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THE VIRGIN ISLANDS OF THE UNITED STATES

By THEODOOR DE BOOY

Museum of the American Indian, Heye Foundation

After a kaleidoscopic career, unrivaled even by the ups and downs of other Antillean islands, the passing of the Danish West Indies to the rule of the United States probably marks the last change of ownership of this little group.

On his second voyage in November, 1493, Columbus sailed through the island group, which he named the Virgin Islands in honor of St. Ursula and the Eleven Thousand Virgins of the Catholic calendar. The islands were then populated by fierce Indian tribes, who resented the invasion of their shores and gave battle to the Spaniards. In fact, the first pitched battle in the Americas took place on the island of St. Croix, when the natives fearlessly attacked the landing party despatched in search of water to replenish the supply on the caravels. Men and women alike defended their shores against the invaders, and, while their crude weapons were of little effect against the defensive armor of the Spaniards, at least one of the soldiers of Columbus died from a wound inflicted by a poisoned arrow. One would almost believe that the Indians had a prophetic vision of the future annihilation of their race under the Spanish rule that was to follow.

For a considerable time after the discovery of the islands in 1493, no records speak of European settlement upon them. A century later, indeed, the Earl of Cumberland describes the islands as being "wholly uninhabited, sandy, barren, and craggy." The fate of the original population is surmised without difficulty. In the first decades of the sixteenth century it was a common practice for the governors of the nearby island of Hispaniola to send raiding expeditions to the Bahamas and other islands to supply the crying need for laborers in the gold mines of Santo Domingo. One is led to think that the Indians of the Virgin Islands were exterminated by these means. In fact, we know of a decree of Charles V proclaiming that the Virgin Islanders were to be treated as enemies and exterminated.

It was not until about 1625, so far as can be determined from the somewhat hazy records, that St. Croix was temporarily settled by a few colonists of Dutch and English nationality, and it is likely that St. Thomas and St. John also were occupied about this time. The usual strife marks this colonization, and it was not long before the Spaniards, ever jealous of other settlers in what they considered their lawful domains, put an end to the Dutch and English colonies of St. Croix by the simple means of massacring the inhabitants. Shortly after this the French made a more successful and lasting colonization of St. Croix and were able to repel the

Spanish attempts to drive them away. With some other islands, St. Croix was sold to the Knights of Malta in 1653, but was abandoned by the French settlers in 1695. The island remained practically uninhabited until 1733, when it was purchased from the French Government by King Christian VI of Denmark and was joined to the local government of the islands of St. Thomas and St. John. It continued under the Danish flag until 1801,

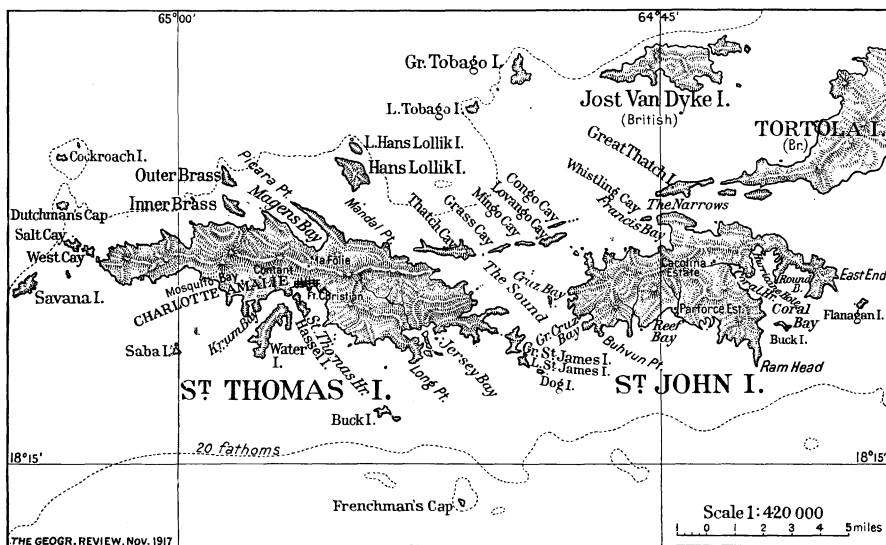


FIG. 1.—Sketch-map of the islands of St. Thomas and St. John. Scale, 1:420,000. Based on Danish Admiralty Chart No. 205, edition of 1914, and U.S. Hydrographic Office Charts Nos. 1002 and 965, dated 1886.

when the islands were taken by the British forces. Restored to Denmark in 1802, the islands were again captured by the British in 1807 and were held by them until 1815, when Denmark once more took possession.

The vicissitudes of the islands of St. Thomas and St. John, while not so varied as those of St. Croix, were also startling. After the temporary occupation in 1625 by a few Dutch colonists, the islands do not appear in the public eye until the year 1671, when the Danish West India and Guinea Company of Copenhagen took possession of St. Thomas. This prosperous company was directly responsible for the subsequent welfare of St. Thomas, and through it the harbor of St. Thomas first derived its commercial importance and from it St. John was permanently settled in 1717. Outside of a few unpleasant visits by buccaneers and a negro revolt on St. John, the two islands enjoyed a period of comparative quiet and considerable, if fluctuating, prosperity until 1801, when they were captured by the British. From this date on, the history of St. Thomas and St. John is the same as the history of St. Croix.¹

¹ See Waldemar Westergaard: *The Danish West Indies under Company Rule (1671-1754)*, New York, 1917. Reviewed in this number of the *Review*, under "Geographical Publications," below.

The most interesting historical relation of the Danish West Indies after 1815—their relation with the United States—is well known. In 1865 the United States offered the Danish Government the sum of \$5,000,000 for the islands, which offer was increased to \$7,500,000 two years later. The treaty providing for their purchase was ratified by the Danish parliament but for various political reasons was cancelled by the government at

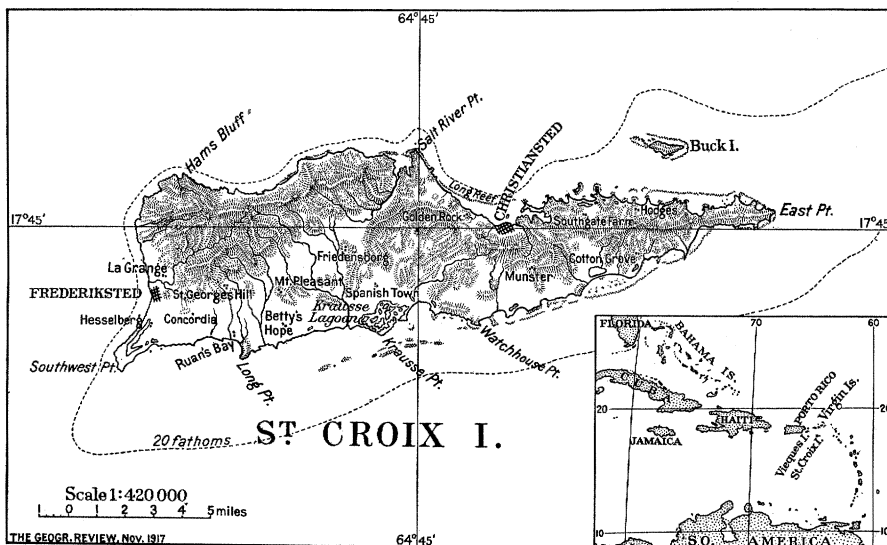


FIG. 2—Sketch-map of the island of St. Croix. Scale, 1:420,000. Based on U. S. Hydrographic Office Charts Nos. 1002, dated 1886, and 1423, dated 1894. The relation of Figures 1 and 2 may be established by noting that the meridian of $64^{\circ} 45'$ W. cuts both St. John and St. Croix and that the latter lies about 40 miles due south of the former. The general location of the Virgin Islands is shown on the inset.

Washington. Again, in 1902 Denmark was offered \$5,000,000 for the islands, and, had it not been for German influence in the upper house of the Danish legislature, the sale would probably have been consummated. It was not until January 17, 1917, that the islands were finally sold to the United States. The sum paid was \$25,000,000; and the actual transfer to the United States Government took place on March 31, 1917, when the Stars and Stripes finally replaced the Dannebrog. It was decided by the United States Government to name the acquired territory the Virgin Islands of the United States, and they are now officially known by this name. It may be pointed out, however, that the southernmost island, St. Croix, in reality was not one of the Virgin Island group as named by Columbus.²

While negotiations between the United States and Denmark regarding the sale of the islands were in progress, considerable doubt was expressed by the general public as to their value as an investment. The argument

² Nor does it belong to the group physically (see note in the March, 1917, *Review*, p. 242).—EDIT. NOTE.

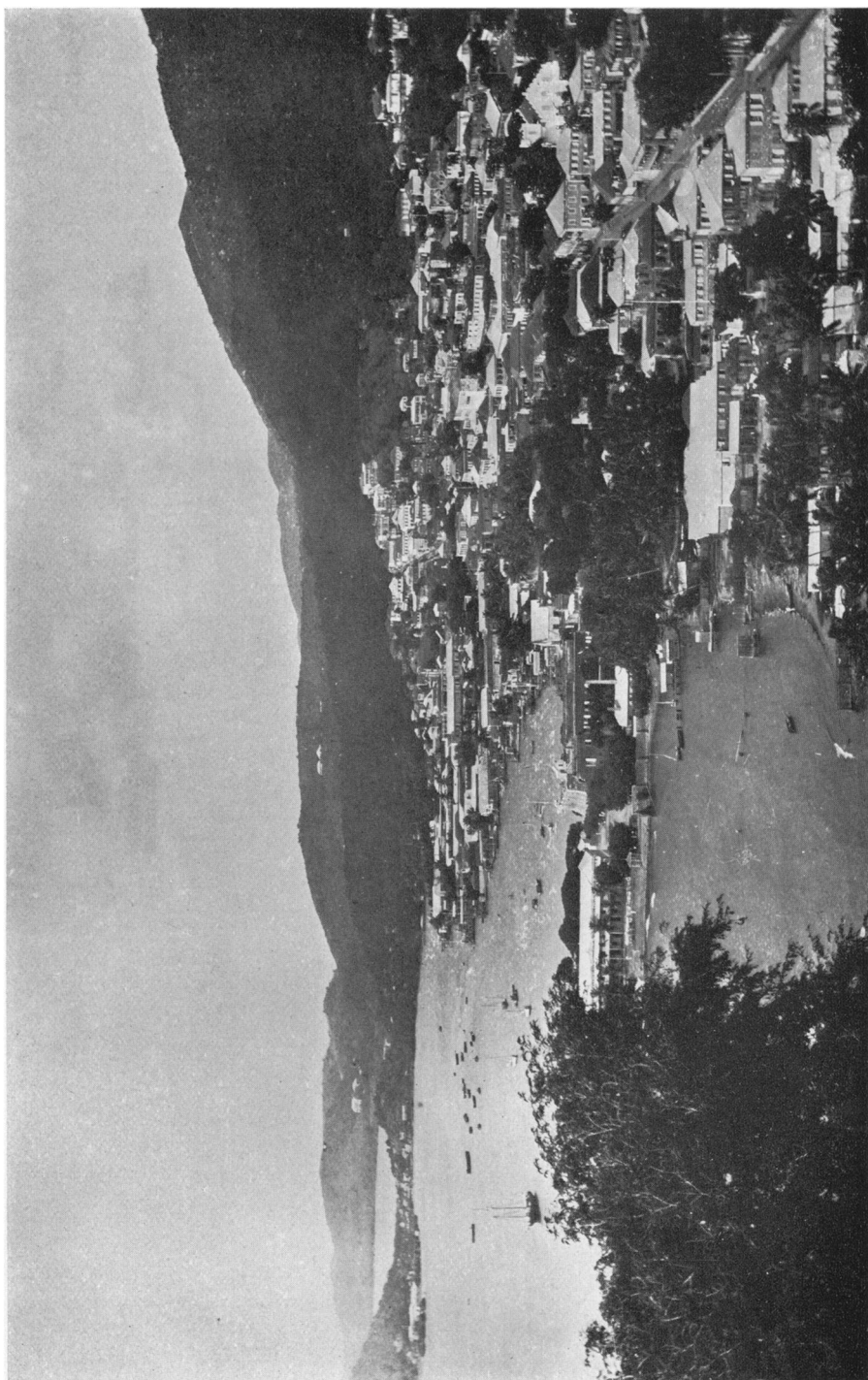


FIG. 3.—View of Charlotte Amalie, St. Thomas, looking west from the Frederiksberg. (Photo by Clarence Taylor.)

was advanced that, with the exception of St. Croix, the islands were practically non-productive, and one periodical went so far as to ask its readers if \$25,000,000 was not too high a price to pay for a bay rum factory. This latter remark, of course, pertained to St. John, where bay rum is produced.

Whatever may be the intrinsic worth of the islands, there can be no doubt that St. Thomas has an incalculable strategic value, and that its possession is of the greatest protection to the Panama Canal in the event of hostilities with any European Power. It lies directly in the steamer routes between European ports and the Canal Zone, and a fleet stationed in the adjacent waters, with the wonderful harbor of St. Thomas available for repairs and supplies, could dominate the approaches to the Caribbean. This fact appears to have been overlooked by those who considered that too high a price was paid for the islands.

It must of course be admitted that their mere commercial importance did not warrant so large an amount. Nevertheless they have considerable commercial value. What their resources are will be shown in the following pages, and, as the three islands are totally different in their productions, it will be necessary to discuss each island separately.

ST. THOMAS

St. Thomas, the westernmost island of the group, is the second largest: it measures fourteen miles in length from east to west, and is from one to three miles broad. In reality it is nothing but a curved mountain ridge whose highest elevation is 1,550 feet. The island has a population of about 10,000, of which by far the greater part are negroes. Much could be written of its people: of their amiability, of their kindness and hospitality to strangers, and of their pride in their little island. It is undoubtedly a great satisfaction to the United States that the inhabitants of St. Thomas were practically unanimous in their desire to be transferred from the Danish Government to that of Washington, and the rejoicing when the actual transfer took place was great. For, while the St. Thomians had no reason to complain of the treatment accorded them by the Danes, it was always felt that Denmark was a long way off and that in consequence a long time had to elapse before the sanction of the home government could be obtained for any change that might be desirable. Furthermore, owing to the proximity to the United States and because of the numerous American vessels that have been coming to the port of St. Thomas for coaling or other purposes, the working classes of the island are familiar with Americans and American methods. As a consequence of all this, it is not probable that the change of government will cause much dissatisfaction among the islanders or that it will be long before the St. Thomians become accustomed to the new régime.

The mountain ridge which forms the island curves northward in the

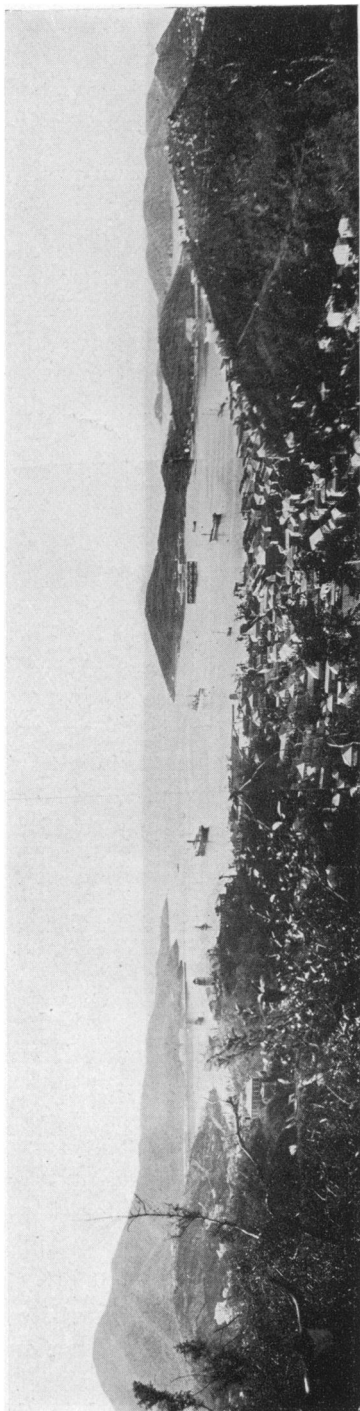


FIG. 4—Panoramic view of St. Thomas harbor and town of Charlotte Amalia, looking southward. (All photos, except Figs. 3 and 8, by the author.)

middle, leaving a corresponding basin on the south coast. It is this basin which forms the excellent harbor of Charlotte Amalia, as the town of St. Thomas is named. This harbor is unexcelled in the West Indies with the exception of Coral Bay on St. John. It offers complete protection to the largest ships, and the numerous inlets and smaller bays lend themselves admirably to the purposes of a naval base; large men-of-war may lie in the harbor itself, and smaller vessels, such as torpedo boats and supply ships, can take up positions in the inlets. With fortifications on the hills and mines in the approach to the harbor absolute safety may be insured.

Charlotte Amalia has about 8,000 inhabitants, who are mostly employed as stevedores and coal-passers upon the vessels that visit the port. Much has been written of the former commercial importance of St. Thomas when the island served as an entrepôt for the trade of practically the entire Windward Island group of the Caribbean. Upon the advent of direct steamer lines to the various islands the locational advantage waned, and St. Thomas lost a great deal of its prosperity. It is the common belief that now that the island is part of the United States some of its former prosperity will return and that the semi-deserted warehouses and docks will resound with the bustle of an increasing commerce.

The loss of commercial prestige had been preceded by the decline of agriculture, which, with the abolition of slavery, practically ceased to exist on the island. In the old days, when labor was inexpensive, sugar was raised in large quantities. This is attested by the ruins of old plantation buildings as well as by

trade figures. Many of these buildings picture the glory of the olden times, when the hospitality of the planters and their luxurious way of living were a by-word, and a ride through the island, with its views of ruined windmills and massively built mansions, is one of the interesting experiences of a visit to St. Thomas. Though a revival of profitable agriculture would not appear to be probable, much of the land could be used for the raising of cattle, for which there is always an active market.

One of the points of interest to tourists is the shipyard in Krum Bay to the westward of Charlotte Amalia. It is here that most of the vessels putting into St. Thomas harbor in distress, and afterwards condemned and sold by the insurance underwriters, are broken up. Krum Bay, in consequence, is generally spoken of as the graveyard of ships, and the owner boasts of the possession of a large number of the figureheads with which the old sailing vessels were decorated. These figureheads present a somewhat startling appearance when first seen; especially startling were they after the hurricane of October, 1916, when they lay scattered over the grounds in erratic confusion.

Automobiles are unknown on St. Thomas, as there are no roads upon which they can be used. Even carriages can go but limited distances, for the roads rapidly narrow to mountain trails, and even in the town itself there are many streets on the hillsides where a carriage cannot pass. Many of the streets are mere stone stairways, each having a big stone gutter, or "gut" as it is called in Charlotte Amalia, alongside, to carry off the water from the upper parts of the town.

The old Fort Christian, which in its later days was used as a police station and local prison, is one of the sights which no tourist to St. Thomas should miss. It is far more interesting than the so-called Bluebeard's and Blackbeard's castles usually recommended in the guide books. That it has but small strategic importance may be inferred from a complaint made by a certain Governor Iversen to one Carl Baggaert, who happened to be building a house in the year 1674. In this complaint the Governor said: "It is not advantageous to the Fort that Baggaert built his house so much higher than the Fort, insomuch that everyone who comes to him can completely overlook it." This interesting commentary, however, need not mar the visitor's enjoyment of Fort Christian; it is well worth viewing, and its cells and battlements testify to the solid methods of construction in the old days.

Nor should the tourist neglect to hire a horse and ride over the hills to the north side of the island. The ascent from Charlotte Amalia to Ma Folie, as the estate on the crest of the 1,500-foot hill is called, is startling in its abruptness. Standing on the crest, one sees to the south the town of Charlotte Amalia nestling on the slopes below and the wonderful harbor with its ships of all nationalities, its bright red fort, its floating dry dock, and all its other picturesque features. To the north one sees the

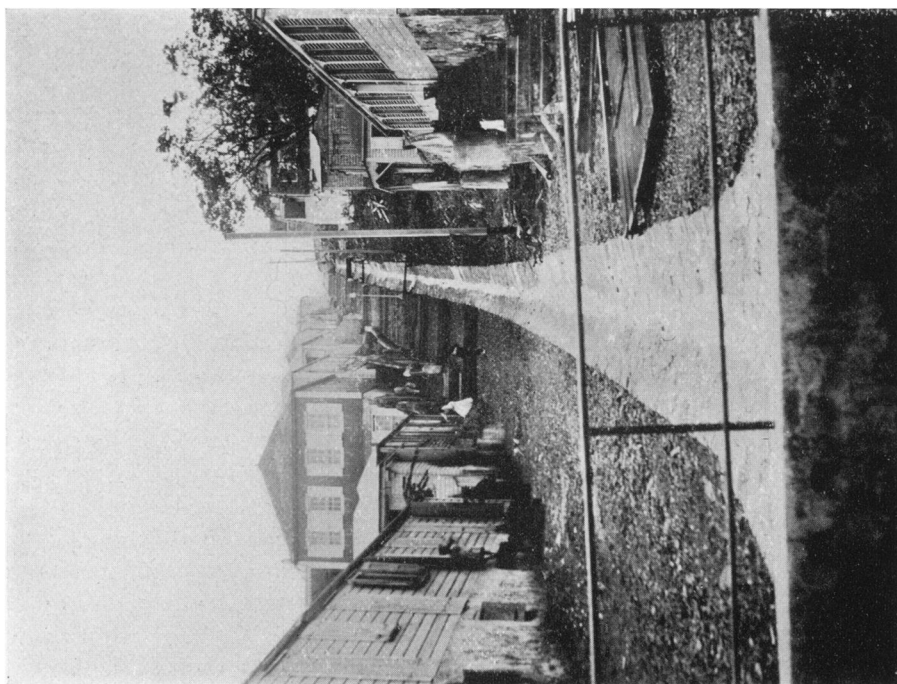


Fig. 5—Steep street with steps and gutter, Charlotte Amalia, St. Thomas.

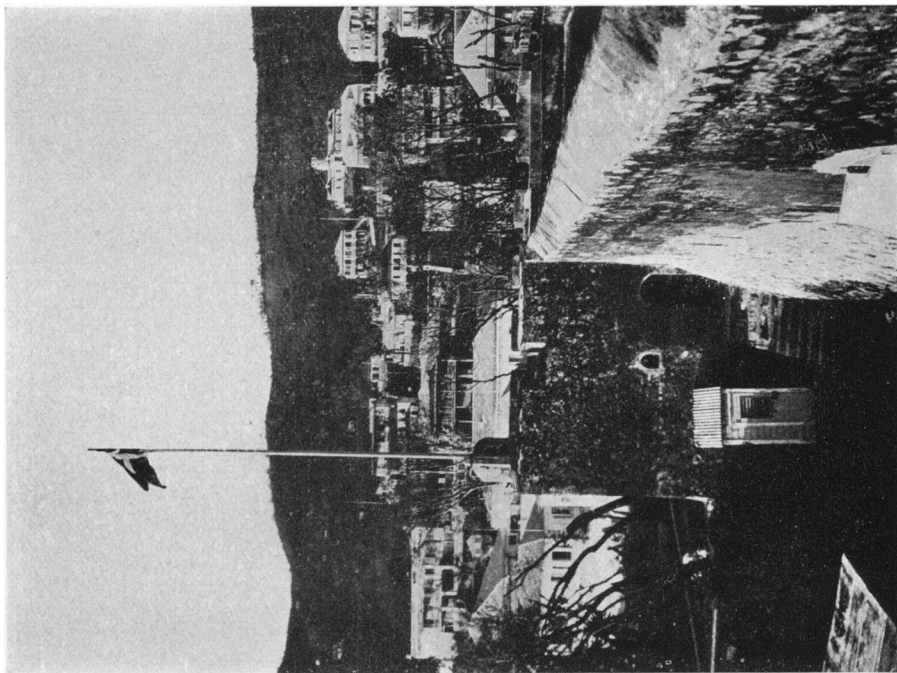


Fig. 6—Battlements of Fort Christian, Charlotte Amalia, St. Thomas.

small islands of Inner Brass and Outer Brass, Hans Lollik, the British island Jost Van Dyke, and the deep inlet known as Magen's Bay, perhaps the prettiest bay in the Antilles. To the west one sees Crab Island, Culebra Island, and far-off Porto Rico. To the east, the island of St. John is clearly visible, and glimpses may be had of Tortola and all the other British islands of the Virgin group. Far off to the southward on clear days one can even make out the mountains of St. Croix.

The climate of the Virgin Islands is excellent, that of St. Thomas being perhaps the best. The nights are cool enough to allow one to sleep under a light blanket, and the days are very far from being oppressively hot. As a result, the inhabitants are healthy, and epidemics are rare.

ST. JOHN

The island of St. John, lying about three miles east of St. Thomas, is a little smaller in area than the latter. It is nine miles long and has an irregular breadth. The highest elevation is 1,300 feet, and, like St. Thomas, the whole island is hilly. The population consists of but 900 souls, and these lead a somewhat precarious and poverty-stricken existence.

St. John might well be termed the Cinderella of the Virgin Islands. If the average geographer be asked the name of the newly acquired Virgin Islands, he will reply: "St. Thomas, St. Croix," then pause and after deep thought add, "St. John." Published accounts of these additions to the territory of the United States make lengthy mention of the island of St. Thomas and its commercial and strategical importance, and of St. Croix with its agricultural possibilities, but dismiss St. John with a scant line or two telling of its bay trees and the poverty of its inhabitants.

The possibilities of exploiting St. John are great, however. In the first place, the bay tree flourishes on the little island. It has been found by actual experience that the bay tree is somewhat erratic and is most particular as to its habitat. Attempts have been made to grow this tree in various islands, and practically all attempts were failures. Even on St. John, small as it is, it seems that the trees do well in certain parts and are unable to gain a foothold in others. Why this is so has never been satisfactorily explained. But even with this drawback, there are today many regions on St. John where extensive cultivation of the bay tree would be highly profitable. The leaves of the bay tree are gathered and are distilled in the usual copper stills. This distillation results in the collecting of the natural oil, the bay oil, contained in the minute cells of the leaves. The bay oil is mixed with white rum in the ratio of about one quart of oil to five hundred quarts of rum, and the product is bay rum. Occasionally bay rum is made by distilling the bay leaves directly in the rum; but this method is slower and far more expensive and has practically been discontinued. The bay industry, therefore, presents one of the possibilities of St. John. While various proprietors are at present engaged in the cultiva-

tion of the trees and the distilling of the oil, there can be no doubt but that a greater exploitation of this industry would result in material benefit, especially if modern machinery for collecting the oil were employed.

Again, St. John offers great possibilities as a cattle-raising center. Perhaps no better-watered island exists in the Antilles. As a consequence, while the ground is generally steep and hilly, the slopes are covered with excellent grass of all varieties and offer feeding-grounds for thousands of heads of cattle. At the present time cattle raising seems to be neglected by practically the majority of the landowners. There can be no doubt that owing to the increased population of the neighboring island of St. Thomas through the prospective establishment of a naval station there, and also owing to the fact that no duty would have to be paid on cattle exported to Porto Rico now that the islands are under the same government, a ready market would be found for all cattle raised on St. John. St. Thomas can in no wise compare with St. John for pasturage or for water supply, and St. Croix is practically entirely given up to sugar cultivation,

The waters surrounding the numerous small keys that encircle St. John literally swarm with fish of all species. Perhaps no better fishing-grounds can be found in the Antilles than those between St. John and the keys to the westward, Congo Cay, Lovango Cay, Mingo Cay, and Grass Cay. For all that, there is practically always an unsatisfied demand for fresh fish in Charlotte Amalia. The demand for fish will naturally increase in the future. What, then, could be a more profitable investment than a suitable fishing-boat with a motor auxiliary? It could find a safe harbor in any one of the numerous bays of St. John, and with this island as a center could fish the surrounding waters and carry the catch to the St. Thomas market.

With the advent of modern intensive methods, sugar-cane cultivation on St. John would be a failure. While ruined plantation buildings bear mute evidence to the fact that St. John, like St. Thomas, was at one time a considerable producer of sugar, this was in the days when sugar was high and labor was cheap. With modern methods, St. John with its steep roads and hills could not compete with sugar-plantations on islands where flat areas make the gathering of the cane an insignificant item of expense.

But if the production of sugar would not be a profitable enterprise, undoubtedly truck-farming would amply reward anyone going into it on a large scale. The raising of all sorts of vegetables in the West Indies is a possibility which is frequently and strangely overlooked. The consumption of canned vegetables by the well-to-do of these regions is quite large, and such small quantities of fresh vegetables as are raised are in eager demand at good prices. It is a common mistake to suppose that the tropics are not suited to the production of garden truck: indeed, tomatoes, lettuce, beans, melons, etc., not only thrive, when well watered, but bear more prolifically than in northern climates. The raising of these



FIG. 7.

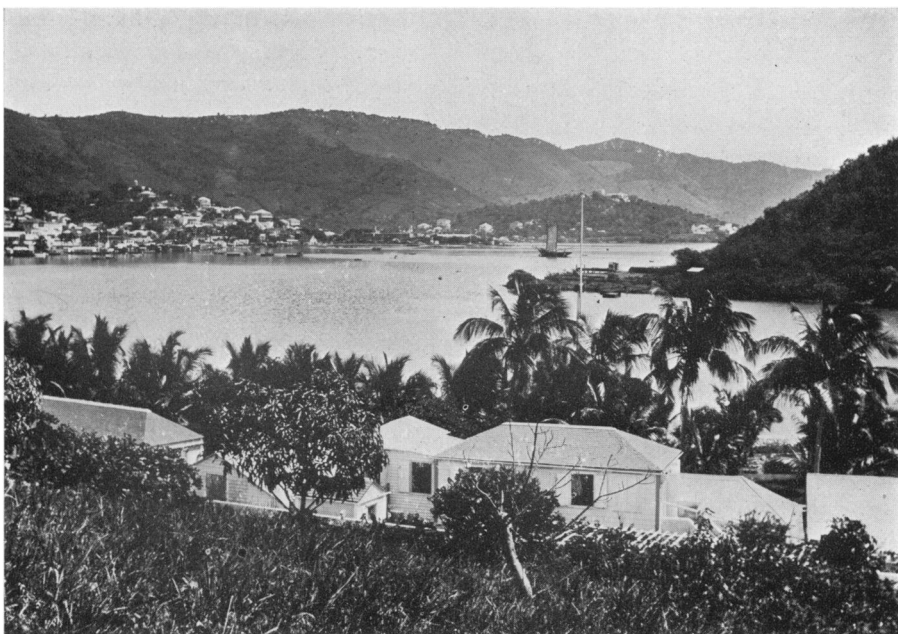


FIG. 8.

FIG. 7—Coral Bay, St. John. Tortola Island (British) in background. The white buildings are the Moravian Missionary settlement of Emmaus.

While Coral Bay, with its complete shelter from storms, its depth of water, and its numerous inlets, offers better facilities for a naval base than does St. Thomas harbor, its position with respect to the mountains of Tortola Island, upon which guns of heavy caliber could be mounted, would jeopardize the safety of a fleet.

FIG. 8—St. Thomas harbor looking eastward from foot of Careen Hill. (Photo by Clarence Taylor.)

on St. John would give employment to many, and a profitable market in St. Thomas would be assured.

It has been said that the acquisition of St. Thomas by the United States will mean an influx of travel and the erection of hotels. Here again St. John offers possibilities in many ways greater than those of St. Thomas. It is true that St. Thomas offers a busier outlook, and the ships that enter

its wonderful harbor are a constant attraction. But, on the other hand, while the scenery of St. Thomas is magnificent, that of St. John excels it. Climb any hilltop in St. John and look north, east, south, or west, and unrivaled views delight the eye. The surrounding islands, of a vivid green, seem to serve only to make the line of contrast between the pale blue sky and the dark blue sea more pronounced. Surely no other island in the Antilles offers views that can compare with these in natural beauty. Viewed from a hilltop the coloring of the surrounding bays ranges from a deep blue to a light green, limited on the one side by the white waves of

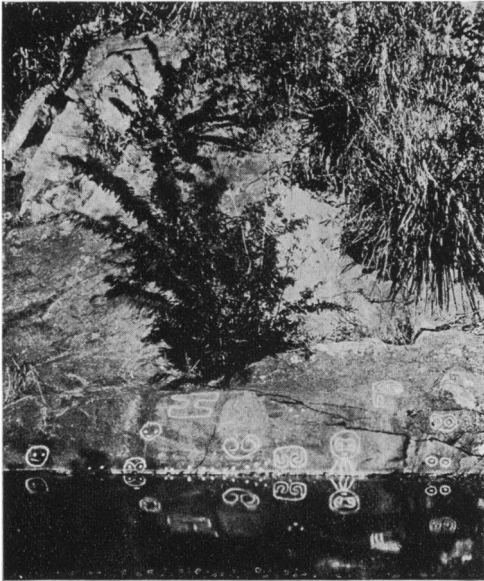


FIG. 9—Indian rock-carvings, Reef Bay, St. John.

the reef and on the other side by the cream-colored sands of the beach. If the tourist is searching for the picturesque, it is found in abundant measure in the ruins of the old plantation buildings, whose walls and quaint staircases still exist in the tropical undergrowth. Is the tourist a lover of bathing, boating, fishing, riding, or hunting? All these sports can be followed on St. John. Is he interested in folklore or in the monuments of an extinct race? Strange tales will be told him of the uprising of the slaves in 1733 and of the ghost of the murdered daughter of the owner of the "Carolina" estate that still haunts the ancient mansion. He will be told of the three hundred escaping slaves who, when capture was inevitable, jumped from a towering precipice rather than surrender and perhaps die under the lash. Or again, a trip to the waterfall of Reef Bay, where strange rock carvings of the Indian inhabitants can be found upon the large boulders surrounding the pool, may satisfy the tourist's longing for a novel experience. Is the tourist interested in Colonial furniture? A ride through the island with frequent halts at the small cabins and huts will assuredly reward him with a "find" or two to boast of in later years to admiring friends.

It will be seen, therefore, that St. John, the Cinderella of the Virgin Islands, has her charms and that the exploitation of the island would well repay the original outlay. A suitable tropical hotel built on St. John to entertain the sort of traveler who is content with what the country offers and does not insist upon imported food would be well patronized. Let a few young and energetic men, accustomed to the handling of West Indian laborers, start produce farms on the rich soil of St. John, and they would be certain of large returns. Let some capitalist stock a farm with a large number of cattle of a breed that will thrive in this climate, and he would be certain of a profitable investment. Let the bay tree industry be encouraged by having expert agronomists advise the planters as to the best methods of increasing the groves. When all this is done, it will be found that St. John, now only a name and a small speck on the map, will become as important as its more prosperous sisters to the west and the south.

ST. CROIX

St. Croix is the largest of the newly acquired islands and is 22 miles long and of irregular breadth. While the island has large flat plains, it also has one mountain ridge, the highest elevation of which is about 1,100 feet. The population consists of some 15,000 souls, the majority of whom are agricultural laborers.

St. Croix is the one agricultural possibility of the Virgin Islands. Its extensive and fertile plains make it especially well adapted for sugar cane cultivation, and those fields and hill slopes that are not given up to this purpose serve as pasturage for the numerous cattle that are used in the carts necessary for the transportation of the cane to the sugar mills. As a consequence St. Croix possesses very little waste land, and numerous large sugar factories dot the landscape with their huge chimneys.

The motoring possibilities of St. Croix are excellent, and the island boasts of many cars. A ride over one of the roads with its fringe of coconut trees is one of the delightful experiences lying in wait for the tourist. An automobile trip from Frederiksted, where all large steamers calling at the island anchor, to Christiansted, the seat of government, is a source of constant delight to the eye; and, while the wild magnificence of St. John is lacking, the more orderly landscapes of St. Croix are preferred by many.

St. Croix has two large towns, Frederiksted and Christiansted. Owing to the dangerous reef which shuts out the large ships, Christiansted is only visited by small sailing vessels and consequently does not exhibit the hustle and bustle so noticeable in Frederiksted on steamer days. On the other hand, Christiansted being the seat of government, its buildings are larger and more important-looking than those of Frederiksted and the inhabitants more sensible of their importance. Furthermore, Christiansted boasts of having been the home of Alexander Hamilton, and the inhabitants do not

fail to point out his abode to the visiting tourist. Both Christiansted and Frederiksted have the usual forts of a style of architecture not unlike that of Fort Christian on St. Thomas; they serve to remind the tourist of the glories of bygone times, when buccaneers, privateers, and other enemies made life interesting to the more peaceful inhabitants of the Antilles.

Perhaps the most advertised curiosity of the island of St. Croix and more particularly of the town of Christiansted is the old schooner, the *Vigilant*. No visitor is allowed to escape from the island without being told that the *Vigilant* was built in the year 1802 and served at times as a privateersman with letters of marque from the Danish Government and again at times as a Danish gunboat. Tales are told of the running fight she had, while in the latter capacity, with a Spanish gunboat in which the Spaniard came off second best. Then again the *Vigilant* served as a slave-carrier and transported human cargoes from island to island in the West Indies before slavery was abolished. Finally, in the destructive hurricane which swept over the Virgin Islands on October 9, 1916, the old vessel was wrecked inside the Christiansted reef. She was raised, however, and now serves in the humble capacity of cargo-carrier in the interinsular trade. The tourist, after hearing all this, naturally wonders how a vessel could have existed for such a long period, over one hundred and ten years, in West Indian waters, where the teredo worm works quick destruction for all woods exposed to the sea. Consequently, if questioned, the owner of the *Vigilant* will admit that parts of the vessel have occasionally been renewed, and, if hard pressed, will finally confess that the only original part of the first vessel remaining is a small eight-foot piece of the oak keel!

St. Croix has had a somewhat disturbed existence for the last century or so, owing to labor conditions. As in St. Thomas and St. John, the visitor will remark the numerous ruined estate houses. Their ruin, however, was not caused by the hand of time, but was mostly occasioned by the negro uprising of 1848, when the slaves under the leadership of one General Bourdeaux (colored) revolted and insisted upon being emancipated. Severer even than this revolt was the so-called laborers' riot in 1878, when innumerable plantations were burned to the ground and many of the planters totally ruined.

There is, even at the present time, considerable labor unrest on St. Croix. It must be said that not all of the blame rests on the laborers, and that the planters could go far, with the present prices of sugar, towards paying better wages to the negroes. However this may be, St. Croix promises to increase in prosperity under the new rule when St. Croix sugar will not have to pay the former high duty upon entrance to the United States.

In conclusion, a few words regarding the destructive hurricane which visited these islands on the night of October 9 to 10, 1916, may not be amiss. Anyone familiar with West Indian literature becomes imbued with

the idea that hurricanes of the most destructive variety are the common lot of settlers on those islands. As a matter of fact, but three major hurricanes have visited the Virgin Islands during historical times. The first one was in the latter part of the seventeenth century, the second was in 1867, and the last was that of 1916. Of course, minor hurricanes and heavy blows are not infrequent,³ but destructive hurricanes are rare indeed. When they do occur, a bountiful nature quickly succeeds in restoring vegetation to its normal aspect; as for the destroyed houses, their flimsy construction means that they can easily be replaced.

³ E. B. Garriott: *West Indian Hurricanes (U. S. Weather Bureau Bull. II, Washington, 1900)* enumerates fifteen hurricanes as having affected St. Croix, St. Thomas, or the Virgin Islands between 1493 and 1855 (list, pp. 23-25). The same work contains a description of the storm of 1867 (pp. 52-53).