The beginning and end of the colonies in the Danish West Indies

For many years, Denmark had wanted to secure colonies to acquire wealth, inspired by states such as the Netherlands, which successfully managed to establish trading posts and colonies that made a profit. As a result, the African Company was established in 1755, and the first Danish fort, Christiansborg, was acquired on the Gold Coast in 1659.

The purpose of the fort was to provide the Danes with a safe harbour to negotiate with the local powers. Initially, the Danes bought goods such as ivory and gold and paid with a variety of materials such as textiles, firearms, metal and other goods that the local rulers could not produce themselves. The trade was good, but the desire for profit led to the founding of a new company in 1671: the West India Company, focused on the Caribbean, which colonised the uninhabited island of Saint Thomas in 1672.

The colony of St. Thomas provided the opportunity to grow crops that were not possible to grow in Denmark due to the climate. Tobacco, indigo, cotton and sugar. However, St. Thomas had the problem that there wasn't much suitable land, as the island was characterised by mountains and hills. Therefore, the island ended up focusing on trade instead, as it had a perfect natural harbour.

In 1718, they chose to colonise the neighbouring island of St. John, as the soil on St. Thomas had been depleted and they were short of land. However, there was the same problem with space, as the island had many mountains and hills. Therefore, just a few decades later, in 1733, the island of St. Croix was purchased from France.

With the colonisation of St. Croix, Denmark entered the triangular trade between Europe, Africa and the Caribbean.

Loaded with textiles from India, firearms and other goods, the ships sailed down to the forts on the Gold Coast, where the goods were used as payment for slaves. They were then shipped across the Atlantic to the Danish West Indies. Here, the slaves were sold to the highest bidder and then used as labour on the plantations where they harvested sugar. The sugar was partially processed on the island before being sent by ship to Copenhagen, where it was refined to its pure form.

The island was large and flat, however, the island had 2 mountain ranges. One in the northern part of the island and another at the eastern end of the island. The island was divided into nine different districts/quarters, which were subdivided into plantations. From east to west, there was a road connecting the island called the Centre Line. Along this route were the most fertile parts of the island. The first town on the island was Christianssted in the northeastern part, but over time, another town was established at the western end, under the name Frederikssted.

In 1799, the towns served as administrative centres where the island's administration could gather information, and they could be places of refuge in case of rebellion. In Christianssted and Frederikssted, Danish and foreign ships arrived with slaves, materials and food. This was necessary to maintain slavery as the island was not self-sufficient, as the island focused on sugar production.

In the cities, most plantation owners sold their raw sugar and rum to merchants who acted as middlemen and transported it back to Copenhagen.

In 1792, the Danish government decided that the transatlantic slave trade should be banned, but plantation owners were given a period of 10 years to bring in enough slaves to become self-sufficient. After the ban came into effect in 1803, slavery on the islands lasted until 1848.

In that year, discontent broke out among the slaves, causing them to march directly to Frederikssted, where Governor Von Scholten declared the slaves free on July 3. However, several restrictions were quickly placed on their freedom to prevent the collapse of the island, as it was feared that people would leave the island, leaving the plantations without labour.

These restrictions were meant to be temporary, but ended up existing for 30 years until 1878. The restrictions became a trigger for what would become known as The Fire Burn. It was an uprising sparked by rumours of police brutality and discontent over low wages and strict work rules, in which plantation workers partially burned down Frederiksted and a third of the plantations on the island.

After the abolition of slavery, the Danish government began to see the islands as an economic burden. Therefore, they tried to sell the islands, just as they sold the forts on the Gold Coast and possessions in India back in 1845. In 1917, they succeeded when the West Indies were sold to the US after a referendum in Denmark.