



The Historical
Society of
Pennsylvania

Collection 219

French West Indies
Collection

1712-1857

1 box, 0.2 lin. feet

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Restrictions: None.

Related Collections at Claude Unger Collection, Collection 1860A.

HSP: Dutilh and Wachsmuth Papers, Collection 184.
Abraham Dubois Papers, Collection 1636.

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Abstract

Following in the footsteps of the Dutch and British, French settlers arrived in the Caribbean in the 1630s and established trading ports on the islands of Saint-Domingue (later Hispaniola), Martinique, and Guadeloupe. The settlers, with the aid of indentured servants and later African slaves, cultivated numerous crops that were eventually exported to France.

Philippe Buache was most likely the official cartographer of her royal highness, the Queen of France. In this capacity, he explored the West Indies with the goal of creating physical and geographical depictions of the French colonies and their environs.

The French West Indies collection spans from 1712 to 1757 and is written primarily in French. It consists mainly of correspondence sent from merchants in the French West Indies and the geographical writings of cartographer Philippe Buache. The papers offer insight into the geography and trade of the West Indies in the eighteenth century; Buache also wrote about the geography of Australia and Antarctica. Most of the letters were apparently captured by an English privateer during the English-French War of Austrian Succession (1740-1748) and never reached their destination, but were probably carried into some part of the English colonies in America.

Background note

French West Indies

Around 1630, the first permanent French settlement in the Antilles (also known as the West Indies) was established on Tortuga, after the French seized it from the Spanish. Over the next several decades, France, England, and Spain vied for control of islands in the Antilles, most specifically the island that was later known as Hispaniola. In 1665, King Louis XIV officially recognized the French colonization of Saint-Domingue, which became known as the Pearl of Antilles in western Hispaniola. French and British power in the Caribbean soon overcame the previous Spanish influence, and Spain eventually ceded control of Saint-Domingue to France.

Initially, French settlers to the Caribbean operated small farms with indentured servants, but the African slave trade was introduced to the islands by the mid-seventeenth century. Sugar and coffee were cultivated for export.

During the first half of the eighteenth century, France and England fought a series of wars that affected the French West Indies – the War of Spanish Succession (1701-1714), the War of Austrian Succession (1740-1748), and the Seven Years' War (1756-1763). French vessels were often in danger of capture by the British in the Caribbean during these wars.

Philippe Buache

Philippe Buache was born in 1700 in Neuville-en-Pont, France. He was the official cartographer and geographer for the French monarchy and joined the Academy of Sciences in 1730. Buache explored the geography of the West Indies and a possible connection between Asia and America via the Bering Strait. He published many geographical essays, including "Memoire sur les decouvertes faites par la Perouse" (1798); "Recherches sur File Antilla et sur l'epoque de la decouverte de l'Amerique" (1806)" and "Observations sur quelques iles situees entre le Japon et la Californie" (1809). Buache died in Paris, France in 1773.

Scope & content

The French West Indies collection traces the activities of merchants in the Caribbean and geographical observations of French cartographer Philippe Buache in the eighteenth century. Most of the correspondence was written from several locations in the Caribbean with the majority of the letters sent from Petit-Goave on Haiti. The letters appear to have been sent between merchants and French settlers in the Caribbean and acquaintances and family members in France. According to the original folder that housed the correspondence, "most of these were apparently captured by an English privateer during the English-French War of 1743 and never reached their destination, but were probably carried into some part of the English colonies in America." The following men are represented among the correspondents: Mr. Robineau, Thomas Des Vaux, and Mr. Gentille Grateloup of Bordeaux. In a letter sent to Grateloup, the author discussed the recent declaration of war against Britain (June 13, 1744). While the letters contain some comments on the political climate, they mainly relate to the shipment of goods between France and the West Indies and the manner in which these goods would be purchased, especially with the waters becoming increasingly dangerous due to the war. Besides discussing trade and the war, some letters touched on the appointment of army officers. Many of the correspondents also discussed personal matters, including weddings and the health of family members. For example, there is a letter that an unidentified correspondent sent to his cousin, a woman living on the coast of Saint Domingue, inquiring into the general well-being of his family members (1746).

The materials of Philippe Buache in this collection date mainly from the 1750s and consist of his geographical essays and observations of the French West Indies and other lands. A booklet titled "Memoires touchant la Martinique" contains information about the "Isles d'Amerique" (islands of America). It appears that Buache hoped to make a general map of the Antilles in order to improve the navigation of this area. He

commented on the topography of Martinique, describing the mountains, coastline, and rivers. There are also longitudes and latitudes for different locations on the island, including Fort Royal, Fort St. Pierre, and Gros Morne. Buache also explained why he decided to create a map for Martinique and lists the names of several bodies of water, noting which had been added to the original map. Sunrise and sunset times and longitudes and latitudes (in comparison to Paris) were also recorded in this booklet. There are some map sketches in the back of the booklet.

There are folders containing a geographical essay written by Buache on November 15, 1752 and there are other miscellaneous writings (1752-1757) that he penned as geographer for her majesty, the Queen of France, and the Academy of Sciences. He commented on general physical and natural geography in “*Cartes et Tables Analytiques de la Geographie Physique ou Naturelle,*” as well as the geography of the Antarctic and Australia in “*Considerations geographiques sur les terres Australes et Antarctiques.*”

Related materials

At the Historical Society of Pennsylvania:
Claude Unger Collection, Collection 1860A.
Dutilh and Wachsmuth Papers, Collection 184.
Abraham DuBois papers, Collection 1636.

Bibliography

“Louis XIV” and “West Indies” on Microsoft Encarta. <http://encarta.msn.com>. (20 August 2007)

Subjects

Austrian Succession – War of – 1740-1748
Cartographers – 18th century
Cartography – 18th century
England – History – 18th century
Foreign trade and employment – 18th century
France – History – 18th century
Martinique – Commerce – 18th century
Merchants – France – 18th century
Merchants – West Indies, French – 18th century
Physical geography
Shipment of goods – 18th century
Sugar trade
West Indies, French – History – 18th century
West Indies, French – Commerce – 18th century

Buache, Philippe, 1700-1773

Administrative Information

Restrictions

None.

Acquisition information

Provenance unknown.

Preferred citation

Cite as: [Indicate cited item or series here], French West Indies collection (Collection 219), The Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

Processing Note

Before processing, this collection was incorrectly titled the French West India Company papers. This is the title that appears in the 1991 printed guide to manuscript collections at HSP. In fact, the French West India Company was dissolved in 1674, long before the documents included in this collection.

Box and folder listing

Folder title	Date	Box	Folder
Correspondence	July 28, 1712-August 1744	1	1
Correspondence	September 1, 1744- September 9, 1744, 1745	1	2
Correspondence	February 10, 1746-August 26, 1746	1	3
Correspondence	August 30, 1746-August 14, 1747	1	4
Correspondence	May 1757, n.d.	1	5
Memoires Touchant la Martinique [memoirs of Martinique]	c. 1732	1	6
Esai de Géographie Physique [geographical essay]	November 15, 1752	1	7
Miscellaneous geographical writings	1752-1757	1	8