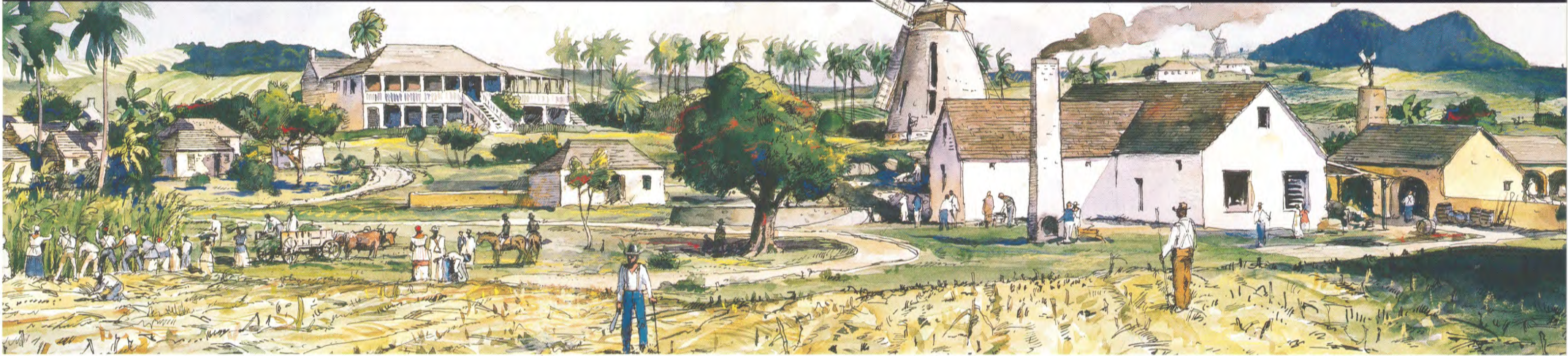


# Saint Croix's Golden Age of Sugar



A plantation at work on 19th-century St. Croix  
ILLUSTRATION BY NICHOLAS SCHREIBER

## The Sugar Plantation

For a time St. Croix was one of the wealthiest sugar islands in the West Indies. The good years coincided with wars between colonial powers. In the late 18th and early 19th centuries production was high, and the price of sugar on the world market was stable. In 1803 the island's population was 30,000—26,500 were slaves who planted, harvested, and processed cane on 218 plantations. More than 100 windmills and almost as many animal mills ran night and day in season, converting sugar into wealth.

Growing sugar was hard work. The idea of the indolent planter is mostly myth. A planter and his manager had to know how to plant a crop and bring it in; how to make sugar, molasses, and rum and get them to market; how to build; how to motivate enslaved

labor; and how to deal with island merchants, ship captains, and bankers. Work went on year-round. For the ambitious and ingenious, a plantation was an all but certain way to a fortune. But for most planters it was a business loaded with risk.

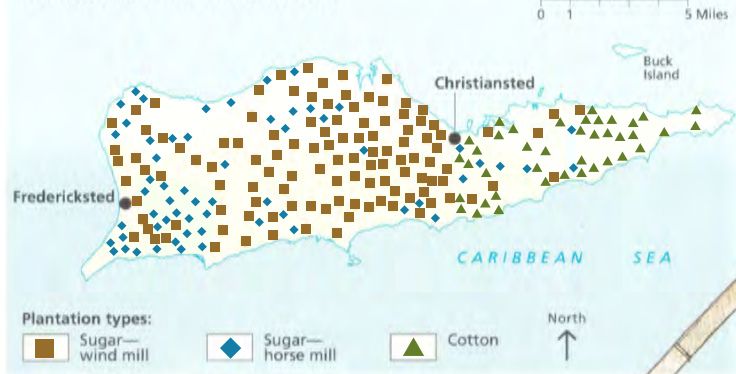
Planters contended with drought, hurricanes, fluctuating market prices, and the hazards of shipping. Considerable investment, much of it borrowed at high rates, was needed for buildings and machinery as well as land and slaves—because a planter was as much a manufacturer as a farmer. Sugar production was a highly integrated process from field to market that, in fact, foreshadowed the coming industrial age.

Most plantations were small communities of 225 to 300 acres, but not self-sufficient. Much food, clothing, and equipment was imported. Two-thirds of the land grew cane; the rest contained dwellings, garden plots for provisions, pasture, and the large T-shaped factory building. In it cane was transformed into raw sugar called muscovado. The factory was part of an industrial complex: a great stone windmill for squeezing juice from cane, a boiling house for reducing the juice to crystals, curing houses for drying sugar and draining off molasses, warehouses, and a distillery for turning molasses into rum. The manager's house and slave village stood nearby. The first slave dwellings were of wattle-and-daub construction. Later ones were of masonry, usually built by the slaves themselves as single cottages in orderly rows. The greathouse—dwelling of

the planter and family—was the glory of the plantation. Nothing so manifested a planter's luxurious mode of living. Often built by slaves, it usually sat on commanding ground, surrounded by the carriage house, stables, quarters for house servants, and other dependencies. It was a work of art illustrative of an age.

The best days were over by 1820. Competition from beet sugar, coupled with slave emancipation in 1848 and sporadic hurricanes, drought, and labor unrest through the balance of the century, contributed to an irreversible economic decline. When the last sugar plantations ceased operating in the late 1920s, those who labored in their fields and factories did not lament their passing.

Plantations on St. Croix, c. 1800



### Fields of Cane

Sugarcane worked a revolution in Caribbean life. After sugar caught on as a staple in the French and English islands about 1650, plantations replaced small farms, and indentured labor gave way to chattel slavery. Wealth accumulated at the top of the social order and misery at the bottom. Society on this island and in the West Indies generally is today the heir of these beginnings.

Sugar cane is an Old World species, a member of the grass family, and grows readily in this climate. Work began in the fall, the rainy season, with gangs of slaves digging trenches for cuttings. Sprouts were weeded until knee high, and 16 months after planting the cane was 10 feet tall and ready for cutting. The harvest was the busiest time of the year. Working from first light to last, slaves stripped off the leaves, cut

down the cane with their hooked bills, and loaded the stalks into carts for the mill. Grinding went on night and day. Workers passed the canes through the mill's rollers twice to increase juice extraction. The juice dripped into a collection box and from there ran by trough to the boiling house.

The limestone windmills of St. Croix were sturdy conical structures of Dutch origin, refined by decades of English experience.

### Making Sugar

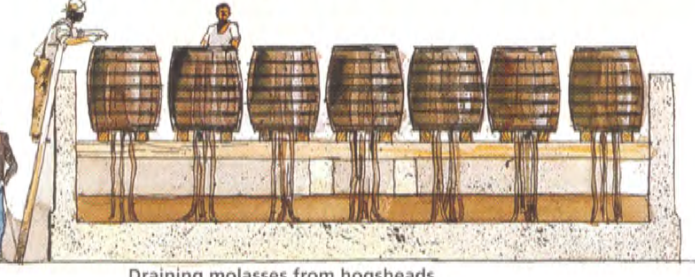
Cane juice flowed straight from the mill to the boiling house, where it was reduced to a moist, brown sugar called muscovado. A boiling master, usually a slave valued for his skill at the process, directed work. Along one wall stood a receiving vat and next to it a battery of successively smaller cauldrons, called coppers, over furnaces fueled by bagasse, dried crushed cane stalks.

On the opposite wall were shallow cooling pans. After skimming off impurities and adding lime, workers ladled the juice from copper to copper, stirring and skimming. At the last and hottest copper, the rapidly thickening juice was carefully watched over. If the boiling master could produce a sugary thread be-



In the boiling house

tween his thumb and forefinger, cooking was done. At his cry of "strike," workers turned the moist crystals into wooden pans to cool. This sugar was packed in hogsheads, huge barrels of 1,600-pound capacity. They were put on racks and the molasses drained off. After a few weeks, when the sugar was



Draining molasses from hogsheads

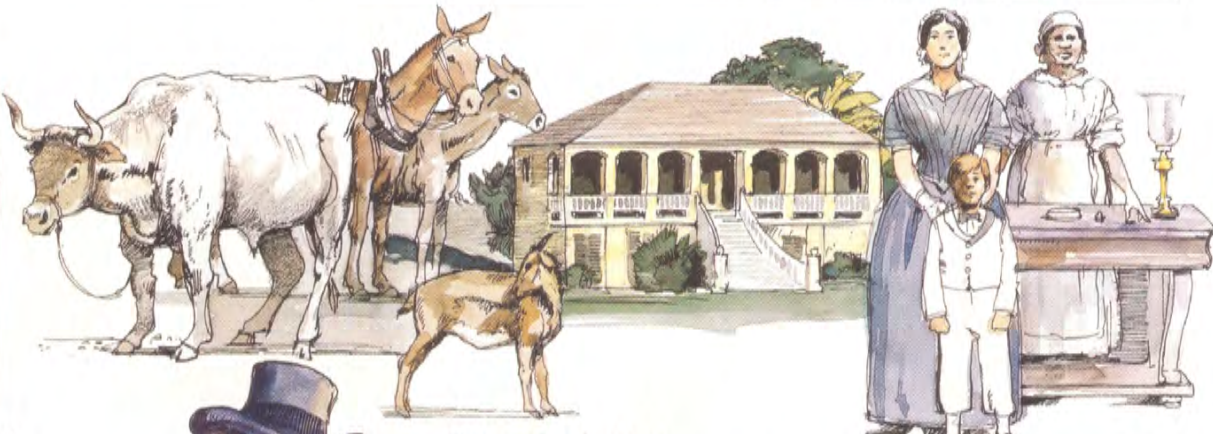
dry, the hogsheads were topped off with fresh sugar, sealed, and then loaded on oxcarts for transport to the town wharf for export.

Molasses was a lucrative byproduct. Most was used to make rum for export to Europe or North America.

### Wind Power and Animal

Plodding teams of oxen or mules powered the islands' earliest mills. They turned long poles attached to vertical rollers that extracted juice from the cane fed into them. Beginning in 1750 the planters, with slave labor, built scores of wind-driven mills on high ground to catch the trade winds. In 1794, 100 windmills and several dozen animal mills were operating on St. Croix.

Workers steered the blades into the wind with the tailpiece (1). Gears (2) transferred power through a drive shaft (3) to vertical rollers (4) into which workers fed cane. Juice flowed into a reservoir (5) and then by trough to the boiling house.



### The Greathouse

The greathouse was a planter's joy and pride. It was usually built in the prevailing neoclassical style by slave labor, including craftsmen. Like the mill, the house sat on high ground to catch prevailing breezes. From the gallery a planter could survey his domain. The earliest estate houses on St. Croix were relatively modest wooden affairs, with separate kitchens to reduce the risk of fire.

From the 1760s on, accumulated wealth enabled planters to build with limestone and brick. Some houses featured a staircase sweeping up to the main level—to a parlor, dining room, bedrooms, and perhaps an office and library. The rooms were airy with high ceilings.

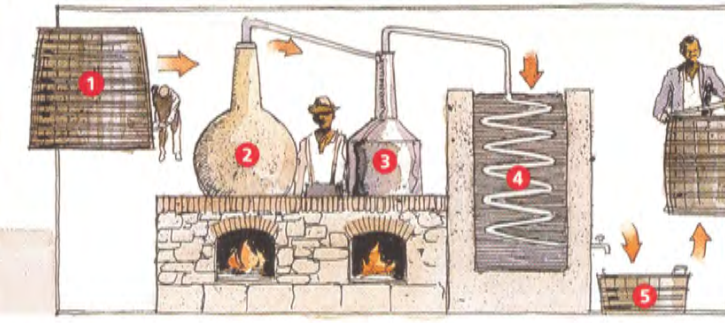
A planter's wife would go to great expense to fill the house with fine mahogany furniture and imported silver, crystal, porcelain, and linen. The most important supporting buildings were the cookhouse (with banks of ovens and grates), stables, and servants' quarters.

Presiding over this world the planter's wife saw to all things domestic and frequently organized sparkling socials that brightened island life. She was helped by a host of servants, usually specially selected blacks brought into the household to cook, clean, tend children, and look after the horses and carriages. The duties of these blacks and their relationship to the planter and his family gave them a measure of independence and considerable rank over field hands.

### Distilling Rum

Rum was the staff of West Indian life and a plantation's second product. It was made by fermenting water and molasses, five parts to one in a vat (1) with a measure of skimmings, oranges, and herbs to taste. After a week the mix

was heated in a still (2). Vapors passed to a doubler (3), gaining strength, and from there through condensing coils (4) into a vat (5). Emerging as 120-proof rum, it was aged and barreled for export. Crucian rum was among the best.



### Life of the Blacks



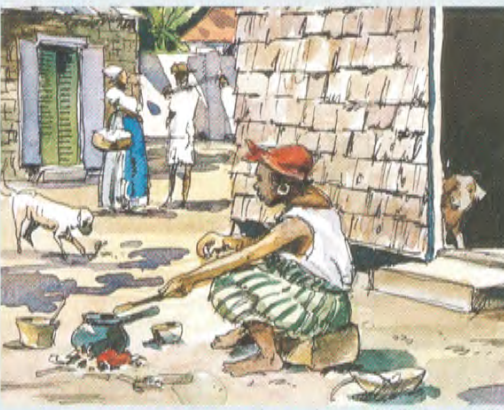
The town market

From settlement in 1734 to the abolition of Denmark's slave trade in 1803, tens of thousands of blacks—the exact number is not known—were shipped to St. Croix to work in its fields. Their hard, monotonous labor underlay St. Croix's wealth. They worked from dawn until dark, with two hours off for a meal, six days a week. At crop time they worked around the clock, followed by a few days of festivity, a yearly high point for slaves. Males and females, with children in tow, labored together to plant, weed, or cut in season. Men worked in the mill and boiling

house, tended stock, carted sugar to the dock, served in the household, constructed buildings, and became artisans. Amenities were few. They lived in masonry huts that they built themselves, arranged in rows for control. They sewed their clothing from annual allotments of fabrics. Food was scanty: to corn meal and salt fish they added produce from their garden plots. They sold surplus produce in the public market. Despite slavery, some African customs persisted in language, religion, and foods.



Cutting cane



Cooking a meal

### Exports and Imports

St. Croix lived by trade. The island exported five commodities—sugar, rum, molasses, cotton, and hardwoods—and imported (as it does today) nearly everything it used or consumed. Much of this cargo rumbled across Christiansted wharf in ox carts driven by slaves and was loaded on ocean-going vessels. When yields were good and prices high, planters lived lavishly; spent freely in London, Copenhagen, or Philadelphia on equipment, food, and luxuries; and paid off debt.

Until Denmark ended its slave trade in 1803, Christiansted was an important port in the infamous Triangular Trade that took cheap goods from Europe to Africa, slaves to the Caribbean, and sugar and molasses to New England or Europe. The

Middle Passage was sheer horror. So many dead and dying were tossed overboard, said one captain, that "the sea lanes to the West Indies were carpeted with the bones of black Africa." At Christiansted survivors were herded into the compound of the DWI&G Company and auctioned off to the planters and city dwellers.

The Napoleonic Wars and British occupations (1801, 1807–15) interrupted old trade patterns with Europe and the United States. As peace returned, the United States soon became the island's chief trading partner. The link even survived high tariffs protecting the fledgling U.S. beet sugar industry. Long at-



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