



AN OVERVIEW OF THE VIRGIN ISLANDS HUMAN HISTORY

The Virgin Islands have had a rich, diverse human history. From archaeological investigations, it has been determined that preceramic (i.e., stone age) people migrating from South America established temporary fishing settlement here by 2200 BC. They were followed by three major pottery-making cultures: the Pre-Taino or Igneri (=The ancient ones), ca. AD 50-650; the Taino (the so-called Arawaks), ca AD 650-1425, and the Caribs or Kalina, ca. AD 1450-1590.

The Spanish hostile encounter with caribs at St. River, St. Croix, during Columbus second voyage of exploration in 1493 – as well as subsequent events there involving Juan Ponce de Leon during his tenure as governor of San Juan Bautista (later called Puerto Rico) contributed significantly to the fatal decline of Native American people and culture in the Antilles.

The Spanish, having no real interest in Lesser Antilles other than claim of title by virtue of Columbus “discoveries”, restricted their role there to military expeditions designed to dislodge foreign encroachments.

For all practical purpose, Native American no longer inhabited the Virgin Islands group by the Northern European attempted to colonize St. Croix beginning in 1631.

Thereafter, the succession of ownership of that island reveals, in microcosm, the importance of the West Indies in the Europeans drive for empire and struggles for national dominance in the New World in the 17th and 18th centuries:

England (1631; expelled by Spanish that year)
France (1636; expelled by Spanish that year)
England (1642; subjugated by Holland in same year)
Holland (1642-1645; expelled by England in latter year)
England (1645-1650; expelled by Spanish in latter year)
Holland (1650; abortive attempt to retake island)
France (1650-1655)
Knight of Malta (lease from French Crown, 1655-1665)
France (1655-1696; abandoned island in latter year, but retained title until 1733)
Denmark (1733-1917)
United States (1917-)

DENMARK

Denmark, already in possession of St. Thomas (1671) and St. John (1718), purchased St. Croix from France in 1733 because of the last named island’s superior potential for sugar cultivation. That acquisition marked the first time title to a West Indian island had been exchanged by means other than by warfare. Denmark’s optimism was not in vain. By the last quarter of the 1700s,



Salt River Bay National Historic Park and Ecological Preserve

only Jamaica surpassed St. Croix in yield of tons of sugar cane per acre. On St. Croix, the plantation system, based on slave labor, together with the great demand for sugar, molasses, and rum in Europe and North America, created an unprecedented degree of prosperity between 1760 to 1820. The cosmopolitan opulence of that era is recalled today in the imposing architecture of Christiansted, Frederiksted, and surviving plantation great house and ruins scattered throughout the countryside. St. Thomas, with the advantage of free port status dating from the latter 1700s, concentrated its economic focus on maritime trade. After the emancipation of the slaves in the Danish West Indies in 1848, the agricultural economy of the island of St. John gradually declined to that of small subsistence farms. By the late 1800s, changes in the international marketplace had reduced the Danish West Indies as a whole to an economic liability for Denmark.

THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

The purchase of the Danish West Indies by the United States in 1917 was the culmination of two previously unsuccessful attempts in 1867 and 1902. In each instance, military strategic considerations provided the impetus. The transfer of the Virgin Islands barely preceded the United States formal entry into World War 1. Consequently, the islands were placed under a naval administration, with the inhabitants not receiving actual U.S. citizenship administration in 1931. This relationship was formalized in the Virgin Island Organic Act of 1934. Since that time, two significant dates have marked the evolving political process in the U.S. Virgin Island. The revised organic act of 1954 replaced the semiautonomous municipal form of government (Districts of St. Thomas, St. John, and St. Croix) with a territory-wide system. In 1972, congress further enable Virgin Islanders to elect their own governor, lieutenant-governor, and Delegate to Congress.