

# Introduction

The Virgin Islands in the course of centuries have witnessed the coming and going of Ciboney, Arawak and Carib peoples, European discovery by Christopher Columbus, temporary occupation by pirates and adventurers, colonization, commercial and plantation development by Danes and other North European settlers, African slavery and its abolition, American purchase, colonial government, social and political change, and in recent years remarkable tourist and industrial developments.

These and other topics have been narrated and interpreted by Dr. Isaac Dookhan in this first comprehensive history of the U.S. Virgin Islands. Dr. Dookhan is eminently well qualified for this undertaking. He was born in the British colony of British Guiana, now independent Guyana, where he was educated in the public schools and served as teacher and headmaster. He did his baccalaureate and doctors degrees at the University of the West Indies in Jamaica. Under the direction of Professor Douglas Hall, he researched and wrote a Ph.D. dissertation history of the British Virgin Islands. These islands are in geographical proximity to and have had close historical ties with the U.S. Virgins. More recently he has published *A Pre-Emancipation History of the West Indies*. [1] The author has drawn upon primary and secondary sources in recounting the experience of the Virgin Islands and their peoples. He is concerned with successive waves of immigrants, how they affected the physical environment and cultural life of the islands, the impact of international wars and politics, commodity price movements, and technological changes.

The Virgin Islands of the United States comprise St. Thomas, St. John, and St. Croix, along with some fifty-odd islets and cays. They

were purchased from Denmark in 1916 and the transfer effected the following year. Permanent settlement of St. Thomas dates from 1672, St. John from 1718, and St. Croix, which was acquired by purchase from France, from 1734. St. Thomas, with its excellent harbor, was uniquely placed to become a great trading center, while St. Croix and to a lesser extent St. John became centers of cotton and especially sugar production. These islands, which occupy the keystone of the West Indies arch, are located about 18° north of the equator and 64° west of Greenwich, 40 miles east of Puerto Rico, and about 1400 miles southeast of New York City.

Standing on the periphery of both the Greater and Lesser Antilles, the Virgin Islands have seen a succession of Indian cultures. After destroying the labor supply of Espanola in their lust for gold, the Spaniards turned to the inhabitants of other islands and are thought to have depopulated the Virgin Islands. For a century or more before the coming of the Danes, the islands attracted pirates and poor settlers who came from the eastern Caribbean islands which had been settled by Englishmen, Frenchmen and Dutchmen. Dr. Dookhan shows how piracy, in turn, gave way to buccaneering and privateering, to regulated and exclusive trade by the Danish West India Company, and eventually to modified free trade.

Today it is difficult to understand why tiny Caribbean islands were once valued highly by the leading maritime nations of Europe. In part, they afforded the Protestant nations of northern Europe the opportunity to establish bases from which to launch attacks on Spanish strongholds and especially the galleons which carried precious metals to Seville and Cadiz.

The seventeenth century witnessed the decline of silver mining and trade of New Spain and Peru and the pirates and buccaneers who preyed on this trade. During the same century more and more Europeans came to the West Indies to grow tobacco, cotton, indigo, ginger, and especially sugar-cane. So popular were these commodities in Europe that voluntary white laborers could not meet the demand. Resort was had to forced laborers, first to white indentured servants, and then in growing numbers to African slaves.

Some islands, such as English Barbados and Danish St. Croix, were well endowed by nature to become sugar islands. St. Croix, as Dr. Dookhan explains, had fertile plains and valleys, sufficient rainfall of seasonal variability, adequate harbors and anchorages, and the northeast trade winds which filled the sails of incoming vessels, energized the

windmills which crushed the sugar-canes between iron rollers, and moderated the climate so that it was tolerable for European and African inhabitants. Small islands generally had certain advantages over large islands and continental coastal plains. They had a high ratio of coastline to land area which had the effect of economizing on difficult and costly land transport, were relatively less costly to defend against outside aggressors, and, once populated and cleared of forests, afforded few places of refuge for runaway and rebellious slaves. Together with such man-made advantages as the influx of experienced planters and merchants from the English and Dutch islands to windward, St. Croix became the sixth ranking island — well ahead of Cuba and Puerto Rico — in the production of cane-sugar by the eve of the American Revolution.

Dr. Dookhan says that the Danes regarded St. Thomas as a combination of plantation colony and trading entrepot. Not only was it a distributing point for its sister islands, but it carried on an extensive trade with neighboring foreign islands and the Spanish Main. European manufactures, North American foodstuffs and building materials, and African slaves crowded the wharves and warehouses of the port city of Charlotte Amalie. The kingdom of Denmark-Norway remained neutral during the numerous wars of the later part of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. This meant that St. Thomas was able to conduct a lucrative neutral trade with the colonies of belligerent nations. Here was found a money market for the sale of captured ships and cargoes and courts to dispose of prizes brought in by the privateers of different nations. In time, St. Thomas became a free port which attracted foreign traders in times of peace.

Dr. Dookhan devotes three full chapters and parts of other chapters to the African slave trade and the institution of slavery. That this is by no means a disproportionate emphasis is revealed by the facts that slavery existed in the Virgin Islands from 1672 to 1848, a longer time span than that following emancipation, and the black people made up ninety per cent or more of the population during the greater part of the slave era. Slave trade topics include trading forts in West Africa, tribal origins, trading methods, mutinies on slave ships, death toll on the Middle Passage, numbers transported, 'seasoning' the slaves for the routine of plantation life, and the abolition of the slave trade. Slavery as an institution involved such matters as occupations and work loads, feeding, housing, clothing and medical care, and regulations which governed the behavior and social status of slaves. Slaves found ingenious

ways to resist their white oppressors, ranging from malingering to armed revolt. Indeed, emancipation came in 1848 after a mass uprising in St. Croix which was ably led by 'General' Buddhoe.

St. Thomas has been described by Professor Gordon Lewis as a Protestant city-state in which Calvinist and Lutheran were permitted freedom to worship and Catholic and Jew the right to hold private services.[2] As in north Europe and the colonies of North America, there were close relationships between religion and capitalism in the development of the Virgin Islands. Lacking people to settle their colonies, Denmark welcomed immigrants from Europe, North America and especially the English and Dutch islands to windward. Ethnic and religious diversity thus became marked features of Danish colonial society. Included in the polygot society of planters and merchants were Lutherans, Anglicans, Moravians, Sephardic Jews, French Huguenots, and members of the Dutch Reformed Church. Probably the outstanding religious development in the islands' history was the coming of the Moravian missionaries in 1732. These were men of humble birth who practiced their trades while they educated and won black converts. Planter opposition to the missionaries subsided when religion was given credit for encouraging the slaves to work harder and obey their masters.

The economy of the Virgin Islands, which rested upon sugar capitalism in St. Croix and the entrepot trade of St. Thomas, declined gradually in the nineteenth century. For a time, however, St. Thomas benefited from the steamships which called there to refuel and reprovision and to participate in the lucrative transit trade. The sugar industry fell on evil days as it faced growing competition from other cane growing countries and especially the beet sugar growers of Europe. Planters sought to reduce costs of production by means of mechanization and exploitation of their workers. Under the leadership of Queen Mary, who was an ordinary cane field worker, laborers in St. Croix staged a massive uprising which led to much loss of life and property. Dr. Dookhan asserts that 'many laborers came to believe that there was no difference between slavery and freedom.' Following the laborers' revolt of 1878, conditions improved somewhat as plantations were subdivided into farms which were leased to rural families. Yet the decline of both agriculture and trade continued down to the outbreak of the first World War despite an ambitious program by the Danish government to improve basic conditions.

After nearly a century of discussion and negotiation, the Virgin Islands were transferred from Denmark to the United States on March

31, 1917, for the sum of \$25,000,000. Motivating the United States to action was the need for naval bases to defend the approaches to the Panama Canal, together with fear of German acquisition and use of the islands against her enemies in World War I. From 1917 to 1931, United States naval officers governed the Virgin Islands, retaining many of the Danish colonial laws that had been enacted in 1906. Race relations were frequently strained when officers and sailors from the southern states of America attempted to force their Jim Crow rules on to the black inhabitants. Though the social services – especially public health and education – were improved by the naval officers, little progress was made in reviving the economy after the postwar boom collapsed in 1920. Rum production was hurt by the extension of the Prohibition Act to the Virgin Islands, although some relief was provided when the distilleries turned to the production of bay rum. Virgin Islanders sought opportunities abroad during the lean years of the 1920's, many emigrating to New York and other cities along the Atlantic seaboard.

The year 1931 saw the arrival of two personalities. Herbert Hoover, the first President of the United States to visit the islands, is remembered for his derogatory observation that the Virgin Islands were the 'effective poorhouse' of the United States. Dr. Paul D. Pearson became the first civilian governor. His governorship (1931-1935) was marked by economic rehabilitation which went far to improve the well-being and morale of the people. Dr. Dookhan relates the numerous programs which the public corporation, known as the Virgin Islands Company, carried out. These included the encouragement of homestead farms, the revival of the sugar industry in St. Croix, port improvement in St. Thomas, and the promotion of tourism by constructing the Bluebeard Castle Hotel in St. Thomas. Despite these ambitious programs, the level of unemployment remained high and rioting took place in St. Thomas in 1934. Two years later the constitution of the islands was altered to permit universal manhood suffrage, and shortly after the first political party was organized. From this time onwards the political life of the islands was to be lively and at times acrimonious.

Contrasted with the isolation and backwardness of the depression years was the bustling activity during World War II. Anti-submarine warfare and the routing of U.S. convoys through Caribbean waters gave St. Thomas and St. Croix strategic military importance. Shore personnel manned the naval bases and air bases, while liberty parties from the warships anchored in the harbors increased the tempo of business and pleasure. Construction of military structures and roads

drew workers away from agriculture. Other workers came from the British and French islands to windward. Though unforeseen at the time, the postwar tourist industry was the chief beneficiary of the military airbases which were converted to commercial aviation and the informal advertising of the islands by ex-servicemen.

'Tourism and tourist expenditures have been responsible for the dynamic growth of the Virgin Islands since the 1950's,' writes Dr. Dookhan. A complex of factors explain the remarkable transformation which has enabled these islands to develop in the course of a few years from little known Caribbean backwaters into rivals of Florida and Southern California. The continued decline of agriculture, which culminated in the phasing out of sugar production in 1966, turned the attention of islanders to programs of economic diversification. Beginning in 1952, a Tourist Development Board was established. In 1954, slightly more than 60,000 tourists came by cruise ship and air to the Virgin Islands where they spent an estimated \$4 million. Among other things, American tourists were attracted by the scenic beauty and tropical climate, the political security which the islands enjoyed as American territories, low prices and duty exemptions on 'free port' luxury goods, easy access by air and water, and promotional activity by the tourist board. The big boom in tourism followed the closing of Castro's Cuba to Americans in 1959. The following year saw the arrival of over 200,000 tourists who spent almost \$25 million in the shops and hotels and marinas. In 1970, after a decade of phenomenal growth, over one million tourists came to the Virgin Islands where they spent approximately \$100 million.[3]

Diversification has also taken the form of measures to promote industrial activity. Tax exemptions and industrial subsidies, together with duty-free entry into the United States of certain articles assembled in Virgin Islands factories, have stimulated the growth of industry. These industries include watch assembly operations, textile manufacturing, oil refining, and the processing of bauxite into alumina. Industry has been handicapped, however, by the limited supply of native skilled and unskilled labor, high living costs, inadequate power and water supplies, lack of raw materials, and small market size.

Tourism and industry soon exhausted local labor supplies and turned to sources outside the islands. Thousands of immigrant West Indians have come from Puerto Rico and the British, French and Dutch islands. Other newcomers were U.S. citizens, or 'Continental' who were attracted by business opportunities or came to retire in the Virgin

Islands. Official census returns show that the population of the three islands increased from 26,665 in 1950, to 32,099 in 1960, and to 63,200 in 1970. Recently the Virgin Islands Bureau of Statistics and Economic Studies has estimated the total population at 85,600, or over thirty per cent higher than the U.S. Census count of 63,200. St. Thomas has an estimated 45,710, St. Croix, 37,578, and St. John, 2,312. Though the wealth and income is maldistributed, per capita income in 1970 was estimated at \$3,880 per year, which compares favorably with the mainland figure of \$3,942, and was far above the per capita income of any Caribbean territory. At the low end of the income and welfare scale are the 'down islanders' or 'aliens' who are estimated to number 15,000 out of an employable labor force of 35,810.[4]

Economic and social change has been so rapid in recent years that Virgin Islanders have found it increasingly difficult to preserve their rich heritage. But a close reading of Dr. Dookhan's *History* reveals historical themes which help one to comprehend the truth that the islands' history shows the coexistence of continuity and change. The variegated racial and national groups in the society today should remind one that the Virgin Islands have seen wave after wave of immigrants — Danes, Dutchmen, Englishmen, Frenchmen, Jews, and especially people of African descent. Reminiscent of the 'down islanders' today were the immigrants from Madeira, Barbados, St. Bartholomew, and India who were employed in agriculture following the emancipation of the slaves in 1848. When it is considered that the population is largely 'down island' only a few generations removed, there is little justification for the attitude of superiority and snobbishness which citizens display towards 'aliens'. The lush growth of the religious denominations has gone hand in hand with the influx of nationality and ethnic groups. Much as it was in past centuries, St. Thomas continues to be a Protestant city state where the people turn out on Sunday in their best clothes, carrying Bibles and prayer books as they enter their chapels and churches. St. Croix, and to a lesser extent St. Thomas, has seen the growth of Catholicism in recent decades owing largely to the influx of Puerto Ricans.

Connecting links can be noted between the entrepot trade of St. Thomas in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and the free port trade today, between the tourists who came on nineteenth century steamship packet lines and those who come by cruise ship and air today. Charlotte Amalie and its waterfront is a happy mixture of the old and the new. There are centuries-old warehouses with thick brick

walls, wide doors, and wrought iron grills which once contained hogsheads of sugar, puncheons of rum, prize cargoes brought in by privateers, and assortments of European trade goods. These structures have been converted into retail shops which display luxury wares from all corners of the globe and draw thousands of shoppers daily during the tourist season from the numerous cruise ships which make St. Thomas and St. Croix regular ports of call. Besides the American tourist's duty-free allowance of \$200, one gallon of liquor can be entered free of duty. The liquor trade is so vast that one wag has said that there is enough booze to float the island should the Caribbean sea dry up. Lest it be thought that tourism is a post-World War II phenomenon, Dr. Dookhan points out that most European visitors to the West Indies in the middle decades of the nineteenth century passed through St. Thomas on their way to or from other parts of the Caribbean.

Numerous windmill towers and factory ruins remind one that St. Croix, and to a lesser extent St. John, once had important sugar industries. Near the port of Frederiksted, St. Croix, is Estate Whim where the great house and outbuildings have been restored and a fine museum added by the St. Croix Landmarks Society. On the north coast of St. John are the ruins of Annaberg sugar factory which has been cleared of brush and the masonry stabilized by the National Park Service. To a considerable extent the sugar capitalism of St. Croix has been replaced by the incentive-based alumina and petroleum industries of today. Whereas the incentives today are largely tax exemptions and duty remissions, sugar capitalism more than two centuries ago was encouraged by a seven-year tax free incentive to intending settlers, many of whom were experienced planters from 'down island'.

Dr. Dookhan emphasizes the fact that Virgin Islanders, like other peoples in dependent territories, have been influenced more and more by the 'revolution of rising expectations.' No longer are they tolerant of low living standards, poor public services, political and economic dependency, cultural deprivation, and invidious comparison with white 'Continental'. New leadership has emerged in government, business, and the professions. Black Virgin Islanders are encouraged to take pride in themselves, their race and heritage, and to work towards personal development and self confidence. The people who were uprooted from Africa and transported to the Virgin Islands to cultivate plantations, build forts and harbor towns, unload and load ships, and today fill responsible positions in a complex insular society are conscious of their



centuries-old achievements. Local leaders have chronicled their people's rise to recognition.[5] No longer is Virgin Islands' history written from the standpoint of Denmark and the United States. Instead, attention is focused on slave resistance and rebellion, laborers' revolts, the rise of trade unions and political parties, and the progress that has been made towards self-government, material betterment, and cultural excellence. Carnival is by far the most colorful spectacle of the year in the Virgin Islands. As Herman Wouk, a writer in residence for some years, describes it: 'Africa was marching down the main street of this little harbor town today; Africa in undimmed black vitality, surging up out of centuries of island displacement, island slavery, island isolation, island ignorance; Africa, unquenchable in its burning love of life.'[6]

That achievements have fallen short of objectives in the 'American Paradise' is clearly evident to all but the superficial observer. Along with the phenomenal growth of tourism have come certain social and economic ills. These include such problems as traffic congestion, high living costs, housing pressure, alien labor, concentrated ownership and soaring land values, absentee ownership and control of the economy, ecological abuse, and social disorganization. Efforts to cope with these problems and achieve a viable way of life have and continue to tax the moral and material resources of the people. One newly-created institution to cope with these and other problems is the College of the Virgin Islands. Founded in 1962 as a junior college and later expanded into a four-year, baccalaureate degree-awarding college, it is a focal center for ideas and programs that further the cultural and social life of the people. 'By 1970,' as Dr. Dookhan writes, 'the Virgin Islands had not yet attained complete economic self-sufficiency, political fulfilment in statehood, or a fully satisfactory system of social services, but the stage was set for a further thrust forward.'

[1] Isaac Dookhan, *A Pre-Emancipation History of the West Indies* (Collins, 1971).

[2] Gordon K. Lewis, 'An Introductory Note to the Study of the Virgin Islands,' *Caribbean Studies*, Vol. 8, No. 2 (July 1968), p. 8.

[3] Al Bill, 'V.I. Tourism — Is the Life Blood Waning or Waxing?' *Carib: The Weekly Magazine*, St. Thomas, November 11, 1971, pp. 2-3, 12-13.

[4] 'Local Bureau Sets V.I. Head Count at 85,600,' *The Daily News*, St. Thomas, November 18, 1971, pp. 1, 18.

[5] Valdemar A. Hill, Sr., *Rise to Recognition (An Account of Virgin Islanders from Slavery to Self-Government)*, Printed in the U.S.A., 1971.

[6] Herman Wouk, *Don't Stop The Carnival*, Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1965, p. 343.