Chapter 2
The Caribbean Cartography of Samuel Fahlberg

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Abstract Swedish born in Halsingland and educated in Stockholm, Dr. Samuel Fahlberg (1758–1834) came to the Caribbean to the island of St. Barthélemy (“St. Barths”) in 1784 as a physician and Government Secretary when it was relinquished by France to Sweden. Two years later, he became the Provincial Medical Officer and the Customs Inspector and Cashier, and in 1803 he also became the Director of Survey of the tiny colony and mapped it extensively for the Swedish West India Company. But because of the ongoing problems between Sweden and France over the island and his too close an association with the island’s pro-British faction, Fahlberg eventually was forced to flee under threat to “lose his life, honour, and property” to the neighboring Dutch islands of St. Eustatius (1810–1816 and 1829–1834) and St. Maarten in (1816–1829). He remained in St. Maarten and St. Eustatius (“Statia”) as a doctor, surveyor, cartographer, architect, and artist for most of the three remaining decades of his life until his death in St. Eustatius in 1834. During these years, Fahlberg produced several excellent and important maps of these Caribbean islands and their towns, plantations and estates, and fortifications.

The Life and Times of Samuel Fahlberg

The information regarding Samuel Fahlberg’s early life is sketchy. He was born the son of a farmer in the area of Halsingland in Sweden on 5 September 1758. After the death of his father and a twin brother in 1769, he and his mother sailed for

1I am indebted to Elsje Bosch, Director of the Sint Maarten National Heritage Foundation and Sint Maarten Museum in Phillipsburg, for her conversations with me about Fahlberg and his work and for her sharing of rare biographical information on him with me.

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Stockholm to make a living. Along the way they were shipwrecked; his mother drowned, and he barely survived by clinging to some ice.

Upon his arrival in Stockholm, Fahlberg was taken in by Jacob Tjader, Supervisor of Public Baths and Borough Medical Officer, and made his apprentice. Apparently appreciating his intellectual ability, Tjader enrolled Fahlberg in college to study botany and pharmacy under Bergius. He followed this up with an internship in surgery with Olaf of Acrel at Serafimer Hospital where he passed his examination to become a qualified surgeon in 1782.

Fahlberg’s first real employment was as a surgeon on a merchant ship. Eventually, he traveled to France where he signed up with the fleet of Jean François de la Perouse bound for North America where he was wounded in a battle with the English in Hudson’s Bay. In 1784, he returned to Stockholm to become a deputy surgeon at the Serafimer Hospital.

In 1784, France ceded the West Indian island of St. Barthélemy (“St. Barths”) to Sweden in exchange for trading rights at Gothenburg (Sweden sold it back to France in 1878). During the selection process for personnel to administer the new colony, the Swedish government and Svenska Västindiska Kompaniet (Swedish West India Company) gave preference to individuals who had some familiarity with the New World. Consequently, in December 1784 Fahlberg was appointed as a government secretary and physician to St. Barthélemy. Two years later he traded in his government secretary position for one as a customs inspector and cashier. At about this time, he also married his first wife Elizabeth Siwars. She died in 1798, and in 1801 he married Elizabeth Evory from the Dutch island of St. Eustatius (“Statia”). Since the island was temporarily (March 1801–June 1802) in British hands, the wedding ceremony was performed by the British governor. In 1805, Fahlberg was reappointed as a government secretary and served in all three positions until he departed the island in 1810.

As a doctor on the island, Fahlberg helped to combat several epidemics, including small pox. He also functioned as an unpaid surveyor and naturalist. By 1803, he was appointed an island engineer with the title of Director of Survey, and eventually, his maps came to the attention of the Swedish government, the Swedish West India Company, and Academy of Sciences in Stockholm.

During this period, Fahlberg also must have wandered the Caribbean and Gulf of Mexico extensively for he collected historical artifacts and natural specimens from Trinidad, Venezuela, and elsewhere for the Academy of Sciences and the University of Uppsala and corresponded with important Swedish scientists and other intellectuals. Some of his articles were published in the Academy’s Lakaren Och Naturforskaren, and a butterfly, tortrix Fahlbergiana was named after him. Fahlberg was granted a doctorate from the University of Uppsala in 1796.

The political situation on St. Barthélemy was quite stressful during the era of the French Revolution and Napoleon. While Fahlberg may have favored the American and French revolutionaries early on, over time his attitudes changed somewhat. St. Barthélemy’s population was divided into pro-French and pro-British groups.
Although Fahlberg tried to remain neutral, he was on good terms with the leader of the pro-British faction, John Nordling, who was forced to resign his office in the Swedish West India Company in 1797. Fahlberg later became a commander of a company of Swedish militia in the capital, Gustavia, and word of his attempts to stop the privateering activities of the pro-French faction soon reached the pro-revolutionary Swedish government in Stockholm. Consequently, he was exiled to St. Eustatius in 1810, but continued to work for the Swedish West India Company as an off-island agent for another year. Fahlberg associated with numerous prominent Englishmen throughout the West Indies, and in 1811 in two letters from Antigua to the Swedish government on St. Barthélemy, he advocated that the island be declared neutral under British protection. Thereafter, Fahlberg was tried in absentia for conspiracy against the Swedish government on the island, found guilty, put under a death sentence, and lost all of his positions, titles, and property. Somewhat later, the verdict was confirmed by the Civil Court in Sweden, but altered slightly to allow his property to pass on to his children.

Fahlberg remained in St. Eustatius as a garrison doctor until 1816 when he moved to Dutch Sint Maarten to be with his two married daughters and their families and where he worked as a doctor and surveyor. The closely clustered, privateer-friendly volcanic Leeward Islands of St. Eustatius, St. Maarten, and Saba were under the direct control of the Geoctroyeerde Westindische Compagnie (“Chartered West India Company,” the Dutch West India Company) from 1621 until 1791, when the Dutch government bought out the failing enterprise. Yet, by Fahlberg’s time on the islands, little had changed. In 1829, he returned to St. Eustatius as a garrison doctor and remained there until his death on November 28, 1834. Just before his death, he received a pardon from the Swedish government.

Since the American Revolution, there has been an especially close relationship between the United States and St. Eustatius and St. Maarten. Both islands were friendly to the American revolutionaries and opened their ports to their ships and trade. St. Eustatius was known as “Gold Mountain” for its wealth of trade, and in 1776 it was the first foreign territory to officially salute the American flag. In the United States Library of Congress’ Geography and Map Division there is a wonderful untitled pencil and wash drawing of Oranjestad, St. Eustatius (177?), probably by an unknown Dutch artist, that shows a fortified harbor surrounded by volcanic peaks, farms, houses, a church, and warehouses. In the harbor, proudly flying their flags, are American ships and those of countries friendly to the American cause – the Netherlands, France, Denmark, and Sweden – engaged in commerce (G5032.S3A35.177-, S., Vault). During World War II, both islands served as bases for hunting U-boats (some of which were being resupplied only a few miles away by Vichy-loyal French St. Martin) in the Atlantic and Caribbean, and today they are major tourist destination for Americans and Canadians, among others. See: Ostindie, Gert. 2005. Paradise Oversea. The Dutch Caribbean : Colonialism and Its Transatlantic Legacies. Oxford: Macmillan Education, 2005.
under a general amnesty, but the word did not reach him in time. Today, a main street, the Rue Fahlberg in Gustavia, St. Barthélemy is named in his honor.  

The Maps of Samuel Fahlberg

Under the ever economically minded Company and colonial administrations, Fahlberg mapped in addition to his other contracted duties; he rarely was paid primarily as a cartographer. The small volcanic 8 square mile island of St. Barthélemy too is in the Leeward Islands very near to St. Maarten and was claimed by France in 1648 at the end of the 30 years War in Europe. Initially, its economy was based primarily on marginal plantation agriculture mainly in sugar for the rum trade. Today, it is a French collectivity and part of the French West Indies along with Guadaloupe, Martinique, and French St. Martin and has international reputation as a center of upscale tourism frequented mostly by visitors from North America and Europe.

While on St. Barthélemy, Fahlberg drew several maps of the island and its neighboring islands, the most important of which is his Charta öfver ÖN St. BARTHELEMY . . . (Stockholm: 1801), engraved by the Swedish chart maker Erik Åkerland (1754–1832). In fact, it is one of the most significant maps in the cartographic history of the island. It is a scientifically accurate and very aesthetically appealing map, showing the whole island and surrounding close-in smaller ones. The main town Gustavia, named after King Gustav III of Sweden, is at the lower part of the center of the map. It is located at 80° 47′ west of Stockholm and 17° 51′ north latitude and is described in statement in an oval at the center of the left edge of the map. The other villages and quartiers also are clearly designated as are the agriculturally productive lands, divided into surveyed French long lots. In the lower left corner of the map, below the Gustavia description and above the guide to the map’s symbols there is a list of the quartiers (14) indicating the number of habitations (135) and inhabitants (2,072) of each.

The volcanic mountains are shown as such, and there are four salines (salt ponds) labeled. The numerous bays and respective beaches of the island are identified. There are indications of the depths of some of the bays as there are for the waters off of some of the surrounding smaller islands. The scale is recorded as 1,000 French feet to the inch, and, understandably, the language of much of the map is French.

St. Barthélemy also appears on earlier Fahlberg regional map of 1792, but in nowhere near as refined and detailed manner as in 1801. His CHARTA öfver Canalerna och Utloppen emellan Öarna från St. Barthelemy till Dog och Prickle Pear . . . (Stockholm: 1792), also engraved by Åkerland, shows the less sophisticated rendition of St. Barthélemy with surrounding islands in the lower right corner. To the northwest is a similarly simplified and undersized depiction of Dutch-French St. Martin and beyond it in the same direction a vastly oversized version of the neighboring British island of Anguilla. Finally, in the upper left corner of the map are the oversized and somewhat misplaced Prickly Pear and Dog islands cited in its title. Inset in the lower left corner is the Speciale-Charta öfver Inloppet och Hamnen Carenage samt Staden Gustavia with a guide to its map symbols and again on an indicated scale of 1,000 French feet to the inch. Given the distortions of size and location on the larger part of the map, it is not surprising that no scale is present here.


This map covers a larger area and is concerned mainly with the passages and potential routes between islands. Not only St. Barthélemy, but all of the islands are relatively generalized. The 1792 and 1801 maps are hand colored. This is still quite an artistically satisfying map, but although better than many of the contemporary maps of the area, the 1792 map is nowhere nearly as scientifically accurate as that of 1801 or other Fahlberg maps, despite whatever its title might profess. It also should be viewed as an earlier example of his cartography. Although rarely cited, his sources for these and others of his maps consisted of previous Spanish, French, Dutch, and English cartography of the islands, local government surveys and maps, and his own careful surveys. All in all, Fahlberg’s high-quality mapping of St. Barthélemy and its environs better revealed the island to Sweden and the Swedish West India Company and helped to more firmly establish Swedish possession of it.

In his later years, Fahlberg did a number of exceptional maps of St. Martin. Like St. Eustatius, the 37 square mile St. Martin was first sighted by Europeans on Columbus’ second voyage to the New World in 1493. But it had been known to Arawak, Cibonay, and Carib Indians for almost three and a half millennia previously. The Indian name for St. Martin was Sualouiga (“Land of Salt”), for its many salt ponds that made it valuable to them and early European interlopers. It was first
settled by French and English from nearby St. Christopher (St. Kitts) in 1627 and
the Dutch West India Company in 1631 and was officially divided between the
French (20.5 sq. mi.) and Dutch (16.5 sq. mi.) in 1648 after the 30 years War, as it
remains today. St. Martin’s semi-arid climate and soil are poorly suited for planta-
tion agriculture, and cotton, tobacco, sugar, indigo, coffee, and cacao all failed
there; its salt remained economically important into the twentieth century. The
island began moving toward becoming the tourist mecca that it is today in 1939
when the Dutch and French declared it a duty free area. This status also allows for
the ready distillation, importation, blending, and exportation of alcohol, thus
creating a developing regional trade in St. Martin flavored rums.

Fahlberg’s Cart Topographique de l’Isle de St. Martin... (1790–1791, 1817, and
1826?) is on a par with his 1801 St. Barthélemy map. It shows the geographically
and politically complex island of St. Martin with its volcanic mountains, salt ponds,
external and internal bays, beaches, quarters, towns and villages, and local and
national divisions artistically rendered in specific detail. In the upper left corner is
the neighboring smaller island of Tintamarre, popular today for its beach and mud
bath. Below it is the guide to the maps symbols, and below it, the scale. Perhaps, to

emphasize this map’s importance and to enhance its broader appeal it is in French rather than Dutch or Swedish. His distinctive 1826? painted state of the map is particularly attractive and exhibits Fahlberg’s talents not only as a cartographer, but as an artist as well.  

Fahlberg drew, painted, and/or hand colored several other important maps of St. Maarten, especially of the area around Great Bay, including the main town (officially the capital after 1919) of Phillipsburg. In c. 1817, he executed a superb, beautiful watercolor plan of the fortifications protecting the entrance to Great Bay and Phillipsburg, which occupies a strip of land on its north side that separates the bay from the Great Bay Salt Pond, the biggest on the whole island, yet a bit further to the north. It was undoubtedly done for the local Dutch administration. His Profil en Perpendiculaire hoogte boven de Zee der vornaamste Batterijen in het

\[\text{Fahlberg, Samuel. Cart Topographique de l'Isle de St. Martin Levée par des Observations Hydrographiques l'an 1791. Rélevée e l'InterieurCorrigé les cinnées1817. &1826. par Samuel Fahlberg, manuscript in the collection of the Universiteitsbibliotheek, Amsterdam.}\]
Nederlandsch van het Eyland St. Martin is divided into three parts. The top third illustrates the western approach Great Bay from the east, locating its three protective batteries, as acknowledged in the title. The center third, Plan van het Fort Willem den Ersten, shows the plan of the western most fort, named after King William I (labeled “A” on the top map) with its principle blockhouse in profile. There is no plan of another smaller gun site located forward of it (labeled “C”). Plan van het Fort Amsterdam at the bottom is of the larger eastern battery (“D”), which is separated from Fort Willem by Little Bay. Directional arrows specify the orientations of the plans, their heights above sea level are indicated clearly, and there scales are present. Fahlberg’s three extremely accurate maps mirror the eye, ability, presentation, and technique of the skilled surveyor and of the artist.

Fort Amsterdam was constructed in 1631 by the Dutch West India Company to protect its salt extraction on the island. Fort Willem was constructed by the British in 1801 as Fort Trigge to threaten the Dutch and then taken by the Dutch in 1802 and named Fort Gelderland. It fell to the French in 1807 as Fort Louis Napoleon and in 1810 to the British again as Fort Trigge. The Dutch reclaimed it as Fort Willem in 1816 and abandoned it in 1846. Fort Amsterdam has been reconstructed to some extent, in part using Fahlberg’s map, as a tourist attraction. It sits just above and south of and is dwarfed by the modern Divi Little Bay Resort. Fort Willem and its outpost on the other hand are in total decay and even difficult to find. They await a commitment of funds from the St. Maarten government from its tourist tax revenues for restoration.

In 1822, Fahlberg painted a charming and notable View of PHILIPSBURG. As pointed out in its full title, it looks out upon the town from the estate of one Gerd (Gerhard?) Du Cloux across the Great Bay Salt Pond southward onto Great Bay with the island of Saba in the distance. In front of Saba is Fort Amsterdam and on the heights above it to the left is Fort Willem. It is perhaps Du Cloux’s livestock grazing beyond the wall in the foreground. The gatherers of firewood on the near shore of the salt pond and those rowing across it are probably slaves, since slavery was not finally abolished on the French side of St. Martin until 1848 and on the Dutch side until 1863.

9Fahlberg, Samuel. c. 1817. Profil en Perpendiculaire hoogte boven de Zee der voraamste Batterijen in het Nederlandsch Gedeelte van het Eyland St. Martin. Samuel Fahlberg... manuscript in the collection of the Universiteitsbibliotheek, Amsterdam.
10Fahlberg, Samuel. View of PHILIPSBURG. The CAPITAL of the Netherland part of the Island Saint MARTINS. Dedicated to WILLIAM HENRY RINK Esquire the Former Governor of the Islands ST MARTINS and Saba. Taken from the Estate of the Honorble [sic] Gerd Du Cloux Esqr. 1822. By His Most Obedient Humble Servant Samuel Fahlberg, manuscript in the collection of the Algemeen Rijksarchief, Division of Maps and Drawings, The Hague. This map also is reproduced on a popular tourist postcard from St. Maarten, Historical Art of the Caribbean: View of Phillipsburg by Samuel Fahlberg, 1822 (West Falmouth, MA: Caribbean Archives, c. 2005).
Although the town looks quiet, the five larger ships, some of which could be privateers or pirates, anchored or under sail in the bay attest to Phillipsburg’s status as a busy West Indian port. Its location at the rear of Great Bay afforded it protection from hurricanes (e.g. 1819) and pirates and other enemies from the sea. And its position between the bay and pond allowed for a type of natural air conditioning against the hot and humid Caribbean climate. Over the years, Fahlberg’s View has proved to be a rare, valuable, and attractive graphic source on the history of early eighteen century Phillipsburg.

Fahlberg’s close acquaintance Willem Hendrik Rink, to whom the View was dedicated, was the governor of St. Maarten in 1790–1806. While visiting there in 1816, Fahlberg painted a map of Rink’s estate, THE RETREAT…, out of friendship or perhaps as a commission.\(^\text{11}\) It is the picture of a prosperous, fairly good sized estate by St. Maarten standards of the early nineteenth century. There are two great houses, a large barn, out buildings, and slave quarters on a creek surrounded by farm animals, gardens and diversely cropped fields, one being worked by slaves. In the hilly quarter of Cul de Sac, the fields might contain maize and other suitable grains, tobacco, indigo, and even some cotton. Slaves also are engaged at various other activities across the estate, including the opening of the main gate by a slave boy for Rink himself and a retainer approaching on horseback. Coconut and date

\(^{11}\text{Fahlberg, Samuel. THE RETREAT Situated In The Quarter Cul de Sac; The Property Of WILLIAM HENRY RINK Esquire Formerly Governor Over The Islands ST MARTINS & SABA. To WHOM This VIEW is Humbly Dedicated. By HIS Grateful And Most Obedient Servant Samuel Fahlberg Colonial Surveyor. October The 18th 1816, collection of the Algemeen Rijksarchief, Division of Maps and Drawings, The Hague.}
palms and nut and fruit trees are part of the estate as well. In somewhat distorted perspective, it rises up and is all delimited by some of St. Martin’s more moderately sized mountains, the higher ones being on the French side.

Like Fahlberg’s View, THE RETREAT is a noteworthy testimonial not only to its creator, but also to the place and time in which he lived. For the historian, it offers not only a scenic portrayal of his friend’s property, but useful observations on the operations of an early nineteenth century agricultural holding in the poorer Lesser Antilles (as opposed to the major sugar islands) of the Leeward Islands as well.

12...‘The Retrait’ combined with ‘The Farm’ estate are the most important plantation of the Dutch part at present, a tract of 333 ‘akkers’ numbering 152 slaves...” Teenstra, M.D. 1837. The Islands of the Netherlands West Indies: St. Marten. Phillipsburg: Lord & Hunter, 1993, 13.
During his final years on St. Eustatius, Fahlberg kept busy in part by working for the local colonial administration in the capital Oranjestad, much as he had done previously in Gustavia and Phillipsburg, producing superb images such as a plan for the erection of a mole (i.e. breakwater) to protect the anchorages of Orange Bay (1828) and an untitled architectural construction drawing for the non-commissioned officers’ and soldiers’ quarters at Fort Orange (1828). The mole was washed away by a hurricane before it was completed, but the barracks can still be viewed today in a thoroughly restored Fort Orange.

Working for his homeland and the Netherlands, Fahlberg was an “innocuous Swede” whose maps, plans, and other images were inoffensive to but nevertheless of use to the greater powers of Spain, France, and Great Britain in the Caribbean. The quality of his cartography also helped to put the Dutch mapping of St. Martin and its nearby islands at least on a par with, if not over, that of the French and others for much of the remainder of the nineteenth century.

Biographical Note

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13Fahlberg, Samuel. “Plan Figurative Du Mole et Bassin la Rade De L’isle de St. Eustache. levé par Samuel Fahlberg 1828” and untitled drawing (1828). Copies of both of these images are to be found in the St. Eustatius Historical Foundation Museum in Oranjestad; the originals are in the Algemeen Rijksarchief, first section, in The Hague. I am especially thankful to the “guides” at the Museum and to Dorothy F. van Zanten-Pole at the Census Office in Oranjestad for facilitating my research during my brief visit to St. Eustatius.


15For example, a crucial Dutch map of the later nineteenth century seems to have been the Kaart van het eiland St. Martin (Amsterdam and Utrecht: 1883) by Dr. I. Dornseiffen, a copy of which can be found in the Universiteitsbibliotheek, Amsterdam. “All present maps are based on this first map which is almost completely correct.” Speetjens, Jose. 2002. St. Martin Yesterday and Today. Phillipsburg: Foundation History of St. Martin, 2002, 184. Also, see: Reinhartz, 164.

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