



Christiansted in 1839 by Danish artist Theodore C. Sabroe  
DET KÖNIGL. G. BILDETS.

Capital of the Danish West Indies when Sugar Was King

Denmark was a latecomer in the race for colonies in the New World. Columbus's voyages to the Caribbean gave Spain a monopoly in the region for over a century. But after the English planted a colony in the Lesser Antilles in 1624, the French, Dutch, and eventually Danes joined in the scramble for empire. Seeking islands on which to cultivate sugar as well as an outlet for trade, the Danish West India & Guinea Company (a group of nobles and merchants chartered by the Crown) took possession of St. Thomas in 1672 and its neighbor St. John in 1717. Because neither island was well suited to agriculture, the company in 1733 purchased St. Croix—a larger, flatter, and more fertile island 40 miles south—from France. Colonization of St. Croix began the next year, after troops put down a slave revolt on St. John.

For their first settlement the Danes chose a good harbor on the northeast coast, the site of an earlier French village named Bassin. Their leader Frederick Moth was a man of vision. He planned a new town—named Christiansted in honor of reigning King Christian VI—and had the island surveyed into plantations of 150 acres, priced to attract new settlers. The best land came under cultivation and dozens of sugar factories began operating. Population approached 10,000, nearly 9,000 of them slaves imported from West Africa to work in the fields.

Even with this growth St. Croix's economy did not flourish. The planters chafed under the DWI&G Company's restrictive trading practices. This monopoly so burdened planters with regulations

that they persuaded the king to take over the islands in 1755. Crown administration coincided with the beginning of a long period of growth for the cane sugar industry. St. Croix became the capital of the "Danish Islands in America," as they were then called, and royal governors took up residence at Christiansted. For the next century and a half, the town's fortunes were tied to St. Croix's sugar industry. Between 1760 and 1820 the economy boomed. Population rose dramatically, in part because free-trade policies and neutrality attracted settlers from other islands—hence the prevalence of British culture on this Danish island with a French name—and exports of sugar and rum soared. Capital was available, sugar prices were high, labor cheap. Many planters, merchants, and traders reaped great profits, as reflected in the

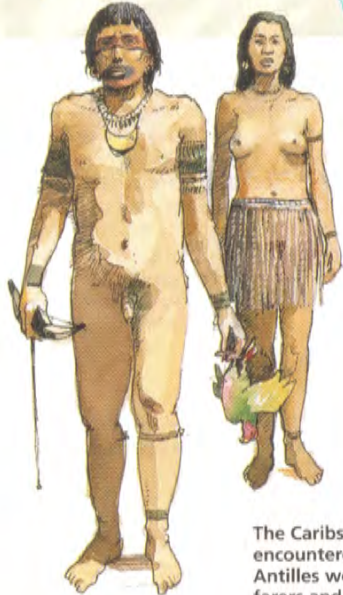
fine architecture of town and country. This golden age was eclipsed within a few decades by the rise of the beet sugar industry in Europe and North America. A drop in the price of cane sugar, increasing debt, drought, hurricanes, and the rising cost of labor after slavery was abolished in 1848 all contributed to economic decline. As the 1800s wore on, St. Croix became little more than a marginal sugar producer. The era of fabulous wealth was a thing of the past. When the United States purchased the Danish West Indies in 1917, it was for the islands' strategic harbors, not their agriculture. The lovely town of Christiansted is now a link to the old way of life here, with all its elegance, complexity, and contradiction.



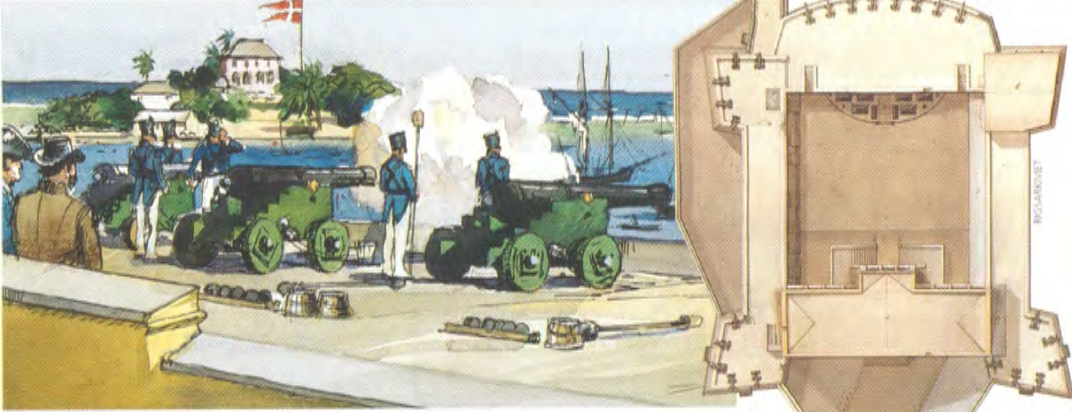
Before the Danes

This island's first settlers migrated up the Lesser Antilles from South America. By 2,000 years ago there was a settlement at Salt River Bay on the island's north shore. By 1300 the village there had the only ceremonial plaza/ball court so far discovered in the Lesser Antilles.

On his second voyage, in 1493, Columbus came upon this island and named it Santa Cruz (Holy Cross). Sighting the village at Salt River Bay, he sent a boat ashore to "have speech with the natives." The Spaniards met a canoe with Caribs. A fight ensued. One Carib was killed, and the rest were captured. Two Spaniards were wounded, one fatally. It was the first documented skirmish between Europeans and New World natives.



The Caribs that Columbus encountered in the Lesser Antilles were skilled seafarers and warriors. Their reputation for cannibalism is exaggerated.



Regulars and Militia

Though Denmark relied mostly on neutrality to defend its far-off tropical colonies, a military presence was essential in a region dominated by European rivalries and slave labor. On St. Croix, defense rested on a system of forts and batteries garrisoned by regular Danish troops. The fort in Christiansted, shown in plan at right, was finished in 1749. Captured leaders of the 1733 slave uprising on St. John did some of the construction work.

Named Christiansvaern (Christian's defense) in honor of King Christian VI, the fort was armed with 18- and 6-pounder cannons. These guns and two outlying batteries, combined with a formidable reef, dominated the harbor entrance.

Under Gov.-Gen. Peter von Scholten, an aristocrat with a taste for ceremony, the military on St. Croix enjoyed perhaps its best years. Von Scholten reorganized the regulars and enlarged militia units and the fire brigade. Free Blacks filled the ranks of the latter and also served in the militia. Christiansted's garrison in 1830—at least on paper—numbered 215 officers and men, including a corps of musicians. This was nearly half of all regulars in the Danish West Indies.

Peter von Scholten is best remembered for his role in freeing the slaves. Arriving in the islands as a young officer in 1803, von Scholten rose through the ranks and was governor-general from 1827–48.

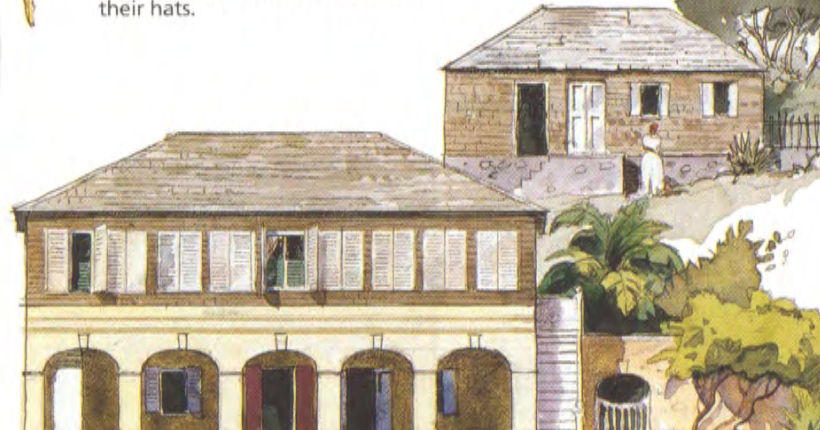
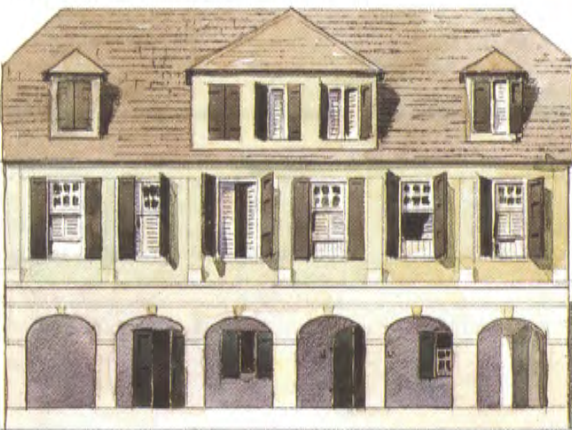
Anna Heegaard, his mistress, was a free woman of color who very likely influenced his views on treating blacks humanely. Despite the fact that the king confirmed his emancipation decree, von Scholten was dismissed from office and stripped of his pension. He died in Denmark in 1854, a broken man.



Free Blacks

In the days of slavery a distinct class, Free Blacks, emerged on St. Croix. Some were given their freedom for faithful service; others bought freedom with money earned as artisans or by raising and selling produce from their gardens in the Sunday Market. They worked as small merchants, fishermen, seamen, shoemakers, tailors, masons, coopers, carpenters, and blacksmiths.

As early as 1747 a section of Christiansted, Neger Gotted—later called Free Gut—was set aside for Free Blacks to build their own houses. Between 1791 and 1815, the town's Free Blacks more than doubled their numbers, rising from 775 to 1,764. Not until 1834 were they granted full equality with whites. Free Black status for men was indicated by a red and white cockade worn on their hats.



In The West Indian Style

Christiansted blends vistas of neoclassicism with a lovely natural setting of high hills and reef-fringed harbor. The town's orderly development over two centuries owes much to the island's first governor, Frederick Moth. He conceived of

Christiansted as a grand town like Christiania (now Oslo) in Norway, with boulevards, promenades, and handsome building lines. He put government buildings and townhouses near the waterfront, relegating workers' cottages to the

outskirts. A remarkably progressive building code embodied his ideas in 1747. Enforced by successive building inspectors, the code regulated materials and construction and even used zoning to regulate growth. Forms of the code were in force

throughout Danish rule, and economic stagnation after Danish rule helped the town survive passing building fads.

Christiansted took shape at a liberating moment in architecture. The

neoclassic style of the 1700s came to dominate the Danish islands, reflecting the wealth accumulated in their first century. The buildings were the work of anonymous craftsmen—masons and carpenters, many of them Free Blacks—in a

day when a master mason or carpenter could both plan a building and put it up. West Indian neoclassical at its best is dignified, solid, and functional. Buildings feature rhythmic arches, light and spacious interiors (often filled with

fine mahogany furniture), arched sidewalks to shelter pedestrians from sun and rain, galleries to catch breezes, and hip roofs that collect rainwater in cisterns. Yellow bricks that came as ships' ballast saw wide use in construction. Buildings from

Christiansted's golden age (above, left to right) are: wealthy merchant or planter's townhouse, Steeple Building (the first Danish Lutheran church on St. Croix), Government House, merchant's shop/residence, and worker's cottage.

Visiting the Park

Take a walking tour of principal historic buildings to sample the town's Danish past. Begin your tour at:

- 1 Fort Christiansvaern, completed 1749, added to 1835–41, protected the town from pirates, privateers, and slave uprisings. It was a police station and courthouse after 1878. It now features military exhibits.
- 2 The Steeple Building (1753) was St. Croix's first Lutheran church. Its steeple was completed in 1796. The congregation moved in 1831, and the building became a bakery, hospital, and school in turn.
- 3 The Danish West India & Guinea Company Warehouse (1749) housed offices and storerooms. Slaves were auctioned in the yard.

- 4 At the Customs House (1841) the government collected taxes on imports and exports. The town's post office was upstairs.
- 5 In the Scale House (1856) hogsheads of sugar and puncheons of rum were weighed before export. The weighmaster's office was on the first floor; soldiers were quartered upstairs. This building replaced an 1840 wooden weighing house.
- 6 Government House was completed in 1830 by connecting two imposing 1700s townhouses. Gov.-Gen. Peter von Scholten had his office here. The second-floor reception hall is restored to its 1840s appearance. The building is owned by the Virgin Islands government.

- 7 The Lutheran Church (1744), built as the Dutch Reformed Church, was sold in 1831 to Lutherans, moving here from the Steeple Building, taking with them most of the furnishings. The steeple is a later addition.

For your safety. Remember: driving is on the left. Inside the fort, do not climb on cannon or stand on walls.

Hours The park is open all year, except Thanksgiving and December 25, 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. It opens at 9 a.m. weekends and federal holidays.

Christiansted National Historic Site is one of over 390 parks in the National Park System. The National Park Service cares for these special places saved by the American people so that

all may experience our heritage. To learn more about parks and National Park Service programs in America's communities visit [www.nps.gov](http://www.nps.gov).

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