The Archival Erasure of a Colonial Massacre

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This working paper is based on Chapter 2 of my doctoral dissertation *Fireburn – Revolt, Remembrance and Representation from 1878 to the Present.* A comprehensive list of my research output can be seen at Lund university's Research Portal and at Orcid.

The analysis draws on both archival documents and critical approaches to absence, bias, and silencing in colonial governance. Interpretations presented here are part of an ongoing scholarly investigation into the structural erasure of key events during and after the Fireburn uprising. The working paper forms part of a dissertation in progress and should not be cited or circulated without permission.

Abstract
This paper presents the first comprehensive analysis of the systematic archival erasure surrounding the mass killing of Afro-Caribbean laborers at Anna's Hope during the Fireburn uprising on St. Croix in 1878. Although internal telegrams and eyewitness accounts refer explicitly to a "great slaughter" of Black insurgents at Anna's Hope on 3 October 1878, the incident is conspicuously absent from official reports, administrative tallies, and subsequent historiography. Drawing on records from the Danish National Archives this paper documents the disappearance of key administrative sources.[1] It argues that this absence is not a bureaucratic oversight, but a necropolitical act of silencing within a broader colonial strategy of narrative containment. By tracing how massacres were rendered unknowable through bureaucratic narrowing and selective preservation, the paper contributes to current debates on archival power, historical erasure, and the ethics of historical recovery.

Introduction

In the historiography of the 1878 Fireburn revolt on St. Croix, one site of violence remains particularly opaque: The plantation Anna's Hope. Despite repeated mentions in early eyewitness accounts, the name Anna's Hope all but disappears from official documents. This paper argues

[1] Correspondance with archivists at the U.S. National Archives (NARA) confirm that the relevant journals from 1878 are missing. Correspondance with archivists at the Danish National Archives confirm that the relevant journals are not in the possesion of the archives in Copenhagen.

that the absence of Anna's Hope from the colonial archive is not a void to be filled, but a structural silence that must be interpreted. What was recorded, what was lost, and what was never documented are not neutral gaps, but products of colonial governance. Following Michel-Rolph Trouillot and Ann Laura Stoler, I treat the archive as a site of power where visibility is distributed unevenly, and where absence itself can become evidence of erasure.

Keywords: Colonial history, Danish West Indies, Danish colonialism, Fireburn revolt, Colonial archives, Archival studies, Memory studies.

1. Context: Fireburn and the Logic of Suppression

The Fireburn revolt erupted on 1 October 1878 in Frederiksted and spread across St. Croix. By 3 October, a military column led by Governor Garde engaged several hundred insurgents at Anna's Hope, resulting in what internal correspondence called a "great slaughter." However, this confrontation never appears in official death counts. Instead, attention was redirected to later, isolated "excesses" committed by a small number of planters.

2. The Missing Police Record

The most significant archival absence concerns the Christiansted police journal for October 1878, which is missing from both the Danish National Archives and the holdings of the U.S. National Archives (NARA). Yet we know it once existed. Governor Garde referred to excerpts from it in 1880. By 1883, when Governor Arendrup attempted to compile a retrospective report, it had vanished. The Frederiksted police journal survives intact; the absence in Christiansted thus represents a geographic and political asymmetry that cannot be accidental.

3. Tracing the Dead: Sources of Contradiction

Multiple sources contradict the official claim of approximately 60 deaths. Garde's own telegram from mid-October estimates 150 insurgents killed. British naval officer Captain Dennistoun cites 210–230. A private letter from a Danish planter describes killing sprees by volunteers. And yet, two official lists (by Stakemann and van Brakle) either miscount or omit Anna's Hope entirely. The very plantation where Garde and Friis report deadly confrontation is reduced to an ambiguous mark or excluded altogether.

4. Archival Silencing as Colonial Strategy

This paper argues that the erasure of Anna's Hope from the record reflects a deliberate effort to contain political fallout and protect the legitimacy of colonial authority. Had the killings been formally acknowledged—through reports, court records, or police journals—they might have

triggered parliamentary scrutiny, demands for accountability, or even legal repercussions for those involved. Instead, silence proved strategically useful. By withholding documentation, colonial officials created a narrative vacuum in which no one could be held responsible, and no clear reckoning was required.

This absence enabled a broader strategy of amnesty and reputational management. Rather than addressing the mass violence that took place in the early days of the revolt, attention was redirected to a handful of isolated "excesses" committed by white planters more than a week later—acts that could be condemned as unfortunate anomalies without threatening the overall narrative of restored order. Governor Garde, who had refused international military assistance and instead armed plantation owners with personal stakes in the conflict, could not afford public scrutiny of the decisions made under his command. To document the killings at Anna's Hope would have been to implicate himself—not only as a commander, but as the architect of an unregulated counterinsurgency. The absence of records, then, was not a bureaucratic lapse but a political shield. By ensuring that no detailed account of Anna's Hope survived in the official archive, the colonial administration preserved plausible deniability and safeguarded both institutional continuity and personal careers.

5. Vernacular Records: Beyond Archival Silence

While the erasure of Anna's Hope from the colonial record reflects a deliberate strategy of forgetting, the memory of mass violence during Fireburn did not vanish entirely. In the absence of detailed documentation, fragments have been preserved through oral traditions and vernacular practices of remembrance. A folk song recorded in 1955 by Marie Richards appears to reference collective punishment and state violence, offering a rare glimpse of how these events were remembered among Afro-Caribbean women. Elsewhere, at Grove Place, a baobab tree has come to serve as a vernacular memorial to fourteen women who died during the revolt—not as a direct response to Anna's Hope, but as a site where communal grief, memory, and resistance converge. These forms of remembrance do not seek to correct the archival record, but to sustain embodied, affective, and place-based memory across generations.

6. Theorizing Absence: Trouillot, Stoler, Mbembe, Hirsch and Gilroy

Drawing on Trouillot's framework of historical silencing and Stoler's concept of the archive as governance, I argue that the missing Christiansted journal is itself an artefact of erasure. The absence is not passive; it is a necropolitical decision about whose deaths count. As Mbembe has noted, colonial states exercised authority not just through violence, but through the bureaucratic

rendering of certain lives as administratively invisible. Drawing on Marianne Hirsch's concept of postmemory and Paul Gilroy's work on counter-histories, I treat these sources as vernacular counter-archives. They emerge outside state institutions and speak from the margins, yet they testify to truths the archive cannot hold. By attending to these vernacular forms, we begin to see not only what was erased, but also what has endured.

Conclusion: Naming the Uncounted

This paper has shown how the Anna's Hope massacre was erased through a layered strategy of omission, deferral, and bureaucratic narrowing. The missing police record is only the most tangible symptom of a wider refusal to name, count, or remember. Far from a neutral gap, the silence around Anna's Hope is a historical act in its own right—one that demands recognition not just as absence, but as a form of evidence. To speak of the uncounted is to disturb the silence that surrounded them. Though we may never know their names, we can mark their absence, and in doing so refuse the terms of their erasure.