

Virgin Islands

NATIONAL HISTORIC SITE



CHRISTIANSTED + ST. CROIX + VIRGIN ISLANDS



RUINS OF SUGAR MILL

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Here at Christiansted was the capital of the Danish West Indies when "sugar was king" and St. Croix was an outstanding example of Danish plantation society in the New World.

ST. CROIX ISLAND is identified with three significant phases of the history of the New World: (1) *Discovery*—St. Croix is the first territory now under the United States flag to have been discovered by Columbus. (2) *Struggle for Colonial Empire*—The island has known seven different flags. (3) *Colonization*—It is an outstanding example of Danish colonial development in the Lesser Antilles.

Virgin Islands National Historic Site particularly commemorates the third of these major phases in New World history. Although earlier efforts were made by other European nations to colonize St. Croix, it was under Danish rule that the island was successfully developed as a major sugar producer, bound to both Europe and America by close commercial, social, and cultural ties.

Enormous wealth derived from sugar production flowed to St. Croix during the 18th and early 19th centuries. The great accomplishments of that era are reflected in the architecture of Christiansted. Here in the wharf area of the town, lie the buildings which were, for more than 100 years, the exclusive seat of government of the former Danish West Indies. Rich in historical associations and architectural value, these buildings make the site an exceptionally valuable heritage to be carefully preserved.

Early History: 1493–1733

COLUMBUS discovered the island and named it Santa Cruz (Spanish for "Holy Cross") on November 14, 1493, during his second voyage to the New World. It is the first territory now under the United States flag to have

been discovered by the "Admiral of the Ocean Sea."

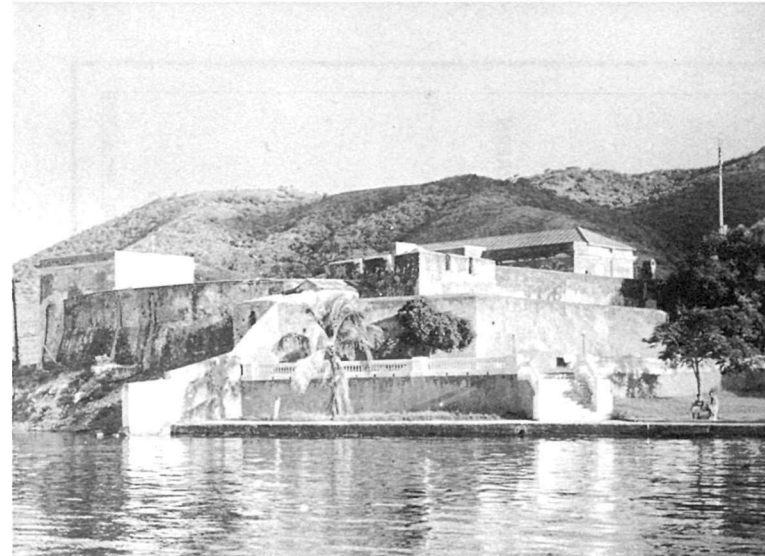
Columbus found the island inhabited by fierce Carib Indians who had driven the more peaceful Arawak Indians from the scene some 100 years earlier. After a skirmish between Spaniards and Caribs at Salt River, where the Spaniards had anchored their fleet in search of fresh water, Columbus sailed away from Santa Cruz, never to return.

The history of Santa Cruz from 1493 to 1733 is obscure. While Spain claimed possession of the whole chain of islands known as the Lesser Antilles, including Santa Cruz, she at first considered them to be "useless islands." The golden treasures and wealth of the Spanish Main were far more alluring than the wooded and unfriendly shores of these small islands. As a result, throughout the 16th and early 17th centuries, Spain did not colonize Santa Cruz, and only occasionally did Spanish and other European seafarers visit the island's shores.

Meanwhile, other nations adopted the view that effective occupation alone gave valid title to colonial lands. Therefore they felt free to settle or colonize lands not actually occupied by Europeans.

When in 1624 Englishmen settled on St. Kitts Island about 125 miles east of Santa Cruz, Spain's colonial monopoly in the Caribbean was broken. Beginning with that event, the Caribbean became the scene of one of the greatest struggles for colonial empire in world history.

In this imperial struggle, Santa Cruz was apparently inhabited by French freebooters and Dutch and English settlers at various times from about 1625 to 1650. In the latter



Fort Christiansvaern, an 18th-century Danish fort with 19th-century additions.

year a Spanish expedition from Puerto Rico seized the island and drove out all settlers. Retribution befell the Spaniards when several months later a French force from St. Kitts expelled the Spanish garrison and took possession of the island.

The French called the island St. Croix (French for "Holy Cross") and sold it, in 1651, to the Knights of Malta. This religious-military order had extensive properties throughout Europe and desired to extend its holdings in the New World, as well as to protect property which it expected to inherit in the West Indies from one of its members. Unsuccessful in their efforts to profit from the island, the Knights sold it to the French West India Company in 1665. Nine years later the island of St. Croix became a French crown colony. In 1696 the less than 800 colonists of St. Croix were transported to what is now called Haiti on orders of King Louis XIV in the interest of more efficient operations.

Though French colonization of St. Croix ceased after 1696, France continued to claim possession of the island. Thus, St. Croix remained largely uninhabited until the King of France, who needed money to carry on a war in Poland, sold the island in 1733 to the Danish West India and Guinea Company, which wanted to gain a new and fertile island.

The Danish West India and Guinea Company

A LATECOMER to the European struggle for colonial empire in the Caribbean was the united kingdom of Denmark and Norway. Its first move into the area occurred in 1671 when the King of Denmark and Norway granted a charter to a group of merchants to colonize the island of St. Thomas and to carry on trade in the Caribbean.

On the basis of this charter, the Danish West India Company began colonizing St. Thomas in 1672, and introduced the cultivation of tobacco, sugar, and cotton to the island. Two years later this company was merged with the Danish slave-trading Guinea Company, and in 1717 the new company began to colonize neighboring St. John Island.

But St. Thomas and St. John were not well suited to agriculture. For this reason, company officials as early as 1726 suggested the purchase of nearby and larger St. Croix Island. In June 1733, the company concluded a treaty with France to purchase St. Croix for 750,000 livres. Actual colonization was begun the next year.

Company Rule: 1734–54

FOR 20 YEARS the Danish West India and Guinea Company ruled St. Croix. During

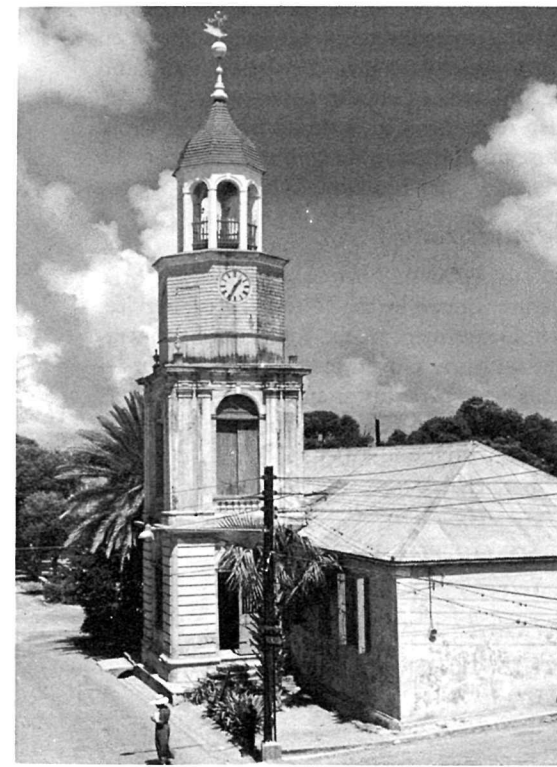
this period the company surveyed the island, divided it into nine "quarters," and subdivided each quarter into plantations of 150 acres in size. To attract new settlers to the island and to encourage them to purchase land, the company offered the plantations at "bargain" prices.

Within two decades, St. Croix experienced a tremendous boom. The high mortality rate on the island was overcome by the influx of European immigrants and African slaves. By 1755 the population had risen to 10,200, including nearly 9,000 slaves.

Also during the period of company rule, most of the island's fertile land was placed under cultivation. Though some cotton was grown on a few plantations on the drier eastern end of the island, "sugar was king" on St. Croix as it was throughout the Lesser Antilles in the 18th century.

With the rapid growth and development of the island, the planters became increasingly dissatisfied with the monopolistic policy of the company. In 1753 they sent a representative to Denmark to petition the King

Steeple Building. Originally, The Lutheran Church of the Lord of Saboath, 1753–1834.



to make St. Croix a crown colony. Since the company was almost bankrupt, its shareholders were only too glad to sell out. Therefore, in 1755 St. Croix, St. Thomas, and St. John were sold to the Danish King. From that time until their purchase by the United States in 1917, they were known as the Danish West Indies.

A Fabulous Sugar Island

INCREASED DEMAND FOR SUGAR, together with a series of major wars in both the Old and the New Worlds, raised sugar prices to unprecedented heights between 1755 and 1820. So great was the prosperity resulting from this boom in sugar that the Lesser Antilles came to be known as the "Fabulous Sugar Islands."

The importance of these small islands in the 18th century is difficult to conceive now. One example strikingly demonstrates their former economic significance: When the Treaty of Paris was made in 1763, to many minds the tiny sugar island of Guadeloupe weighed as heavily in the scales of empire as the whole of Canada.

St. Croix soon joined the ranks of these sugar islands. Production increased from 1½ million pounds in 1755 to a maximum of 46 million pounds in 1812. However, annual production fluctuated widely between these extremes because of yearly variations in rainfall. Maximum acreage in sugar was reached in 1796, when 53.4 percent of the island's total area was planted in cane.

Thus, for a time St. Croix was near the New World's economic center of gravity. In this stimulating environment, Alexander Hamilton, who was to become one of the Founding Fathers of the United States, lived his youthful years. From 1766 to 1772, he clerked for Nicholas Cruger, an enterprising merchant of Christiansted whose ventures ranged over both sides of the Atlantic. By the time Hamilton left the islands in his late teens, he was already experienced in business and financial affairs. Some of these experiences presumably influenced his thought when he designed the fiscal policies of his adopted Nation.

The golden era of prosperity which sugar



Government House, an 18th-century structure with 19th-century additions.

cultivation brought to St. Croix was reflected in the fine architecture of town and country, in the increased number of slaves, and in the planters' luxurious and gracious mode of living. Earlier wooden houses and buildings were largely replaced by substantial and beautiful masonry structures. The total number of slaves owned by the planters rose to a maximum of 27,349 in 1804. Many planters grew so wealthy that they were able to sell their holdings and retire to Europe to live a life of even greater ease and elegance.

As in most plantation societies, however, the planters of St. Croix were unable to create this prosperity solely on their own capital. It was frequently necessary for them to borrow money from bankers, merchants, and even from the Danish State to buy and to retain their plantations and slaves. At the height of St. Croix's prosperity in 1796, the combined debts of the planters represented 40 percent of the total value of their holdings. This debt, although sizable, was not too serious so long as sugar prices remained high.

St. Croix sugar and its by-products, molasses and rum, found a ready market in both Europe and colonial North America. Originally, Denmark's economic policy required that most of the sugar which St. Croix produced be shipped to the motherland. After 1764, however, the planters were permitted to pay off in sugar half the cost of provisions and plantation supplies imported from North America, while molasses and rum could be exported freely to pay the remaining costs.

This pattern of trade prevailed from 1755 to 1833, with the exception of two periods during the Napoleonic Wars. For 10 months in 1801–2, and from Christmas 1807 until the spring of 1815, the Danish West Indies were occupied by the British and most of St. Croix's trade was restricted to England. British occupation of St. Croix, however, seems to have had little effect on the prosperity of the planters.

Economic Decline: 1820–1917

ST. CROIX'S one-crop economy made the island's prosperity particularly sensitive to

changes in rainfall, to fluctuations in the price of sugar, and to technological improvements in the growth, the manufacture, and the means of transporting sugar. For this reason, a sudden drop in the price of sugar beginning in 1820 brought immediate economic distress to the island.

Between 1820 and 1835, the debts of St. Croix's planters rose to 76.34 percent of their combined holdings. Many lost their lands through mortgage foreclosures. Much of the land was withdrawn from sugar production. Some of the planters converted their holdings to cattle raising because it required less capital and labor.

After 1820 capital for necessary improvements in sugar cultivation and production methods was scarce. Yet such improvements were essential if St. Croix sugar was to compete in the world market with the product of such major and better-endowed producers as Cuba, Puerto Rico, Brazil, and the East Indies.

Meanwhile, hovering over the island was the prospect of the loss of its cheap slave labor. Denmark had been the first nation to prohibit the slave trade, effective January 1, 1803. But with the approach, and then the deepening of the sugar depression, emancipation of the slaves of the Danish

West Indies was delayed. After 1820, the Danish State proceeded toward emancipation with extreme caution for fear that St. Croix's economy would be totally destroyed.

But pressure for decisive action continued to accumulate, and finally, on July 28, 1847, the King of Denmark issued a proclamation which promised the slaves emancipation in 1859. Not content to wait, the slaves of St. Croix clamored for their freedom, and on the afternoon of July 3, 1848, Gov. Gen. Peter von Scholten, speaking from the square in front of the fort in Frederiksted and many of the island's plantations were damaged or destroyed by rioting laborers.

Emancipation compelled the planters of St. Croix to make long-delayed technological improvements in the production of sugar in an effort to reduce labor and other costs. The plow was introduced to cultivate the canefields, and steam began to replace wind as the motive power for the extraction of the juice from the cane. But these improvements achieved only limited results. St. Croix's competitive position in the world sugar market gradually worsened. Increased costs of production finally forced the planters, with the financial assistance of the Danish State, to centralize the manufacture of sugar in a few large factories after 1875.

Economic decline created many other problems. The colonial treasury no longer derived a surplus from the export duty on sugar which could be used to better social conditions on the island; Danish State contributions for this purpose were inadequate to offset the loss of revenue in the colonial treasury. Discontent increased when relations between the planters and their laborers became embittered over demands for higher wages. This dispute finally resulted in the "Fire Burn" of October 1878 in which the town of Frederiksted and many of the island's plantations were damaged or destroyed by rioting laborers.

As the 19th century wore on, St. Croix's ability to meet vigorous competition in the world sugar market gradually lessened. Prices sank ever lower. By the end of the century St. Croix was, in fact if not in name, little more than a marginal producer. Her golden era as a "Fabulous Sugar Island," like that of other islands in the Lesser Antilles, was a thing of the past.

United States Purchase

ATTRACTED by the strategic harbors of St. John and St. Thomas, the United States approached Denmark in 1867 with an offer to purchase the two islands for \$7½ million. When this effort failed, the United States tried again in 1902 with an offer of \$5 million for all three islands of the Danish West Indies. Again the effort was unsuccessful.

During World War I the United States, fearful that Germany might seize the harbor at St. Thomas and use it as a submarine base, made a third attempt. This time the offer was raised to \$25 million for the three islands. The offer was accepted, and a treaty for the purchase of the Danish West Indies was concluded with Denmark in 1916.

Ratifications of the treaty were exchanged in Washington on January 17, 1917, and

formal transfer of the Danish West Indies to the United States took place on March 31, 1917. The lowering of the Danish flag in the ceremonies of that day brought to a close nearly two centuries of St. Croix's history as a Danish colony and opened a new chapter in the history of the island as a territory of the United States.

The Historic Site

VIRGIN ISLANDS NATIONAL HISTORIC SITE was established by order of the Secretary of the Interior on March 4, 1952. Under terms of a cooperative agreement with the Government of the Virgin Islands, the Government House and the wharf area of Christiansted and its buildings are to be preserved as excellent examples of the old Danish economy and way of life in the Virgin Islands.

About Your Visit

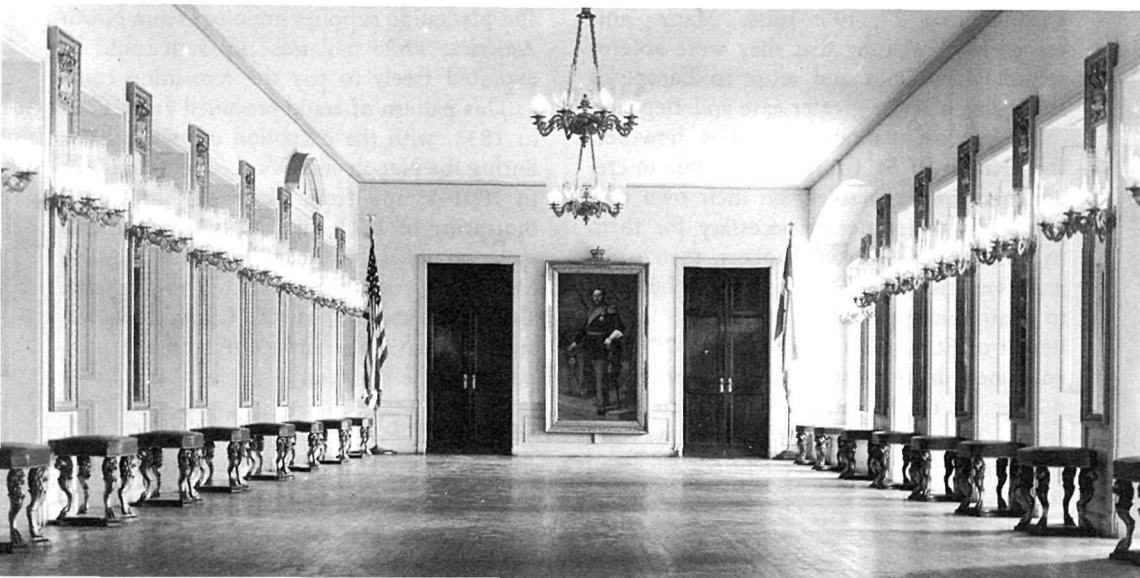
GUIDED TOURS of the site, which start from Fort Christiansvaern, are offered daily except Saturday and Sunday. Information concerning the site and the scheduled tours may be obtained from National Park Service headquarters in the fort.

You may prefer to take the self-guided walking tour indicated on the map. You will especially want to see the ballroom and the old kitchen in the Government House. Also recommended is a visit to the St. Croix Museum, Inc., on the ground floor of the present library building.

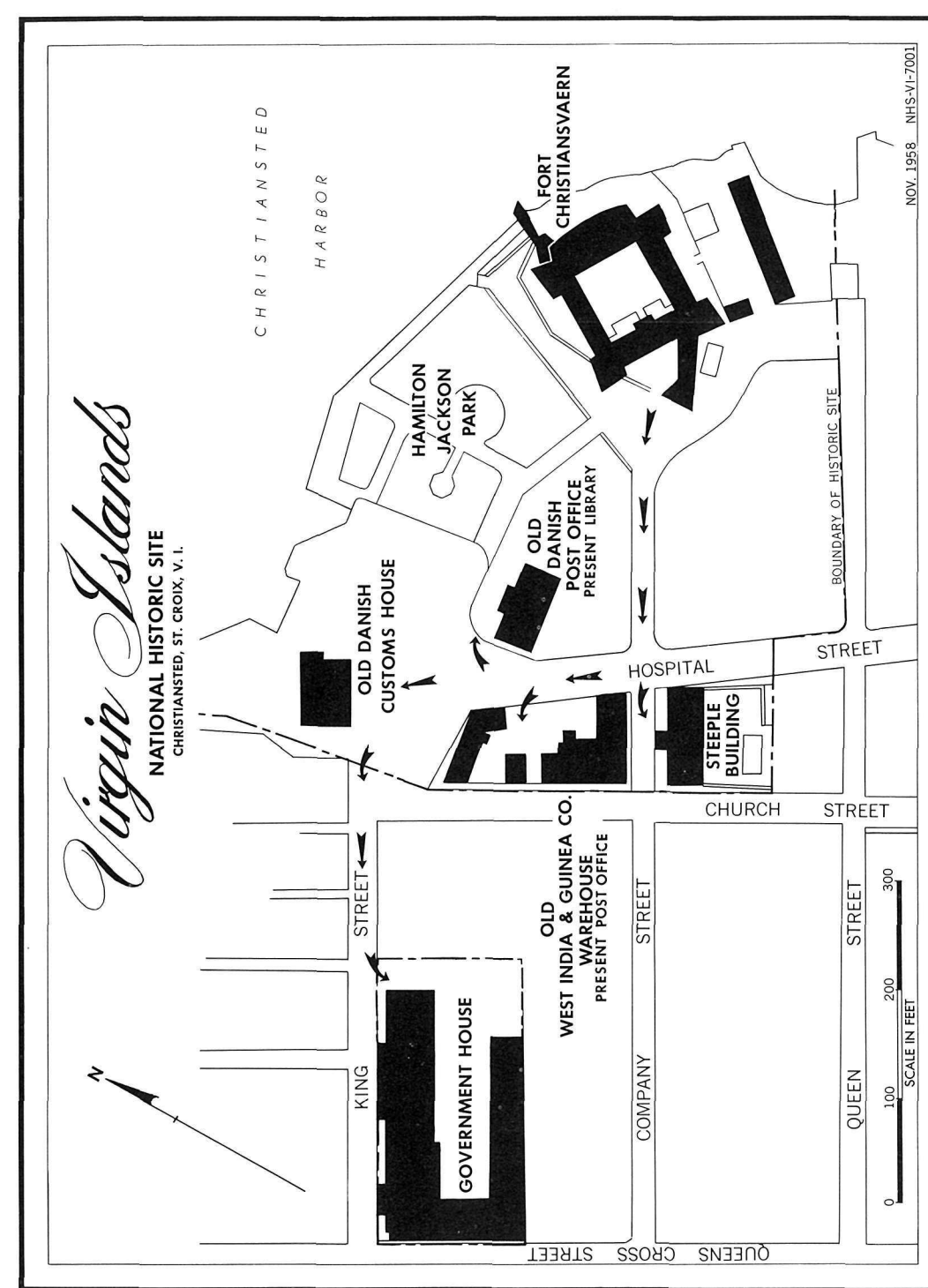
Administration

VIRGIN ISLANDS NATIONAL HISTORIC SITE is administered by the National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior, in cooperation with the Government of the Virgin Islands. A park historian, whose address is Virgin Islands National Historic Site, Box 160, Christiansted, St. Croix, V.I., is in immediate charge.

Ballroom of the Government House. Original portrait of King Frederik VII and replica furnishings presented by Danish Government.



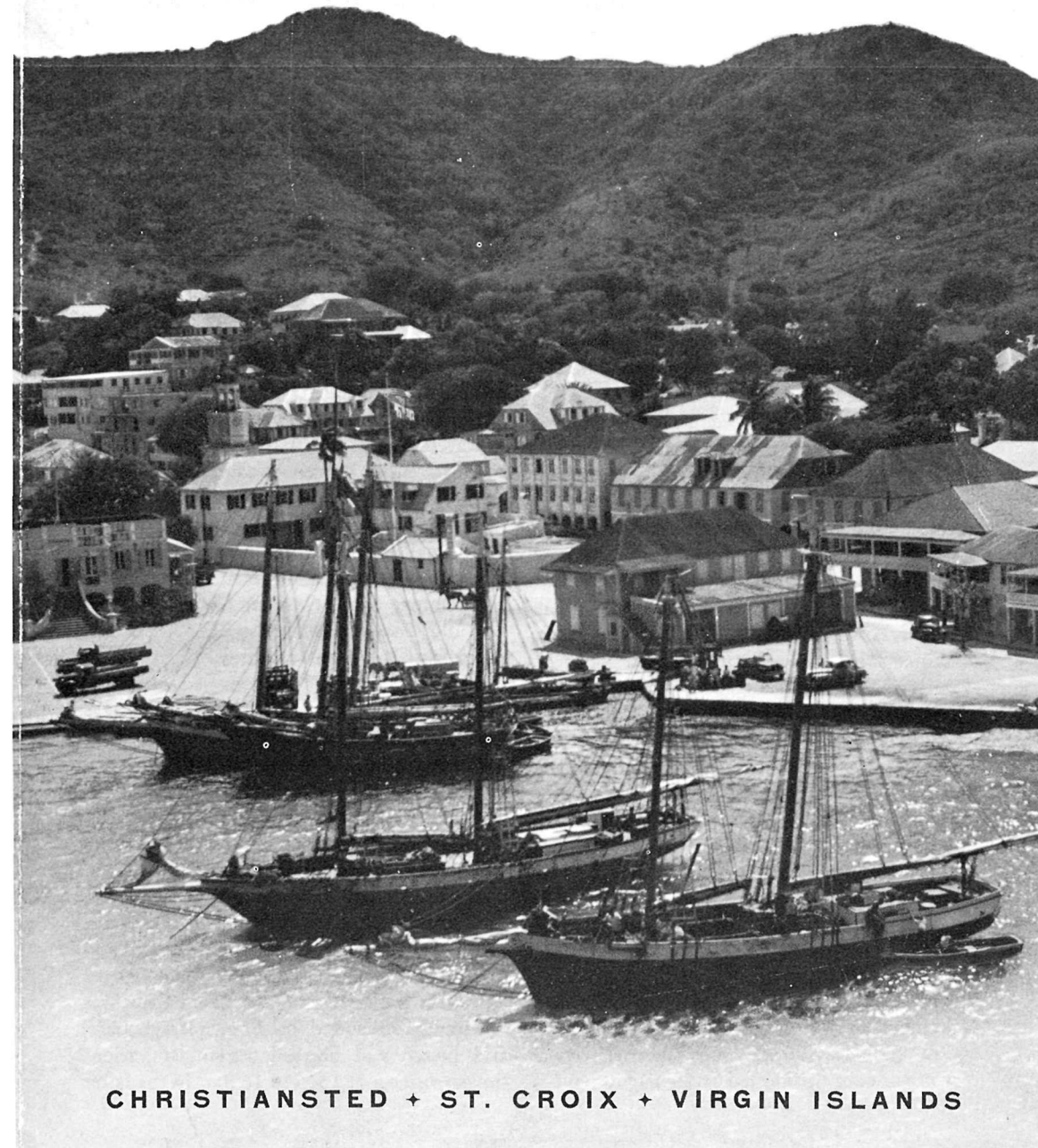
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COVER: Christiansted, St. Croix. Courtesy, "The Caribbean: A Journey With Pictures," by Fritz Henle and P. E. Knapp; Studio-Crowell, publishers.

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