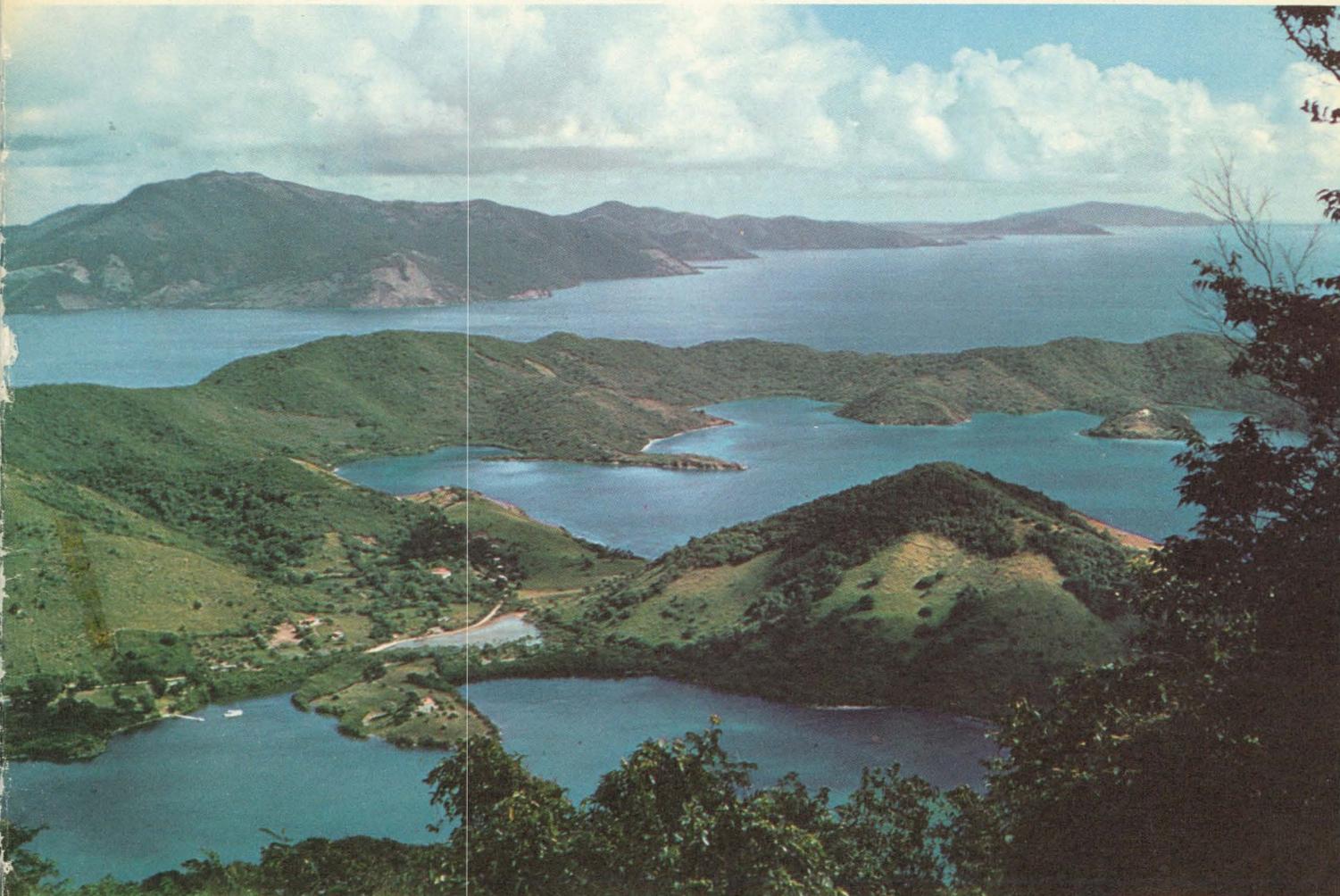


Virgin Islands

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NATIONAL PARK



• PREPARED BY

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UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR

Foreword

The American Virgin Islands consist of a group of three principal Islands — St. Croix, St. Thomas and St. John — and a number of surrounding smaller islands, rocks, and cays in the Caribbean chain.

St. John is the smallest of the three, with an area of a little more than 12,000 acres — approximately the size of Bermuda. It lies some 1,440 miles southeast of New York City, 900 miles southeast of Miami, Florida, and about 50 miles east of Puerto Rico.

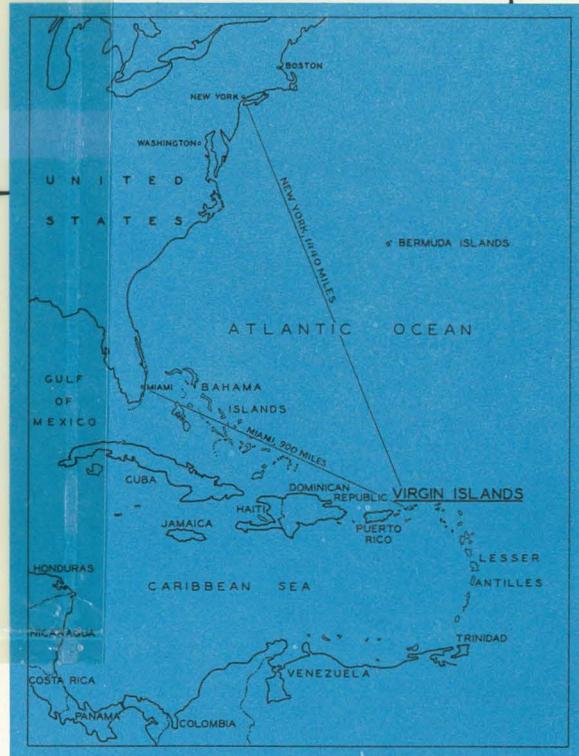
The more populous islands of St. Croix and St. Thomas have been greatly changed over the years. Recently, they have become popular locations for commercial enterprises catering to tourists and for privately owned tropical homes and retreats. The Island of St. John, on the other hand, remains relatively undisturbed and possessed of unique qualities for a national park.

The Virgin Islands are readily accessible from the eastern seaboard by air and water and have become popular with tourists in recent years.

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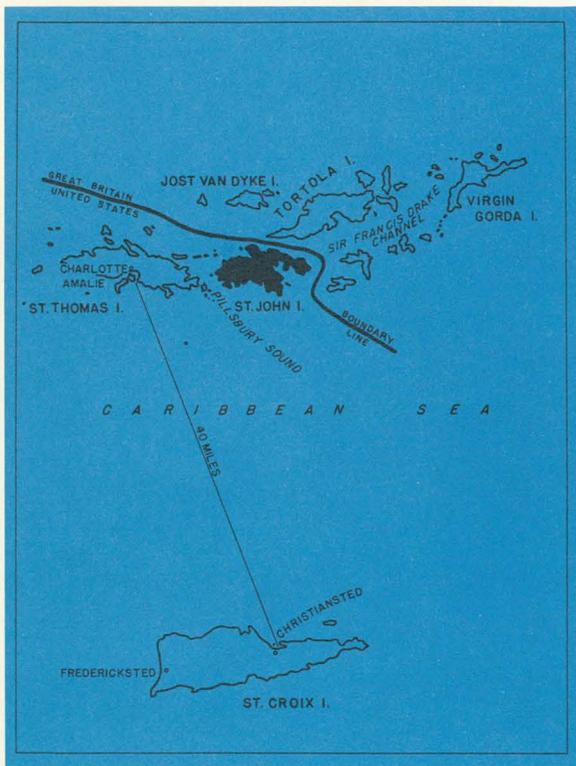
View of Eastern end of St. John from Bordeaux Mountain with Fortberg Hill in the foreground and Tortola Island (British Virgin Islands) in the background.



VIRGIN ISLANDS NATIONAL

PARK PROJECT

*The Island of St. John
is centrally located among the
American and British Virgin Islands.*



The Virgin Islands National Park, recommended by the Secretary of the Interior to the Congress, was authorized by the Act of August 2, 1956. It is limited to an area not to exceed 9,500 acres, including approximately 9,485 acres on the Island of St. John and adjacent rocks and cays and a small area for administrative and operational purposes on nearby St. Thomas.

Tentative boundaries for the park include the portions most suitable for park purposes and exclude about one-third of the island's acreage. The areas not included contain the principal settlements and the limited amounts of agricultural lands, lying close to the bays on the southwestern and eastern sides of the island, required by the resident population. (See map, pages 8 and 9.)

St. John, set in the protected and colorful channels of the archipelago, is different from any area set apart in the United States or its Territories for national park purposes. It does not require elaborate development, since retention of its unspoiled charm is a principal objective.

The national park on St. John was made possible by the contribution of some 5,000 acres of land on the island, acquired for the purpose by Jackson Hole Preserve, Inc., with funds made available by Mr. Laurance S. Rockefeller and members of the Rockefeller family.

SCENIC FEATURES AND SETTING

St. John contains only 19.2 square miles of land. It is *nine* miles long, nearly *five* miles wide, and rises abruptly from the sea to an elevation of 1,277 feet at the top of Bordeaux Mountain. The tropical vegetation covering 85 percent of the island contrasts pleasantly with the white sand of its beaches and the colorful hues of the surrounding waters.

Centerline Road, extending from Cruz Bay on the west to Coral Bay on the east, meanders generally along the high central backbone of the island and gives access to many of its points of interest. From these, ever-changing views may be had of waters dotted with islands and cays, some belonging to the United States and others to Great Britain. To the west, across the *two-mile* width of Pillsbury Sound, lie St. Thomas and the two St. James Islands. Nearby are Lovango Cay and Congo Cay. Northerly and easterly beyond the International Boundary lie the British Virgin Islands, dominated by Tortola Island, and stretching eastward to Virgin Gorda. Drake's Passage, a channel *three* miles wide between St. John and Tortola, takes its name from Sir Francis Drake, who in 1580 became the first European to sail through it. *Eight-tenths* of a mile across "The Narrows" from Mary Point

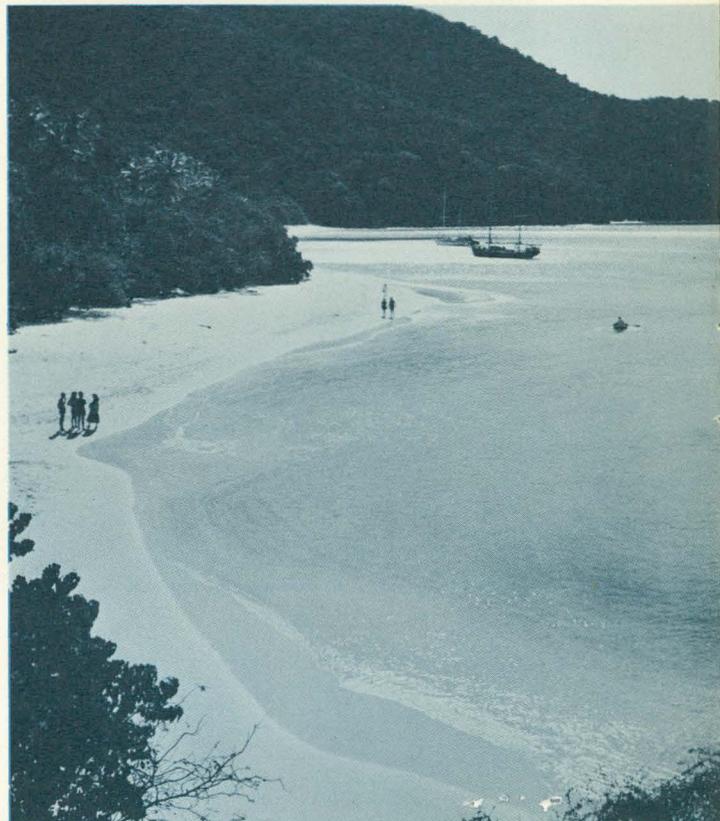
on the north shore of St. John lies the closest British possession, Great Thatch Island. To the south stretches the Caribbean, with the island of St. Croix *forty* miles away.

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Petroglyphs or rock inscriptions carved by the Carib Indians before the Virgin Islands were discovered by Columbus.

Gleaming white sand and the crystal clear waters make swimming the most popular recreational activity.

—Photo by Fritz Henle



HISTORY AND ARCHEOLOGY

Columbus was probably the first European to see St. John, in the group of islands he named "Las Virgenes," in honor of St. Ursula and the eleven thousand virgins. At that time, the Carib Indians had already been occupying these islands, as has been determined by the stone picture writings they left behind.

Archeological research by Theodore DeBooy in 1916-17 led to the conclusion that the petroglyphs, or stone writings, were made in pre-Columbian days and that many of the inscriptions had already been obliterated by weathering.

Even so, distinct figures remain on the rocks at Reef Bay, near the waterfall, and also on Congo Cay and Carval Rock off St. John to the northwest.

On the north side of the island, at Old Oven Hill near Leinster Bay, potsherds of Carib origin have been found. DeBooy states that the period of Carib occupancy must have been of short duration.

Ethnologists believe that these Caribs came originally from South America, traveling up the chain of the Lesser Antilles in search of suitable places to live. Some of the tribes located on small is-



lands not suited to agriculture, and these tribes became warlike, going off in boats to plunder the tribal settlements on the larger islands. It is thought that the Caribs of St. John belonged to one of these warrior tribes.

The pages of history for the period directly following the discovery of St. John and the other Virgin Islands by Columbus are blank. But a German historian named Oldendorp records that about 1555 the Caribs were driven from the Virgin Islands by Charles V of Spain and his "Conquistadores." At least there were no Indians on St. John when the first European settlers arrived in the 17th century.

The first mention of settlers on the Virgin Islands was made in 1625 but St. John was not successfully settled until 1684. All earlier attempts at colonization failed because the English from Tortola drove off the would-be settlers. In 1687, the Danish West India and Guinea Company laid claim to St. John, but it was not until March 25, 1717 that the first permanent colony was established on the island. Twenty planters and five soldiers landed at Coral Harbor on the east end of St. John and defied the British to drive them away.

Immediately upon their arrival, they built Fort Berg on the summit of a small peninsula now known as Fortberg Hill, separating Coral Harbor from Hurricane Hole. This was a most strategic location because no one could approach from any direction without being visible to the watchers in the fort. A bat-

tery was built in conjunction with the fort but both are ruins today.

By 1726, all available land on St. John was taken by new settlers for sugar plantations, and the island flourished. Life was apparently serene and prosperous until November 13, 1733, when the

Historic Reef Bay Estate House, the center of a flourishing sugar plantation of a century ago.

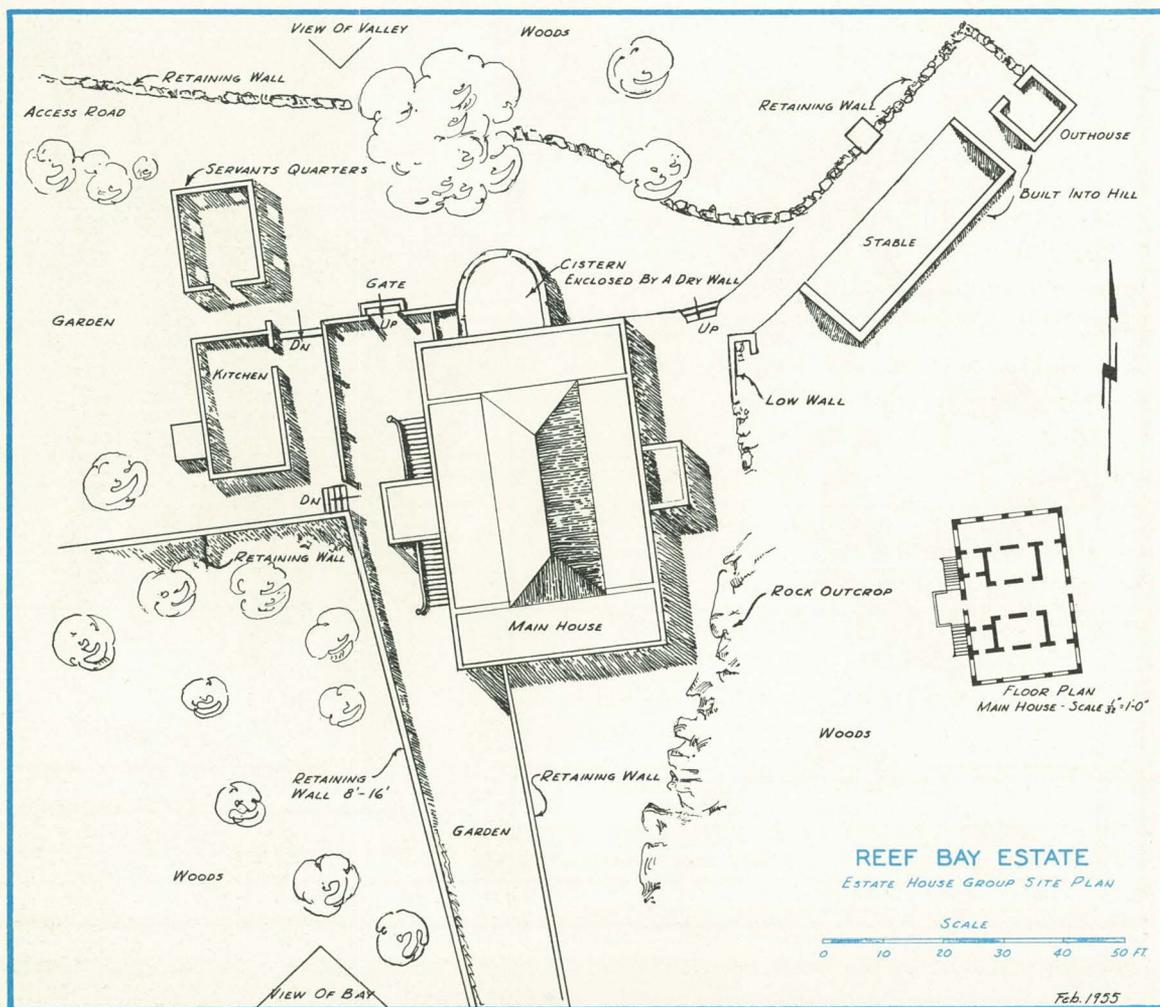


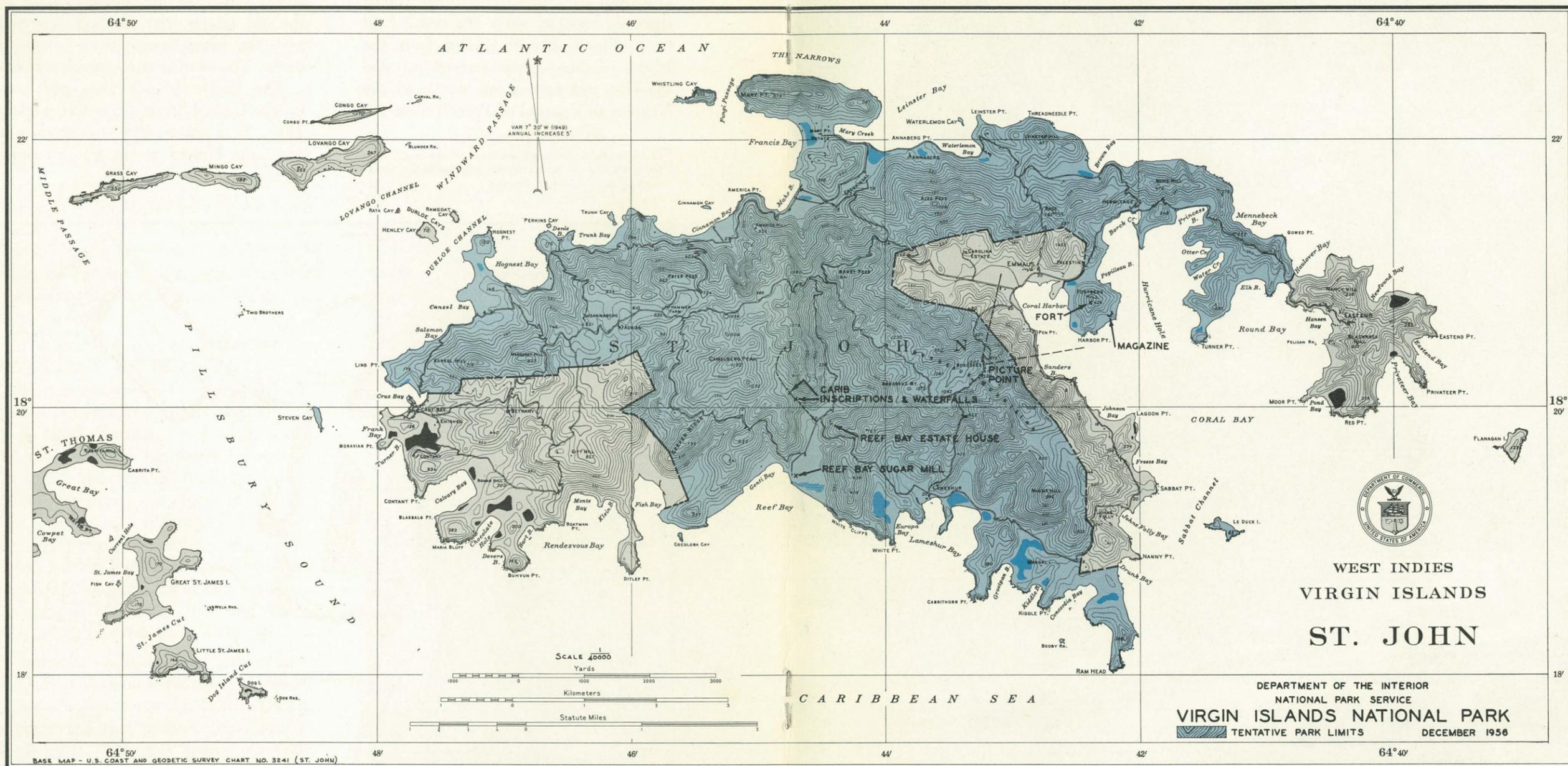
slaves revolted. Some of the planters fled to Peter Durlieu's estate, now known as Caneel Bay Plantation. They stayed there six months, while the revolt held sway. Finally French soldiers from the Island of Martinique arrived, quelled the riot and carried off many of the Negroes to a period of French slavery.*

* Discrepancies in historical accounts of the rebellion of the slaves and the results of that rebellion make further research on this subject desirable.

With the abolition of slavery in the Danish West Indies in the mid-1800's, it was felt to be impossible to keep up the old estates; the planters departed, and the island began to go back to bush. Thus ended the agricultural era.

The Virgin Islands were purchased by the United States from Denmark in 1917. It is noteworthy that as early as 1867 the United States was interested in them.







NATURAL HISTORY

St. John Island, which is one of the Lesser Antilles group, is of ancient volcanic origin. There are also some sedimentary and metamorphic rocks, such as limestone and schist. The mountainous topography found on the island today was formed by the geological processes of folding, faulting, and erosion which followed the deposition of the sediments and the extrusion of the volcanic rocks. Steep mountains, topped by Bordeaux Mountain with an elevation of 1,277 feet, deep, narrow valleys, and many bays with pure white beaches have resulted. The many interesting coral reefs extending outward from the island are being built up on an underwater shelf of rock formed during a recent period of submergence. There are no known minerals of commercial value on the island, although traces of many kinds have been discovered.

The vegetation on the island consists of a second-growth, tropical forest with associated shrubs, vines and herbaceous plants. The original virgin forest was removed or radically altered during the 1700's or early 1800's, when much of it was cleared for sugar plantations, and most of the remainder was cut to produce charcoal for sugar refining and other processing operations. With the abandonment of the planta-

tions in the middle 1800's, forest growth again took over. Today, approximately 85 percent of the island is forest-covered and there is little visible evidence of the former uses. While not of commercial importance because of its composition and size, the forest has importance and value for park purposes which should increase with time and protection.

This tropical forest has an unusually diversified flora for such a small area and seems to be unique even for the Caribbean region. According to N. L. Britton in *The Scientific Survey of Porto Rico and The Virgin Islands, 1923-25*, more than 260 species of native woody plants were specifically recorded for St. John, of which 154 were trees, 72 shrubs, 26 woody vines, and 8 cacti. The more common trees found on the island include cinnamon-bay, various species of fig, palms, mahogany, mango, soursop, breadfruit, guava, seagrape, and mangrove. Flamboyant, hibiscus, bougainvillea, and other flowering shrubs are found in abundance. Several species of orchid and ferns also add interest. In addition, there are on the rocky and semi-arid slopes on the leeward side of the island several species of cacti, one of which (*Cephalocereus royeni*) grows at least twenty feet tall and rather closely resembles the organpipe cactus of the

St. John is truly a tropical paradise.

—Photo by Fritz Henle

Southwest. The flora of the island appears to be in a natural succession toward its original condition.

Wildlife on St. John Island, as on other islands of the West Indies, is not unusually abundant or varied. The mongoose, a small animal introduced from Asia many years ago, can still be found even though the government has tried to exterminate it because it destroys chickens, birds, and small animals. Small lizards are common but there are no snakes, and mosquitoes and flies are relatively scarce. Bird life, on the other hand, is plentiful. There are probably between 100 and 150 species of resident and migratory birds found on St. John. Most of these are members of North American families rather than tropical

families. Among the more common land birds are doves, pigeons, mockingbirds, warblers, hummingbirds, and hawks, and parakeets have been reported. Many kinds of waterfowl, including pelicans, boobies, grebes, ducks, gulls, terns, frigate birds, herons and egrets, are seen around its shores.

Fish common to the Caribbean Sea abound off the shores of St. John. Among the large deep-sea fish are sailfish, tarpon, barracuda, kingfish, dolphin, tuna, bonita, and shark. There are also many small, bright-colored tropical fish to add interest to the turquoise waters. Many brilliant and varied forms of shells, including the large king and queen conch shells, are found on the beaches.



RECREATION POSSIBILITIES



*Ruins of an extensive old sugar mill
at Caneel Bay.*

—Photo by Fritz Henle

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*This large and spectacular cactus
is a common landmark in the Virgin Islands.*

The Island of St. John tells the story of the settlement of the Caribbean islands and life as it existed from prehistoric time. In addition to features already described, there are bush-covered remains of the 18th-century forts and batteries, picturesque ruins of extensive estates constructed during the planters' era, and parts of old sugar mills and equipment.

To become best acquainted with the island, one should travel either by horseback or on foot. It is possible on the existing trails to plan a number of trips that will include both mountain scenery and seaside beauty without retracing any of the route. Hikers and horseback riders do not find either of these activities under the tropical sun uncomfortably hot because of the abundant shade and the constant blowing of the trade winds that give the island its even climate.

Sailing and other boating possibilities are almost unlimited. The many sheltered coves and harbors offer ample anchorage and winds and tides around the island are ideal for sailing most of the year.

Swimming from white sandy beaches is one of the most popular sports of the island, and aqua-lung enthusiasts find the sea around the island ideal for their underwater activities.

MISCELLANEOUS INFORMATION

The climate of the Virgin Islands is subtropical and healthful. Warm, sunny days throughout the year provide an average annual temperature of about 78°, with a difference of only about 6° between winter and summer. The lowest recorded temperature is 69° and the highest 91°. Normal annual rainfall is between 40 and 50 inches and the humidity is comparatively low.

There were 746 people residing on St.

John in 1950, as reported in the census records for that year. St. Thomas is the principal transport hub of the American Virgin Islands and nearly all visitors to St. John arrive via St. Thomas. Regular mail and passenger service is maintained between the two islands by municipally owned and operated launches. Tourist accommodations on St. John are available at Caneel Bay, Trunk Bay, Cruz Bay, and Coral Bay.

The Virgin Islands, with their many bays and island passages, are outstanding for boating and sailing.





*Aerial view of St. John, with Caneel Bay
Plantation Resort in the foreground.*



UNITED STATES
DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR

Fred Seaton, *Secretary*



NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

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