Envelope, 1853

PH88/18

Images such as these centred Britain's role in abolition while ignoring its role in slavery. Sharing this idea through the post helped to shape public memory, which still influences how some people view the history of abolition.

The start of steam

The Royal Mail Steam Packet Company was set up by James MacQueen. He believed slavery should continue, and he criticised leaders of the abolition movement, such as Mary Prince.

Many enslavers worried about the impact freeing enslaved people would have on how much money they could make, because they would finally have to pay for labour. They tried to think of ways to protect their incomes.

James MacQueen had seen first-hand how the slow mail service between the Caribbean and Britain impacted business. He suggested coal powered steamships run a quick and reliable mail service, as one way of boosting trade.

MacQueen believed that his mail plans would increase the power of the British Empire.

Robert Wedderburn

Robert Wedderburn was a leader of the anti-slavery movement in Britain. His half-brother was Andrew Colville, a founding member of the Royal Mail Steam Packet Company.

Wedderburn and Colville shared a father but had different mothers. Their father, James Wedderburn-Colville, was a wealthy enslaver who owned plantations in Jamaica. Robert’s mother, Rosanna, was enslaved by James Wedderburn-Colville in Jamaica. Andrew's mother was married to his father and lived in their Scottish country home.

Although they shared a father, Robert and Andrew had very different lives. Andrew benefited from the family money. Robert was publicly rejected by his father's family and was poor for much of his life. Their life experiences were different because Robert was the child of an enslaved woman and was racialised as Black. Andrew was able to claim the privileges and freedoms of whiteness that society had constructed.

Object caption:

‘Robert Wedderburn’ by Grace Lee, 2022

Image courtesy of Museum of Colour
https://museumofcolour.org.uk/my-words/robert-wedderburn/

Grace Lee's work honours and highlights marginalised figures and narratives hidden from the mainstream, paying homage to the full range of our collective cultural heritage.

Why are certain people celebrated on portraits? Why are some people left out?

‘Every day our society finds both obvious and subtle ways to tell us who it values and who it doesn't. A portrait conveys value, it provides visibility, importance and the potential for immortality. It was always my first choice for celebrating the creative contributions of people of colour to a British society that still struggles to value us and questions the legitimacy of our existence as citizens and our Britishness.’

Samenua Sesher OBE, Founder and Director of Museum of Colour

Mary Prince

Mary Prince was the first Black woman to publish an autobiography on her experiences of being enslaved.

Published in 1831, 'The History of Mary Prince' was met with both praise and controversy, as it revealed the brutal realities of slavery. James MacQueen, the founder of the Royal Mail Steam Packet Company, publicly slandered Prince’s account and questioned its accuracy. Mary Prince and her work were very important in changing wider public opinion about slavery.

Image caption:

Mary Prince Plaque, 2025

Nubian Jak Community Trust, London Borough of Camden, Malet Street

Text on plaque:

Nubian Jak Community Trust

Mary Prince

1788-1833

Abolitionist and Author

lived in a house near this site

1829

London Borough of Camden

Steam Power

The Royal Mail Steam Packet Company was given a Royal Charter and the official contract to transport mail to the Caribbean, North America, and eastern parts of the British Empire.

The company quickly built 14 ships, all named after rivers. The ships had to be fast and able to survive attack from enemies.

Like the older sailing ships, the first Royal Mail Steam Packet Company ships sailed from Falmouth in Cornwall. The journey to the Caribbean on the new steamships took about 19 days and could be very dangerous.

The home port was later moved to Southampton, because it was closer to London. Once the bags of letters were safely off the ship, they were sent to London for sorting, before delivery across the country.

Image captions:

Left:

Royal Mail Steam Fleet, 1880

E17332

Many of the first 14 ships are not listed here, as they were wrecked within 10 years. New ships were built, replacing those lost, as the service expanded.

Right:

Royal Mail Steam Packet Company Map, 1880

E17332/a

The pressure from the steam turned big wheels on board the ship, pushing it forwards through the water.

Object caption:

‘RMS ‘Severn’ in the Bristol Channel’ by Joseph Walter, c. 1843

2004-0194

One of the earliest ships in the fleet - one of the fortunate few that avoided fire or disaster. Its central funnel, resembling a chimney, released steam and smoke from the engine.

To power steamships, coal was burned in huge furnaces, making steam. The pressure from the steam turned big wheels onboard the ship, pushing it forwards through the water. The ships had to stop many times at coaling stations to refuel.

At first, the ships were made of wood, but the metal steam engines could overheat and catch fire. This wasn’t the only risk. Half of the first fleet was destroyed in 10 years because of storms and misnavigation.

Many sailors and passengers died. There were lots of complaints: badly behaved crew, lost mail bags, ships running out of coal. It became clear that James MacQueen’s timetables did not work in real life. MacQueen was blamed for the company’s problems and lost his job.

Image captions:

Top left:

Letter relating to package forwarded from Southampton to London, on arrival from the Caribbean, 10 May 1847

E17467

The writer of this letter received a package from the Royal Mail Steam Packet Company Ship ‘Tay’, after it arrived from the Caribbean.

Lower left:

Letter carried on board RMS ‘Trent’, 1843

PH98/27

This letter was sent from Yarmouth Estate in Jamaica to Aberdeen.

Right:

Royal Mail Steam Packet Company Timetable, 1880

E17332/c

Interactive exhibit – portholes

Royal Mail Steam Packet Company ships carried more than just mail.

Lift the portholes to discover what else you might find.

Text inside portholes (numbered from far left):

1. **Live Animals**
   Early steamships had no electricity or fridges, so they carried live animals for food and milk. Ships often had 1 cow, 25 sheep and 15 pigs on board.

2. **Passengers**
   Steamships carried passengers travelling for different reasons. For example, lone children travelling abroad to go to school or soldiers on their way to war.

3. **Coal**
   Steamships were powered by coal, which was burned in huge furnaces within water boilers. They had to stop many times at coaling stations to refuel.

4. **Letters**

   Steamships carried letters and a crew member had the important job of looking after them. Letters were stored in special strong rooms lined with metal to keep the mail safe.

Freestanding object case 2 – the Royal Mail Steam Packet Company and the abolitionist movement

The Royal Mail Steam Packet Company received a Royal Charter from Queen Victoria in 1839, and soon after began sailing to the Caribbean. They set up the main fuelling station at St. Thomas.

Enslaved men, women and children were forced to refuel their ships.

1. ‘The Horrors of Slavery’ by Robert Wedderburn, on loan from Bodleian Libraries, 1824

Smith newsb. e.19 (1)

Robert Wedderburn published ‘The Horrors of Slavery’ in 1824. It is a pro-abolition memoir which documents the abuses his mother and grandmother experienced while on plantations in Jamaica. The book also encouraged people to join the abolitionist movement.

2. ‘The History of Mary Prince’ by Mary Prince, on loan from The British Library, 1831

8157.bbb.30

Mary Prince was the first Black woman to publish an autobiography in Britain on her experiences of being enslaved. The book received both praise and criticism, as it revealed the brutal realities of slavery. James MacQueen, the founder of the Royal Mail Steam Packet Company, publicly slandered Prince’s account and questioned its accuracy. Mary Prince and her work were very important in changing wider public opinion about slavery. Recently, historians have questioned how much of Mary’s story was changed or left out of the book by its editors.

3. Manuscript of James MacQueen's 'Plan for General Conveyance of Mails', 1837

Post 29/23C

James MacQueen's mail delivery plan was written by hand before it was printed. He argued that regular rapid communication gives 'an influence, a command and advantage to a Nation such as scarcely anything else can give'. He believed delivering mail was 'the upmost possible importance to individuals and to a country.' Here he lists the crew on board ship and how much they would be paid, including the children.

4. Royal Mail Steam Packet Company Map, 1839

Post 29/29B

This map looks very accurate, but ships' journeys did not run smoothly. Half of the first fleet was destroyed within 10 years, many of them due to disasters at sea, including misnavigation.

5. Letter from Seaman Pringle working on Royal Mail Steam Packet ‘Thames’, 1848

2019-0043/6a

Writing to 'my dear sister' from on board the ‘Thames’ in Barbados, Pringle writes that an illness recently spread through the ship. 'One man died in about 36 hours,' nine people were very ill and three were sent home. He hoped to return home in about three months, after travelling to ports including Barbados, St. Thomas and Cuba.

6. Cover, 1848

2019-0043

Seaman Pringle's letter to his sister was posted home in this piece of folded paper.

7. Photographic Print, 1900s

E14760/7

People travelled between Britain and the Caribbean for many different reasons, including education, business, religion and, increasingly in the 1900s, tourism.

8. Articles of Agreement, 20 March 1840

Post 29/29B

Agreement between the Admiralty and the Royal Mail Steam Packet Company, setting out the shipping rules. Mail had to be carried as quickly as possible, with a ship sailing from England for the Caribbean twice a month.

9. Royal Mail Steam Packet Company Stock Certificate, 1929

2022-0026/3

To fund the creation of the business, shares were sold for £100 each and the British government issued a large subsidy. This certificate shows the price of stock in 1929.

Why St. Thomas?

The Royal Mail Steam Packet Company sailed to St. Thomas from their earliest voyages. By choosing to coal their ships at St. Thomas, the company chose to bypass freedom.

It became the first shipping company to set up a dedicated coaling wharf in the Danish West Indies. St. Thomas was an attractive base for some businesses. It had a natural harbour and useful geographical location. The island also offered an opportunity to save money and exert control by exploiting enslaved labour.

At the time, St. Thomas was part of the Danish Empire, and maintained slavery until 1848.

This was more than 10 years after abolition in the British Empire.

Coal was carried on huge ships from Britain to stations in the Caribbean. The Caribbean island of St. Thomas became the Royal Mail Steam Packet Company’s main coaling hub.

Image caption:

Main Street, St. Thomas

Photographic postcard sent from St. Thomas to Germany, 1904

Image courtesy of the Porter Archive

Culture and complexity

‘St. Thomas captivates you – the sun, sand and sea that everyone comes for, sometimes missing the culture and complexity of the most important part – the people. This was not lost on the colonisers who saw an opportunity to exploit them for profit.’

Ayesha Morris, Dollar fo’ Dollar co-founder.

Interactive exhibit – Stereograph

These images, know as stereographs, are some of the earliest photographs of St. Thomas.

When viewed through a stereoscope, the two almost identical photographs merge together. This creates a three-dimensional illusion. Look through the stereoscope viewer and experience St. Thomas in the 1800s.

What do the photographs tell us about life in St. Thomas and what don’t they show?

1. Select a view card and place in the slot.

2. Use the sliding card holder to focus the stereograph.

How was a steamship recoaled?

When a ship arrived, a horn blew, signalling coal carriers to prepare. Coal carriers, mostly women, were carried in small, overcrowded boats to the nearby coal yard.

There, they gathered coal from huge piles, loading it into baskets they carried on their heads. The work was gruelling. Coal dust covered everything, and inhaling the black powder could cause deadly diseases. Each basket weighed around 100 pounds (45 kg). The Royal Mail Steam Packet Company's Captain Woolward described the violent treatment of the enslaved people coaling a company ship:

'I saw the ladies and the gentlemen employed at the work were kept moving by a white man with a whip in his hands; the ladies... had to move smartly with their load, or the whip came into requisition.'

Despite the brutal conditions, workers took great pride in their appearance. Many would boil their clothes every day to keep them clean and white.

Conditions and resistance

Coal carriers hauled heavy baskets up steep, narrow gangplanks to waiting ships, balancing high above the deep sea.

To move as much coal as quickly as possible, they often ran back and forth between the coal wharf and the ship. Each day, workers transported up to 800 tonnes of coal - the weight of more than 500 cars.

Before 1848, both enslaved and free people worked in these treacherous conditions to refuel ships in St. Thomas. Free workers earned about a dollar a day, while enslaved people received nothing - their labour enriching their enslavers instead.

In the first years of operation, free coal carriers stood up for their rights. Some refused to work at night when darkness made the job even more dangerous, while others later went on strike after a new type of coal caused painful irritation to their eyes.

Object caption:

'Backbone: Strong’

by Ama Dennis, Artist and Cultural Curator, March 2024

E17695

Ama describes women coal workers as the embodiment of ‘strength, resilience and wisdom, supporting the physical weight of the coal and the mental weight of being the family's economic backbone. This woman was the fabric of the community, she is the woman we are today.’

Caribbean Social Forum

Steamships were loaded with coal one basket at a time, but none of these baskets survive today. To address this absence, the museum has worked with creative designer Tabara N’Diaye and members of the Caribbean Social Forum to create a basket made of willow for display. Participants also made their own smaller baskets made of cane, inspired by the legacy of the coal workers.

‘Preservation of culture gives me a sense of belonging and having a story to tell.’

Project participant

Image caption:

Basket Weaving Workshops, Caribbean Social Forum, 2025

Interactive exhibit – coal token

This replica shows in detail the type of token coal workers were given to exchange for payment.

Please touch.

Token text:

The West Indian Company

Coal

St. Thomas

1920

Freestanding object case 3 – coal workers

1. Baskets inspired by the legacy of the Coal Workers, by Caribbean Social Forum, on loan from the Caribbean Social Forum 2025

E17764 – E17771

2. Photographic postcard, 1900s

E17131

Balancing a full basket of coal on her head, this image captures the endurance of a typical coal carrier. She wears a catta, a thickly wrapped cloth that cushions the immense weight. Her firm stance makes the heavy load seem almost weightless, a testament to her fortitude.

3. Photographic postcard, 1900s

E17176

After the gruelling labour of coaling steamships in the St. Thomas harbour, coal carrier women found strength in sisterhood. They cleansed themselves of coal dust with herbal remedies and came together in communal spaces for recreation. Whether cooking, bamboula dancing or washing clothes in preparation for another

demanding day, these women forged unbreakable bonds, embodying perseverance and unity.

4. Photographic postcard, 1900s

E17554

Postcards featuring portraits of coal workers spread colonial messages across the world through the postal network. The images have been reclaimed by contemporary community organisations, celebrating the strength of the women and taking back their history.

5. Photographic postcard, 1900s

E17315/3

Thousands of tonnes of coal was shipped from Britain to stations across the Caribbean, with St. Thomas receiving the most. Coal workers unloaded this newly arrived coal.

6. Photographic postcard, 1900s

E17328

Most coal carriers were women, but men also performed this work.

7. Photographic postcard, 1900s

E17315/2

The unloaded coal was taken to storage areas on Hassel Island. The boats in the foreground rowed workers to the coaling station.

8. Photographic postcard, 1900s

E17329

After a ship arrived into the harbour, coal workers carried basket after basket of coal up a gangplank to the ship, so it could be refuelled and continue its journey.

9. Photographic postcard, on loan from Porter Archive, 1900s

E17559/3

On board the ships, European sailors and St. Thomian coal workers came into contact. This photographic postcard appears to have been taken by a passenger and developed on board. It captures a menacing moment of unwanted physical contact from a sailor toward a coal carrier. Another sailor watches, mockingly.

10. Photographic postcard, 1900s

E17315/1

After depositing the coal on board, coal workers walked back down the narrow gangplanks, ready to repeat the process.

11. Photographic postcard depicting the Custom House and Post Office in St. Thomas, 1900s

E17459

12. West Indian Company Coaling Token, on loan from Dollar fo' Dollar Inc., 1920

E17700/2

Before emancipation, enslaved coal carriers were not paid at all. The enslavers were enriched by coal carriers' labour. After abolition, coal workers received a token like this one for each basket of coal carried on board a ship. One basket earned about one penny in pay.

Who were the coal workers?

After emancipation in the Danish West Indies in 1848, people who carried coal to fuel steamships were given different names: labourers, colliers, coal workers, and coal carriers. By any name, they were strong, dignified and often the main source of money for their families.

There was much more to coal workers' lives than just their work. Ranging in age from 13 to 83, coal workers lived throughout the town district on St. Thomas and many lived in the Savan area, close to the sea. As they were not wealthy, their importance was often not recognised, and their names were not listed in many official records or newspapers. You might not find coal workers in history books but their legacy endures in the stories passed down through generations.

To find out about coal workers, researchers must piece together their histories.

Barriers to accessing history

Historical documents are often housed in archives outside the Virgin Islands, in distant places such as Denmark, the United States of America and the United Kingdom. Some are written in other languages, making them even harder to access. Many of these documents reflect a colonial viewpoint. They often leave out the stories of enslaved Africans and other marginalised groups. Most people who lived during this time have passed away, and their stories are lost. Researchers must gather pieces of information from different sources to understand the full history.

Freedom in the Danish West Indies

In 1848, a rumour went around the coal wharfs on St. Thomas: free workers from the nearby island of Tortola would support an uprising by the enslaved population on St. Thomas.

Later that year, on nearby St. Croix, thousands of enslaved people joined an uprising, led by John Gottlieb, who was known as General Buddhoe. The uprising forced the islands' Danish Governor to immediately free all enslaved people in the Danish West Indies, including on St. Thomas.

Although all coal workers were free people after emancipation, the Royal Mail Steam Packet Company continued to look for ways to try and control their freedom.

After slavery was abolished in the British Empire, many enslaved people in the Danish West Indies tried to escape to freedom in the nearby British Virgin Islands. Some reports describe people building rafts or even swimming across the sea.

Their watch is the skyline which touches the sea,
The soft plunging rollers that billow the sand;
They hear the steam-blast of the blue-bosomed lea,
And the thrilling salt-echoes that ramble the land.

The anthracite lumps they fling fast in the hold,
And jingling pennies their slim purses feed,
The hard hours write in a volume of gold
This solemn exchange of the commonest need ....

Black-bathed in an ocean of dignified dust
They greet the worn smile of a glorified day;
Co-sharers in toil and co-partners in trust
They sink with the sun at the close of his sway.

‘Coal Carriers’ by Cyril Creque

Image caption:

Photographic postcard featuring an image of a coal worker, 1900s

E17131

Digital interactive exhibit – finding coal workers in written records

This report shares the names of several people identified as Virgin Islands coal workers, researched by Nadine Marchena Kean, Virgin Islands historian and culture bearer.

Nadine’s two great-grandfathers were involved in the St. Thomas coaling industry in different ways – Samuel Smith, a coal worker, and Charles Deloio, a gatekeeper.

‘If we don’t know our history, we don’t know where we’re going next.

We need to honour the people, we sit on their shoulders. If it wasn’t for these coal workers coming forward where would we be with regards to labour rights, to salaries, to understanding of who we are as a people.’

Nadine Marchena Kean

Image caption: St. Thomas, D. W. I.

They were called labourers (pre-1850), coal labourers, colliers, coal workers and coal carriers.

By any name, they were strong entrepreneurial bread-winners, who should not only be defined by their occupation. Ranging in age from 13 to 83, a large majority of them were women born in the Danish West Indies or the British Virgin Islands. They lived throughout the town district but a large amount lived in Savanne on the island of St. Thomas, which is today one of the Virgin Islands of the United States.

As they were not wealthy and not seen as the economic power houses they were, they were dismissed and their names were not registered as other professions were.

Their names rarely appeared in the newspapers or in any other publications. But we know of them because their descendants live on.

Image caption: Coaling Ship, St. Thomas, V. I.

Thomas Bastian

1818 - ? (post 1901)

St. John – St. Thomas

Listed as an 83 year old coal labourer in the 1901 census, research has revealed the following about Mr. Thomas Bastian's life.

- Born in 1818 on the island of St. John in the Cruz Bay Quarter, the first time Thomas Bastian is found in the records is in the 1855 census.

- In the 1855 census, Thomas is already married to Julianna (1822) and has two children – Alexander (1850) and John Adam.

- In the 1860 census, he is still residing in St. John (perhaps due to rules after emancipation) with his family, including a daughter, Martha (1859).

- With his newfound freedom, Thomas moves with his family and seemed to become a coal labourer soon after 1860 to support his family. He lives at 1 & 2 Prindsens Gade, Kongens Quarter.

- Even after his children become adults and his wife dies he continued to work in order to support himself.

- By the 1901 census, he is the oldest coal worker of whom we have evidence.

In the 1901 census, Thomas Bastian is listed as a coal labourer. Based on the available documents, we cannot determine whether Mr. Bastian worked as a coal stacker or as a coal carrier alongside the female coal carriers. Maybe he did both to support his family. Either way, it appears that he would have made more money than his female counterparts.

Sources: Danish West Indies census 1855, 1860, 1901.

Caritas Jacob

1829 – post 1880 (?)

St. John – St. Thomas

Listed as a 45 year old coal carrier in the 1880 census, research has revealed the following about Ms. Caritas Jacob's life.

- Caritas was born enslaved on the island of St. John in 1829 by a family who owned a shipyard on Hassel Island.

- In the 1880 census Caritas was living at 4 & 5 Hospital Line, Kongens Quarter with her children Susanna Catherine Bastien and Thomas Francis.

- At 18 years old, Susanna, like her mother, was a coal carrier.

- Caritas was most likely working as a coal carrier prior to being emancipated. Although she worked other positions between 1850-1870, she seems to return in 1880 to the job of coal carrier.

- Caritas does not appear in any census later than 1880.

Caritas Jacobs was enslaved on the island of St. John and may have come to coal working through her enslaver who owned a shipping provisioning and repair company on the island of St. Thomas.

Sources: Danish West Indies marriage records 1843 & census 1855, 1857, 1860, 1870 & 1880.

Image caption: St. Thomas D. W. I. Type of Coal people.

Coal Carrying Families

Throughout the census records there is evidence of multigenerational coal workers, like Caritas Jacob and her daughter Susanna Catherine Bastien.

‘Marta Joseph, 62, was registered as living at #10 Dronningens Gade together with her five children in the 1901 census: the 30-year-old Grace Greffry, her two sisters Hosanna Dewant, 28 years and Alma Joseph, 17, and finally her brother Leo Joseph, 15 years old. All four are coal workers…’

Translation of ‘Dollar fo’ Dollar, The Coaling women of St. Thomas 1870-1917’ written by Ann Nørregaard.

Anna Foy

1841 - 1917

Tortola – St. Thomas

Listed as a 60 year old coal worker in the 1901 census, research has revealed the following about Ms. Anna Foy.

- Born free in 1841 in Tortola, British Virgin Islands, Ms. Foy settled in St. Thomas in 1853.

- Ms. Foy first appears in the records of the Danish West Indies in the 1870 census living with Mr. William Jacobs. Both of them work (William as a porter and Anna as a coal labourer).

- The 1901 census indicates that she lives alone and unmarried at 6A Borger Gade (Savanne).

- By 1917, according to the report of death document, she had stopped working by the time of her passing.

The cause of Ms. Foy’s death was not noted in the documents. However, one cannot exclude black lung disease as a possible cause.

The coal workers were once described as ‘an ocean of dignified dust,’ referring to the layers of dust covering the coal workers’ white clothing at the end of the day. This dust, evidence of their hard work would be the same dust that could cause their death.

Source: Danish West Indies census 1870, 1901 & Death records, DWI archives.

Image caption: Coaling at St. Thomas, D. W. I.

Ruth Ann Gordon

1851 - 1905

Tortola – St. Thomas

Listed as a 50 year old collier in the 1901 census, research has revealed the following about the life of Ruth Ann Gordon.

Ms. Ruth Ann Gordon was born in 1851 on the island of Tortola and moved to St. Thomas in 1870.

She lived at 4 Liefde Gode Sovonne in an area referred to as the ‘back of all’ across from Jigget Gut in Savanne.

Her name first appeared in the newspaper due to the tragic way in which she died. In 1905 she fell off of an overcrowded boat on her way to work at the Royal Mail Steam Packet Company dock.

It is a rare occurrence that a coal worker’s name appears in a newspaper much less three newspapers but the way in which Ruth Ann died was so significant that the entire community was affected.

Source: Danish West Indies census 1870, 1901 and the Sanct Thomas Tidende.

Image caption: St. Thomas D. W. I. Unloading Coal.

We have not been able to find photographs of the people identified in this report. The names of people depicted in the photographic postcards were not recorded.

Image caption: ‘A black diamond’, St. Thomas D. W. I., 23 May 1910.

How did Dollar fo’ Dollar begin?

Coal workers’ strength and resilience inspire modern Virgin Islanders. Culture bearers on the island protect the cultural legacy of the past, keeping it vibrant for future generations.

Words in this part of the exhibition by Dollar fo’ Dollar.

More than twenty years ago, Ayesha Morris was drawn to a black-and-white photograph of a woman in a Virgin Islands travel guidebook.

The woman stood tall, with a pipe in her mouth and two large pieces of coal on her head. Intrigued by her presence and the story of the coal workers of the past, she visited Virgin Islands archives and spoke to culture bearers to learn more.

Teaming up with artist friends Jahweh David and DaraMonifah Cooper, they created the annual Dollar fo’

Dollar Culture and History Tour to celebrate the lives of the coal workers.

An image tells a thousand words

‘This tour would not exist without that first image, and as they say, an image tells a thousand words. When you see those coal workers and the strength they had to have in order to do the work that they did, and you see that they are still standing and they don’t look beaten down, they still have a sense of dignity about them. They still carry the essence of themselves with them. That just captures it all for me.’

Ayesha Morris, Dollar fo’ Dollar co-founder

Object caption:

Photographic Postcard, 1900s

E17175

This image serves as the inspiration behind Dollar fo’ Dollar. Symbolising the strength, determination, and resilience of coal workers in the 1800s and 1900s, she balances up to 100 pounds of coal on her head with unwavering poise. Her shirt bears the Danish flag, a reminder of Denmark’s rule.

Interactive exhibit - Honouring our ancestors

To honour ancestors is to remember their sacrifices to create a better future for themselves and those to follow.

The coal workers fought hard to gain the freedoms their descendants enjoy. In the Virgin Islands, their names live on in the DNA and blood coursing through the veins of their descendants.

We recognise their hopes, aspirations, strength, values and determination to fight for their rights. We look to them for guidance on how to move forward in life.

At the November 2024 Dollar fo' Dollar culture and history tour, participants were invited to send a postcard back to London. The postcards featured historic images of coal workers, including the image that inspired the birth of the Dollar fo' Dollar organisation.

Are you inspired by the coal workers and your own ancestors? Read the postcards sent from St. Thomas, share your story, and post it in the box. The Postal

Museum will send completed postcards back to St. Thomas, to continue the exchange of experiences and ideas through the post.

Take inspiration from this selection of postcards sent from people in St. Thomas.

In the Virgin Islands, the coal workers’ names live on in the DNA and blood coursing through the veins of their descendants.

What is a culture bearer?

Culture bearers actively practice, share, and preserve ancestral knowledge.

By embracing this special part of Virgin Islands history with care and commitment, the goal is to help the story of coal workers live on for future generations. Explore their stories on the screen below.

Who was Queen Coziah?

The Royal Mail Steam Packet Company coaled ships on St. Thomas from 1841 until 1915. The company established a system to exploit coal workers' free labour during slavery.

Following the end of slavery in the Danish West Indies in 1848, other nations set up coaling companies that enabled their wealth.

In 1892, coal workers went on strike and demanded to be paid in Danish silver instead of devalued Mexican coins. They refused to fuel the steamships in the harbour and protested downtown. Leading the strike was Queen Coziah, described as a natural-born leader and bamboula dancer. She commanded two hundred mostly female coal workers. Facing guns and cannons with sticks and stones, they won their right to be paid fairly, 'dollar fo' dollar'.

Research reveals Queen Coziah to be Clothilde Simonet, a woman who, with Dorothea Scatliffe and others, played a major role in the strike. Her existence was questioned until recently because her nickname

was not reported in the historic records. Dollar fo’ Dollar tours celebrate this new research, observe traditional art forms, and honour the coal workers’ resistance.

Freestanding object case 4 - Bamboula Dancing

The bamboula is an African dance of the Virgin Islands. It played a prominent role during the 1892 Coal Workers' Strike as labourers were said to dance and drum in the streets as part of their protest.

Banned at times in history and associated with resistance, bamboula is a cultural element kept alive by modern practitioners. It is a significant part of Dollar fo’ Dollar tours.

Object caption:

Bamboula Outfit, 2024

Courtesy of Leniese Mercer, on loan from Dollar fo' Dollar Inc.

E17700/1

'Some women coal workers were bamboula dancers. To get the momentum in carrying that heavy load they would sing the bamboula songs and they would move their bodies in different bamboula moves, so they can alleviate the pressure and the weight of the coal on their head.'

Leniese Mercer

Freestanding object case 5 – Dollar fo’ Dollar posters and placards

1. Signs from Dollar fo’ Dollar Events, on loan from Dollar fo’ Dollar Inc., 2000s

E17700/19 and E17700/21

Historic images of coal workers inspire communities in St. Thomas today.

2. Dollar fo’ Dollar Tour Poster, on loan from Dollar fo’ Dollar Inc., 2024

E17700/18

The 2024 tour featured new re-enactments, culture bearer interviews and an analysis of the Royal Mail Steam Packet Company headquarters. A vibrant array of masquerade groups participated, further emphasising themes of freedom.

3. A selection of leaflets from past Dollar fo’ Dollar events, on loan from Dollar fo’ Dollar Inc., 2017 - 2024

E17700/6 – E17700/11

(No number – opposite side from other objects). Tour Placards, on loan from Dollar fo’ Dollar Inc., 2024

E17700/3 and E17700/4

About 50 of these placards are carried through the streets of St. Thomas every year as part of the commemoration of coal workers’ legacy.

Acknowledgements

Community Partners: Caribbean Social Forum

Angela Beale

Barbara Thompson

Beulah Lewis

Brenda Benjamin

Carol Briscoe

Evamae Bennett

Pamela Franklin

Richard Joseph

Vivienne Hawthorne Collins

Community Partners: Dollar fo' Dollar Culture & History Committee Inc.

Ayesha Morris

DaraMonifah Cooper

Jahweh David

Community Partners: Dollar fo' Dollar Culture & History Tour

Actors - Lasima M’Bilashaka as Mocko Jumbie, Leniese Mercer as Dorothea Scatliffe, Marie Paul as Queen Coziah, Raven Phillips as Lucretia Quinones, Vincent ‘Doc’ Palancia as Constable Gellerup

Bamboula Dancers - Caribbean Ritual Dancers, Gomez Lioness Bamboula Dancers, The Coziah Dancers

Coaling & Old-Time Exhibit - Alvis Christian, Geneva Paris, Henry Powell, Michael and Jane Sheen

Filmmaker - Emmanuel Phillips

Libation - Malachi Thomas

Masqueraders - Gypsies Carnival Troupe, Pan in Motion, Shaka Jumbies, St. Thomas Tropical Masqueraders, Traditional Indians, Zulus

Musicians - Emmanuel ‘Mano’ Boyd, Glenn ‘Kwabena’ Davis, The Echo People

Photographer - Aisha-Zakiya Boyd

Tour guides - Nadine Marchena Kean, Ruby Simmonds Esannason, D.A.

Community Partners: Royal Mail Culture Bearers

Asmeret

Carol

Ernestine

L. Aikens

Medinat Bolaji

Serena O

Sylvia Lartey

Community Partners: Virgin Island Culture Bearer Interviewees

Alphonse Stalliard

Ayesha Morris

Delroy ‘Ital’ Anthony

Jane Sheen

Leniese Mercer

Malachi Thomas

Marie Paul

Nadine Marchena Kean

Ruby Simmonds Esannason, D.A.

The Postal Museum Team

Andrea Dumbrell

Andy Richmond

Arna Spek

Bethany Smith

Chris Taft

Eleni Katsiani

Elizabeth Pilliere

Georgina Tomlinson

Hannah Clipson

Helen Dafter

Ian Tolley

Jackie Coppen

Joanna Espin

Laura Gibbs

Louis Porter

Mathilde Jourdan

Megan Fox

Roseanna Shalloe

Sally Bruce

Shaema Shibli

Sharondeep Jawanda

Tom Harrow-Smith

Design

Lima Studio

Graphic Design

Katie Hilton

Audio Visual Design & Editing

Dan Lusby

Audio Visual Hardware

R-I-T

Production

Displayways

Supporters and External Experts

Ama Dennis

Dr Anyaa Anim-Addo

Ella Phillips

Emmanuel Phillips

Enrique ‘Rico’ Corneiro

Kayte McSweeney

Lecia S. Smith

Miles Greenwood

Nadine Marchena Kean

Tabara N’Diaye

UCL Centre for the Study of the Legacies of British Slavery

Zoe Harper

Lenders

Dollar fo' Dollar Culture & History Committee Inc.

Joy Gregory

Leniese Mercer

Michael and Jane Sheen

Porter Archive

The Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford

The British Library

The Museum of Colour

The National Archives, UK

The project team would like to thank:

1733 St. John African Revolution Committee, Conch Shell Media, Darian Hairston, Jane Sheen, Kevin Blaney of VI Marine, Lyle Battiste, Meder Mogzit Family Farm, Myron D. Jackson, Nakeitha Smith, Radio 1000, the Department of Agriculture, the Department of Sports, Parks, and Recreation, The St. Thomas Historical Trust, the St. Thomas Source, the Virgin Islands Daily News, the VI Police Department, Vincent ‘Doc’ Palancia, Vintage Virgin Islands, Virgin Islands Council on the Arts, Virgin Islands Lottery, Wayne James, Wenner Hill Gardens Cooperative, WSTA 1340 AM, Yvette Finch.

All whose names are not mentioned who have contributed to the development of the exhibition and who have supported Dollar fo’ Dollar for the last 20 years.

All involved in supporting our ambition to create an environmentally conscious exhibition, which involved integrating sustainable practices at every stage of the project lifecycle. This included beginning the project with a sustainability audit and repurposing 100% of the infrastructure of the previous exhibition.

The development of this exhibition was supported in part by a Jonathan Ruffer Curatorial Research Grant from Art Fund.

Art Fund