



Salt River Bay National Historic Park and Ecological Preserve

THE SALT RIVER BASIN IN PRE-HISTORIC TIMES

The prehistoric complex at Salt River, St. Croix, is one of the most important archaeological sites in the Virgin Islands. It has been the focus of every major archaeological investigation on St. Croix since 1880: Alphonse Pinnart (1880), Holger U. Ramsing (1899), Jesse W. Fewkes (1912), Georg Nordby (1915; 1925), Theodor De Booy (1917), Gudmund Hatt (1923), Lewis J. Korn (1935), Herbert W. Krieger (1938), Gary S. Vescelius (1952), and Gary S. Vescelius and Bruce E. Tilden (1978-1979).

Through artifactual evidence and / or early historical accounts, we know that the area was inhabited by all three major pottery-making cultures found in the Virgin Islands in prehistoric times (Igneri, AD 50-650; Taino, AD 650-1450; and Kalina or Carib, AD 1425-1590). There is good reason to believe that the Salt River site was a major religious / cultural center as well as a long lived permanent settlement. The only Tainan ceremonial ball court or plaza found in the Lesser Antilles was discovered there by a Danish archaeologist, Gudmund Hatt, in 1923. Artifacts associated with that game – petroglyphs, stone “belts” (used either as trophies or handicaps), three-pointed stones called “zemis”, and human sacrificial burials – have since that time been in possession of the National Museum in Copenhagen. Significant artifacts from the Salt River site, of both domestic and ceremonial usage and quality, are to be found among public and private museum collections in the Virgin Islands, the United States, Denmark, and other countries.

THE CARIBS

The last, and perhaps undeservedly the most notorious, of the Native American cultures which inhabited St. Croix was the Carib. Originating in the Guiana / Orinoco region of South America, the Caribs had wrested control of St. Croix from the Tainos ca. AD 1425. It marked the westernmost limit of Carib control in the Antilles. The male-dominated Carib social order was in one sense more egalitarian than the Tainos, since their chiefs were not hereditary but were elected on the basis of leadership or prowess in warfare. Irregular warfare for the purpose of obtaining captives and plunder was an important facet of the Carib culture.

Women, unlike male preoccupations with warfare and hunting, usually performed domestic chores and practiced agricultural cultivation. Although the Spanish linked the Carib name inextricably and infamously with the practice of cannibalism, it should be noted that the hereditary Taino aristocracy also engaged in that ritual practice. Furthermore, differing cultural self-perceptions are worth noting. The Carib name, Kalina, implied that as a culture they alone were “people” or “human”. To the Caribs, therefore, it is possible that eating the flesh of “non-people” had an entirely different connotation than the great offense it gave to Europeans.



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THE COLUMBIAN CONTACT: 1493

On the 14th of November, 1493, on his second voyage to the New World, Columbus came upon the island which the dominant Caribs called Cibuquiera (“the stony land”). The Admiral was to name it Santa Cruz or “Holy Cross”. The fleet of 17 vessels (including the *Nina*, veteran of the first voyage) dropped anchor off the Salt River inlet, which Columbus’ Taino translators called Ay Ay (“the river”). The admiral sent more than two dozen armed men ashore in his boat to explore the prehistoric village on the west bank and search for sources of fresh water. This location is the first and only positively documented of two sites associated with Columbus on what is now U.S. territory. Four eyewitness accounts of the St. Croix episode survive: Columbus’s son Ferdinand, quoting the Admiral’s own journal, since lost; the Italian nobleman and friend of Columbus, Michele de Cuneo; the fleet surgeon, Dr. Diego Alvaredo Chanca; and what is now known as the Syllacio – Coma letter. On a return to the flagship, having “liberated” some Taino women and boys enslaved by the Caribs at the village, the boat’s crew encountered a canoe with Caribs (four males and two females) and one or two Taino slaves, which had rounded the eastern cape of the bay. The Caribs readied their bows when the Spaniards approached too closely. The canoe was rammed and overturned, and a fierce but unequal skirmish ensued. This hostile encounter, which constitutes the first documented resistance to European encroachment by Native Americans, resulted in fatalities on both sides. Columbus himself later named the scene of the encounter Cabo de las Flechas, or “Cape of the Arrows,” in memory of the Spanish fatality. From St. Croix, Columbus’ fleet first sailed northward to collectively name Las Islas Virgenes (after the legendary St. Ursula and her 10,000 virgin companions martyred by the Huns at Cologne in the 11th century), and then west southwestward to San Juan Bautista (later renamed Puerto Rico).

THE EARLY POST-CONTACT PERIOD

An understanding was concluded by Ponce de Leon (the first Governor of Puerto Rico) with the Carib chieftains on St. Croix in 1509. The Caribs, for their part, agreed to accept Christianity, refrain from their raiding activities, and provide agricultural produce to the Spanish in Puerto Rico.

Shortly thereafter, Diego de Nicuesa, a Spanish adventurer, raided St. Croix for slaves, capturing as many as 140 Caribs. These were transported to Central America and never seen again. Renewed Carib resistance to Spanish hegemony culminated in their active participation in the general Taino uprising on Puerto Rico in 1511. For these efforts, the Spanish Crown decreed that “Caribs” – the term was now broadly defined to include all recalcitrant Native Americans – were to be done away with. Thus, a series of tragic events which began on St. Croix in 1493 served as the pretext for the “legalized” extermination of thousands of Native American peoples in the Antilles. In the face of ongoing military pressure from the Spanish in Puerto Rico, the Caribs permanently abandoned St. Croix by 1590.



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THE EUROPEAN PRESENCE AT SALT RIVER

Salt River was the focal point of several attempts to colonize St. Croix in the mid-17th century. The frequent change of ownership by force of arms was typical of the European struggles for dominance in the New World, in which the West Indies was regarded as pivotal: the English, 1641; the Dutch, 1642-45; the English, 1645-50; the French, 1650-96, with a lease to the French Chapter of the Knights of Malta, 1655-1665. The settlement there, small and primitive, was built in part atop the prehistoric site and extended along the western shore of the bay. It served a system of fledgling plantations growing cotton, indigo, tobacco, sugar, and a variety of food staples. The only surviving structural evidence of this turbulent period in Virgin Island history is the triangular earthwork fortification at Salt River begun by the English in 1641 and completed by the Dutch the following year. The French referred to it initially as Fort Flamand (“the Flemish Fort”) and later as Fort Sale. This feature is the only one of its type, dating from this period, that has survived in the West Indies, and possibly in North America as well. After the mid-1660s, the settlement at Salt River was relocated to the harbor area along the northeast coast of St. Croix known as Bassin, later to become the town of Christiansted after Danish sovereignty was established in 1733. From the early 18th to mid-19th centuries, the Salt River area continued to play an important role in the economic development of St. Croix, with surrounding sugar plantations using the bay as “unofficial” port for the shipment of sugar, rum, and molasses. In the 1780s, the Danish West Indian government deemed it necessary to build a small gun battery and a custom house along the west shore of the bay in order to control smuggling.

PRESERVATION

Recognizing the extent of nationally-significant resources at Salt River, the federal government bestowed National Historic Landmark and National Natural Landmark statuses in 1960 and 1980, respectively. On 24 February, 1992, 912 acres of Salt River Bay was established as the 360th unit of the National Park System.