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ABSTRACT

Designed for use by intermediate and junior high school students, this paper gives first-hand information on the U.S. territory of the Virgin Islands. Material is divided into five sections. An introduction outlines the basic geographic, economic, social, and educational characteristics of the territory. Separate sections then focus on each of three islands of the Virgin Islands: St. Thomas, St. Croix, and St. John. For each island, an account is provided of its history, culture, economy, and educational system. A final section describes a cultural and recreational trip to British Virgin Gorda, a nearby island. (LP)

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A Venture into the Vibrant Virgin Islands

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ABSTRACT

A VENTURE INTO THE VIBRANT VIRGIN ISLANDS

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Since the subject of the Virgin Islands has been confined to very little attention in social studies textbooks, this paper gives first-hand and in-depth information about one of the territories of the United States. Detailed and interesting facts are given about the three main islands, St. Thomas, St. Croix and St. John, as well as the British Virgin Gorda. The history, the culture and education are dealt with separately for each island, since each is unique and interesting in itself.

A VENTURE INTO THE VIBRANT VIRGIN ISLANDS

Introduction

Welcome to a little known part of your country, the Virgin Islands. Thanks to the usual scant two pages devoted to these islands in social studies textbooks, most of us never learned much about our territories. They constitute an unincorporated territory of the U.S.A. and consist of 40 islands and cays, the largest and most populated being St. Croix, St. Thomas and St. John.

The islands were claimed in the name of Spain in 1493 by Columbus who named them "Las Virgines" in honor of Ste. Ursula and her 11,000 martyred virgins. Although the flags of seven nations have flown over the islands at different times, Denmark owned them from the middle of the 18th century until they were bought in 1917 by the United States for \$25,000,000 because of their strategic position.

In the islands a blend of European, Caribbean and American culture exists. The population of the three islands totals 100,000 with 26,000 students pursuing an education at all levels. Tourism is the main industry but hostility exists in the minds of some of the islanders towards their visitors. Educators are examining their problem and attempting to bring about a more accepting attitude since it is such an important part of the economy. Natural resources such as minerals or oil are lacking, so the people mainly depend upon the harbor, sand and sea. Unemployment currently stands at 9%.

Formal education had a low priority during the Danish colonization beginning in 1672. By 1697, Lutheran missionaries had organized schools. However, it was the Moravian missionaries, beginning with Leonard Cober and David Nitschmann, who began missionary work and education of the slaves.

Free, compulsory and universal education was not available to all until the middle of the nineteenth century. Private and parochial schools were provided government aid, a tradition unquestioned by many today.

In the beginning, schools were only for elementary students and reading was the most important subject. In 1917, a teacher's average salary was \$16.00 per month. Secondary schools were not provided for all students until 1935. The single school district of the Virgin Islands was administratively divided, each with its own superintendent, St. Thomas and St. John making one district and St. Croix the other.

A significant curriculum and instruction program, "Project Introspection", serves a unique function in the schools. Its purpose is to preserve the history and culture of the Virgin Islands through an important role in the school curriculum. It is an attempt to teach an appreciation for the history, culture, music, art, folklore, customs, dance, dishes and traditions for a multi-racial, multi-cultural and diverse population.

St. Thomas Island

Scenery is striking from upper elevations and around the water with colors being bright. They range from unusual blues and greens of the water to green hills and colorful flowers, fish and birds.

Coral World has one of only two underwater observation towers in the world. The marine park is open to the sea. The circular reef tank allows visitors to view coral and fishlife. Nearby Coki Beach has many snorkelers viewing the same kinds of fish and coral formations.

Dress within town and school is noticeably neat and attractive. Tourists find that beach attire worn in town or residential areas would offend local people. Bare chests or midriffs are frowned upon except in beach areas.

Food choices ranged from open air cafes with international menus to more formal French restaurants. Frenchtown is a section of town where many restaurants are available, including the Chart House. Local food was served at the College of the Virgin Islands at a special luncheon. Dishes included fungi (foon-gee), a staple made of cornmeal and okra, and maubi, a local drink made from ginger, herbs, sugar, and bark. Soursop ice cream is a local favorite. Fresh fruit included mangoes, coconuts, bananas, and pineapple. The Market Square is where people come from all over the island in the early morning to buy and sell fruit and vegetables.

Transportation in the islands is usually by taxi. Rates are for destination rather than mileage, with rates set by Virgin Islands law. Taxis are available for tours of the islands. Traffic keeps to the left on all four islands as a carry over from Danish rule. A high-speed ferryboat and seaplane are popular ways to travel among the islands.

History and Culture of the Island

Each island has its own culture, history and traditions. Birds, plants and weather also vary. First residents in the islands were the peaceful Arawak Indians and the warlike Caribs, reported to be cannibals by Columbus. Trade routes brought African slaves westward to the colonies and returned molasses and rum to Europe. Adventurous pirates like Blackbeard, Bluebeard and Captain Kidd were attracted to the bounty. Bluebeard built a castle on St. Thomas overlooking the harbor. This is now a fine hotel in Charlotte Amalie, the capital of the Virgin Islands and only city on St. Thomas.

Education in the Virgin Islands stresses both the influence of the Arawak Indians and the African tribal traditions. Music ranges from calypso to reggae

to folk rock. Limbo dances and steel combos are local favorites. A scratch band with recycled instruments such as a conch shell horn can still be found.

Carnival in St. Thomas takes place right after Easter in the form of an elaborate festival. Origins go back to Africa. The ritual dances have been redirected by Christian practices into Carnival as it exists today. Parades with costumed bands and the steel band performers are joined by the Mocko Jumbos on their 17 foot stilts.

Natural materials with a tropical flavor and colors that reflect the scenery are locally silkscreened in the Jim Tillett Gardens. Craft studios, an art gallery and boutique reflect island influences. Visitors to Jim Tillett's are warmly welcomed to browse and may observe craftspeople during the week as they work. Locally printed fabric is for sale. Lovely dolls are carefully sewn by hand by elderly local ladies and dressed in the colorful fabrics.

Education

A typical school is Dober School, built in 1933 near Market Square and named after a Moravian missionary. Students wear uniforms of pink shirts and grey skirts or pants in this public school. Female teachers and males dressed neatly. Lovely programs are planned by the students featuring folklore, dance and music.

The art teacher discussed her experiences in Dober School for the past five years. Her art exhibit of student work from grades K-6 included lovely examples of batik pieces. One problem with teaching was the power outages in the middle of projects. Not only does the electricity go off regularly leaving the lights and power out but the water also stops pumping.

Artists and art educators face problems in securing art materials and equipment when almost everything must be imported to the islands at added expense.

Another well-known school is Sts. Peter and Paul Grammar and High School, which has a minor problem of keeping teachers in the islands.

The goals of all the schools are to prepare the students for employment after high school graduation. Curriculum needs a closer look to help students fit into jobs. "Are we educating them for jobs that do not exist?" is a question that needs to be addressed. Some problems have arisen in the islands with a sudden growth in numbers of students over the past few years. Basically, the same publications are used in teaching as in the U.S. since the philosophy and historic traditions of education are American.

St. John Island

St. John, with 19 square miles, is the smallest of the three main Virgin Islands. St. Thomas and St. John are combined into one school district and municipal council. Together with the council from St. Croix, these comprise the legislative assembly for the Virgin Islands and meet in the capital, Charlotte Amalie.

An interesting sight remaining on St. John is the Annaberg Sugar Mill, originally covering 518 acres. Annaberg appeared first on a map of 1780 as one of the then 25 active sugar-producing factories on St. John. Situated on a high hill, Annaberg was named for the young daughter of a planter-owner from St. Thomas. Molasses and rum also were produced here.

History of the Island

Danes, Dutchmen, and slaves from the Danish colony on St. Thomas settled in St. John in 1717. Twenty years later 88 working estates or "plantages"

were established. Some cotton, tobacco and indigo were grown but sugar was king.

Much hard work went into clearing and terracing the wooded, rock hillsides under the hot Caribbean sun. Maturity for sugar cane came in 12-18 months. Then the slaves had to harvest and process the crop quickly before it soured.

Without slave labor such farming would have been financially impossible. After the Danes freed their slaves in July 1848, sugar, molasses, and rum production disappeared from St. John by 1916. Subsistence farming followed and continues today.

Annaberg Sugar Mill is now a part of our National Park Service, which attempts to preserve superlative scenic, scientific and historical places of national significance. These are preserved, unchanged for us and future generations to enjoy. A tour of the Mill reminds us of a time that no living person remembers. The hillsides were used for grazing cattle, sheep, goats, horses, and donkeys and continue so today. Some inhabitants made lime mortar from coral chunks, charcoal from the thorny shrub, Acacia, and fishermen wove hoop vine pots and harvested lunch.

It is difficult to imagine all the slopes at Annaberg covered with cane which slaves cut with a short handled knife. If a steady wind blew, the cane was taken to the windmill to be crushed. Juice ran down the rollers to the gutter and on to the factory. The windmill, one of only five on St. John, was among the largest in the islands, being 34 feet in diameter and 38 feet high.

Since the wind was not always dependable, in calm weather cane stalks were crushed on a circular horse mill. Three to five hundred gallons of juice could be produced per hour. When we consider how much work went into boiling

the juice, we realize that planters counted a pound of sugar from a gallon of raw juice as a good recovery. A large oven remains where most of the estate's bread was baked. Similar ovens are still used on St. John.

The building materials consisted of field stone set with a mortar consisting of sand, fresh water, molasses, and lime fired from sea shells and coral. Bricks, which came into the area as ship ballast, and brain coral were used for arches and corners.

A rum still located here was called "kill devil", probably to appease the missionaries working on the island.

Enjoyable transportation around the island is provided in safara taxis, open-air vehicles accommodating 25 passengers. Numerous stops for spectacular views and panoramas of white coral sand beaches and quiet coves left us with an awed and restful feeling. We examined many types of trees, such as the kapok, used in making filling for coats; the sandbox, or monkey-no-climb tree, where the trunk is lined with outgrowths making climbing impossible; and the deadly poisonous manchineel tree that bears apples. Termite nests were as large as bushel baskets. The flamboyant tree, with its fantastic orange blossoms, the frangipani, the genip and the sugar apple, as well as lime trees brought here 400 years ago, abound in profusion.

Education on the Island

On St. John, a typical school is the Cuy Benjamin Elementary School, unique in that its cafeteria and some classrooms were open-air since the temperature in the Virgin Island averages 79° year round. Again, the teachers were friendly and eager to discuss school situations. The walls were decorated with colorful murals painted by the children. It was

interesting to see their milk, chocolate and white, served in floppy plastic sacks because of the lack of much refrigeration.

More than one-half of the land and most of the colorful shoreline waters were set aside as the Virgin Islands National Park. Located in it is Cinnamon Bay where tents, cottages and bare sites are available. Close by is the famous Trunk Bay, a superb seascape. Rocky coastlines alternate with gleaming white-sand beaches, blue skies and turquoise and green water. Pollution is almost unheard of here, so the waters are clear and iridescent.

St. Croix Island

St. Croix is reached by Seaplane Shuttle, which moves off a ramp into the Caribbean and then takes off from and lands on the water. St. Croix is the largest of the Virgin Islands, containing 82 square miles. Located here are the only two towns on the island, Christiansted and Frederiksted, settled in the 1770s by Danes. Alexander Hamilton worked as a young clerk in Christiansted before going to America. It was in Frederiksted that Governor General Peter Van Scholten emancipated the slaves in the Danish West Indies on July 3, 1848 - after they had burned the sugar cane fields across the island. Driving is still on the left, and this may be the only U.S. highway where driving on the left is the law.

There are 15 acres of rain forest which is filled with mahogany trees, yellow cedar, and Tibet trees (also called "Mothers Tongue" because of the pods that rustle in the wind). The air is filled with the scent of many island fruits, and also the call of mountain doves.

History of the Island

A restoration of one of the finest greathouses, similar to our southern plantations, from the late 1700s can be viewed at the Whim Greathouse. There

you will enter a most unusual three-room home made of stone, coral and molasses, designed to resemble luxurious chateaus of Europe, modified with the practicalities of tropical living. Imagine if you can the prosperity and hardship, history and folklore of this sugar cane plantation.

Sugar and rum reigned supreme at the time the house was built. Slaves performed menial labor and many buildings remain a memorial to the plantation workers who built them. Surrounding the greathouse are many interesting structures, such as the cookhouse where small fires were built in compartments and the food cooked in small pots on the forerunner of the four-burner stove. Johnny cakes, a tasty island treat, are still being baked in the cookhouse for tourists. Here we saw "gooses", heavy irons shaped like a goose that used hot coals in the base and were used to press long flat linens.

There was the bathhouse where the residents took infrequent baths, probably in cold water. In the watch house, an early version of a day-care center, in the 1700 and 1800s an old woman watched newborns until their mothers, working in the nearby fields, came to nurse their infants. Other buildings are mills, a windmill, steam mill, sugar factory and pot still.

The fine examples of Danish colonial furniture, china, paintings and documents in the home included a mahogany bed with a coconut husk mattress and a "boot" chair in which the owner would lie back and have a slave pull off his boots.

Education

On St. Croix the Curriculum Center is located in a new million dollar building. Island curriculum directors of subject matter areas are alert, intelligent, and dedicated to providing the best materials and teaching

techniques to teachers in their particular special areas. On St. Croix there are 2000 high school and 1400 junior high school students. The school year consists of 180 days. The people speak mainly English Creole or Crucian, the speech of St. Croix.

While lunching at the Queen's Quarter Hotel on lush Peppertree Hill at another of the popular open-air dining rooms, we were introduced to the sugar bird, which flies down to the tables to eat sugar packets unless covering is provided. These birds resemble the goldfinch of the States.

British Virgin Gorda

The British Virgin Gorda trip was a cultural and recreational experience. We left St. Thomas on the Bomba Charger - a high speed ferry with either our Passports or Voter Registration cards.

The 2 1/2 hour trip involved several stops. One local craftsperson was kind enough before getting off at Tortola to demonstrate making the basketlike coverings for Virgin Islands Perfume. Now she produces 80 woven pieces a day for 20¢ each or about \$16 per day. Her daughter was unable to begin or end the rather intricate process but did assist with the other stages of weaving. The old crafts tend to die out as each generation loses patience or motivation to continue these traditions. The fact that a craft is marketable also influences its survival and directions in which it develops.

An open-air bus on Virgin Gorda transported us to the Baths. There is much open country with people leisurably moving along the dirt roads. The landscape was desert-like on this side of the island with cacti, prickly pear and golden century plants.

The Baths were reached by climbing down a winding path to arrive at the narrow white beach with giant boulders both edging it and in the water. These formations are left by volcanoes or ice flows which formed the dimly-lit grottos. The ethereal sea caves and unique rock formations are explored by many each day.

We met a lady who had lived here six months. She had built a home which was energy efficient and paid only \$20 per year in taxes. However, few services were available to the residents.

Snorkeling in the crystal clear water to observe coral and fish of many colors is available. Bareboats are also available for those who wish to sail by themselves. Windsurfing is a new sport in the 80's with people of all ages.

Conclusion

When we were returning to the Harry S. Truman airport for our flight home, we realized that a tourist could see only the surface of this beautiful place, like the shoppers off the many cruise ships anchored in the harbor. The week was more of an adventure and education for those of us who learned about local customs and culture as we toured the schools and islands.