

# Christiansted

NATIONAL HISTORIC SITE • VIRGIN ISLANDS

*St. Croix Island is identified with three significant phases of New World history. It is the first territory now under the United States flag to have been discovered by Columbus; it played a part in the great struggle for colonial empire and during its long history has known the flags of five nations; and it is an outstanding example of Danish colonial development in the Lesser Antilles.*

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. He stopped briefly in Salt River Bay, and then sailed on. In the century that followed, Spain was distracted by the golden treasures of the Spanish Main and made no effort to colonize Santa Cruz. The British and Dutch came and went. Then in 1650 France seized the island, laid out townsites, plantations, and forts, only to abandon them after a few trying years. Behind they left little but the island's present name—St. Croix, French for "Holy Cross."

In 1733 the Danish West India and Guinea Company bought St. Croix. The company already owned the nearby islands of St. Thomas and St. John, but St. Croix was larger and flatter and held greater agricultural promise. 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.

Within 20 years the island had grown and prospered. By 1750 most of St. Croix was under cultivation and, although some cotton was grown on the eastern end of the island, "sugar was king." Enormous wealth derived from sugar production flowed to St. Croix during the 18th and early 19th centuries. It was this wealth that built St. Croix's substantial, attractive buildings, and supported the planters' and merchants' gracious and luxurious mode of life. Here was such affluence that mere militia officers were allowed to wear gold epaulets—insignia forbidden Regular officers at home because such lavish adornment might "drain" the Danish economy!

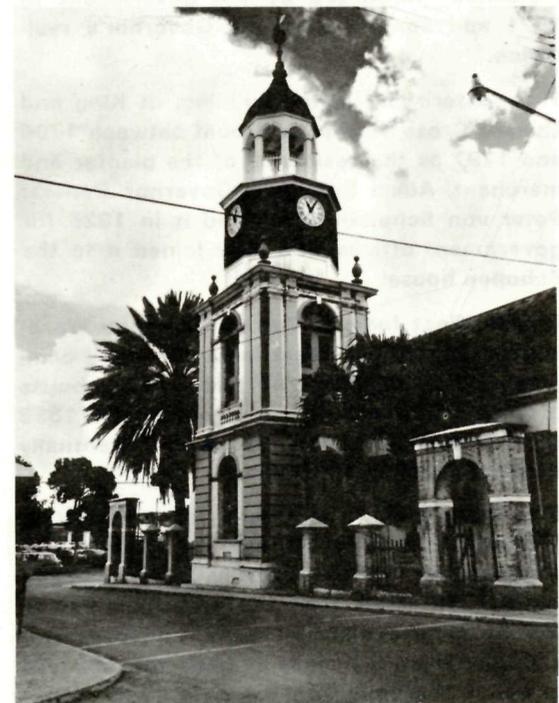
But, as so often happens to a single-crop economy, uncontrollable circumstances rapidly ended St. Croix's prosperity. A sharp drop in the price of sugar, beginning in 1820; the development of the sugar beet, grown in many countries in the early 19th century; planters' debts and land foreclosures; restrictive import laws of other nations; the 1848 emancipation of the slaves—all helped to bring St. Croix's opulence crashing down. By the end of the century the "Fabulous Sugar Island" had become an economic liability.

The United States tried to buy the islands of St. Thomas and St. John shortly after the Civil War. Denmark had been willing to sell but the agreement failed when the U.S. Senate refused to ratify it. A similar effort in 1902, this time to buy all three islands of the Danish West Indies, was also unsuccessful. During World War I the United States, fearing Germany might seize the harbor at St. Thomas and use it as a submarine base, offered \$25 million for the islands. Denmark accepted, and on March 31, 1917, the Danish flag flew over St. Croix for the last time.

Today, the era of Danish control over St. Croix is reflected in the historical associations and architecture of Christiansted. Here young Alexander Hamilton, who was to become one of the Founding Fathers of the United States, served as a clerk in Nicolas Cruger's countinghouse. Here Fort Christiansvaern stands, a silent yet striking witness of an age now gone. And here, in the square and along the waterfront, are the colorful buildings which were, for nearly 100 years, the seat of government of the former Danish West Indies.

## ABOUT YOUR VISIT

The National Park Service headquarters, in Fort Christiansvaern in downtown Christiansted, is open Monday through Saturday from 8 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. Here you can obtain information about the buildings that make up Christiansted National Historic Site. If you prefer, you may take the self-guided walking tour shown on the map on the other side of this folder.



STEEPLE BUILDING

## FOR YOUR SAFETY

The historic area has uneven walkways and stairs. USE CAUTION.

## ADMINISTRATION

Christiansted 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. Under terms of the agreement, Government House and the wharf area of Christiansted are to be preserved as excellent examples of the old Danish economy and way of life in the Virgin Islands. A superintendent, whose address is Box 160, Christiansted, St. Croix, VI 00820, is in immediate charge.

As the Nation's principal conservation agency, the Department of the Interior has responsibility for most of our nationally owned public lands and natural resources. This includes fostering the wisest use of our land and water resources, protecting our fish and wildlife, preserving the environmental and cultural values of our national parks and historical places, and providing for the enjoyment of life through outdoor recreation. The Department assesses our energy and mineral resources and works to assure that their development is in the best interests of all our people. The Department also has a major responsibility for American Indian reservation communities and for people who live in Island Territories under U.S. administration.

National Park Service  
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR

## CHRISTIANSTED'S HISTORIC BUILDINGS

For the most convenient walking tour of Christiansted, begin at Fort Christiansvaern and follow the route marked on the map.

**Fort Christiansvaern** is the best preserved of the five remaining Danish forts in the Virgin Islands. Largely completed by 1749, the Danish army garrisoned it until 1878, when it became a police station and courthouse. The fort was built mainly of hard yellow bricks brought from Denmark as ballast in sailing ships, and, although numerous minor additions and alterations have since been made, its appearance remains relatively unchanged. It is a prime example of 17th- and 18th-century Danish colonial military architecture.

**Old Danish Customs House.** In this building the colonial government performed one of its major responsibilities—collecting the customs. A part of the first floor dates to 1751, but most of the structure was completed between 1828 and 1830. Afterward, until 1927, the Post Office shared the building with the Customs Service.

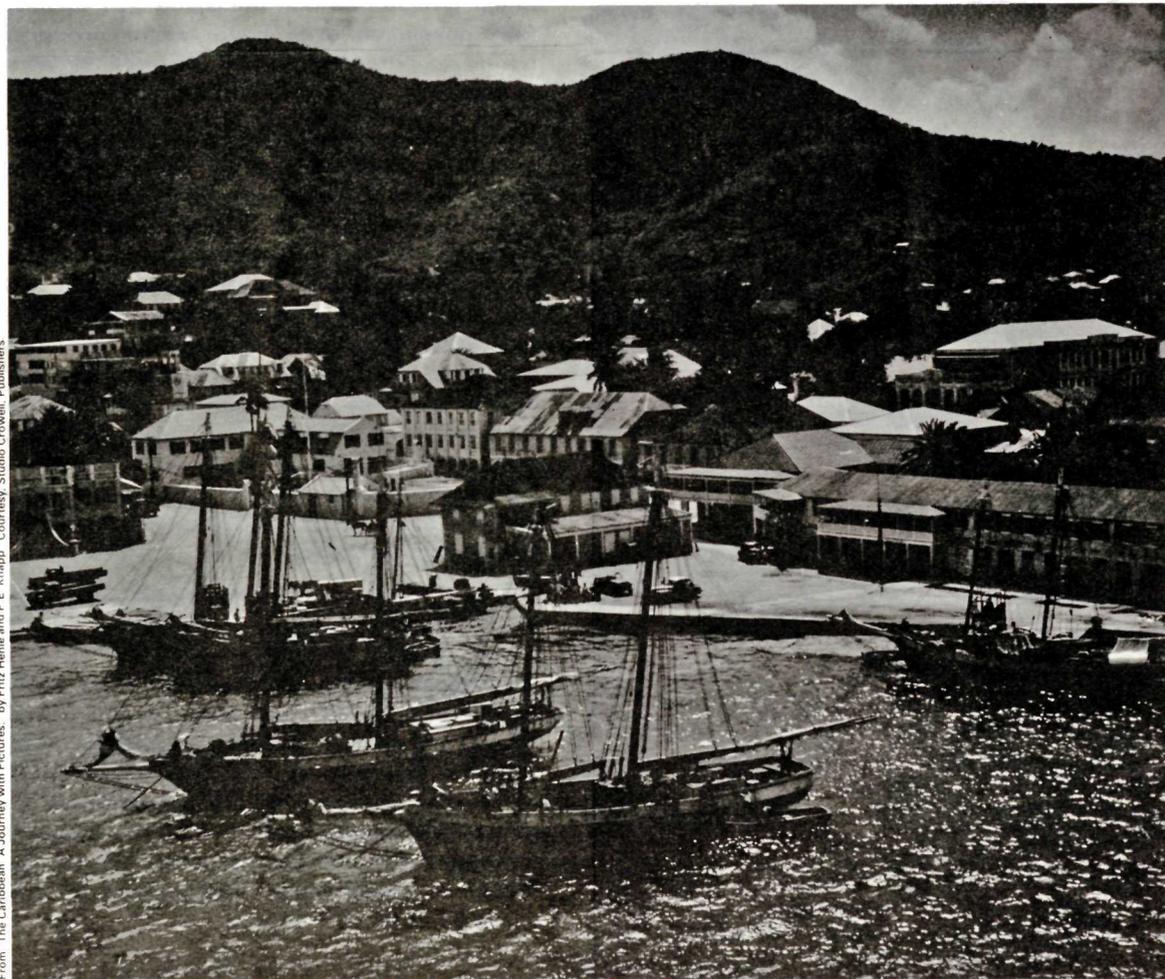
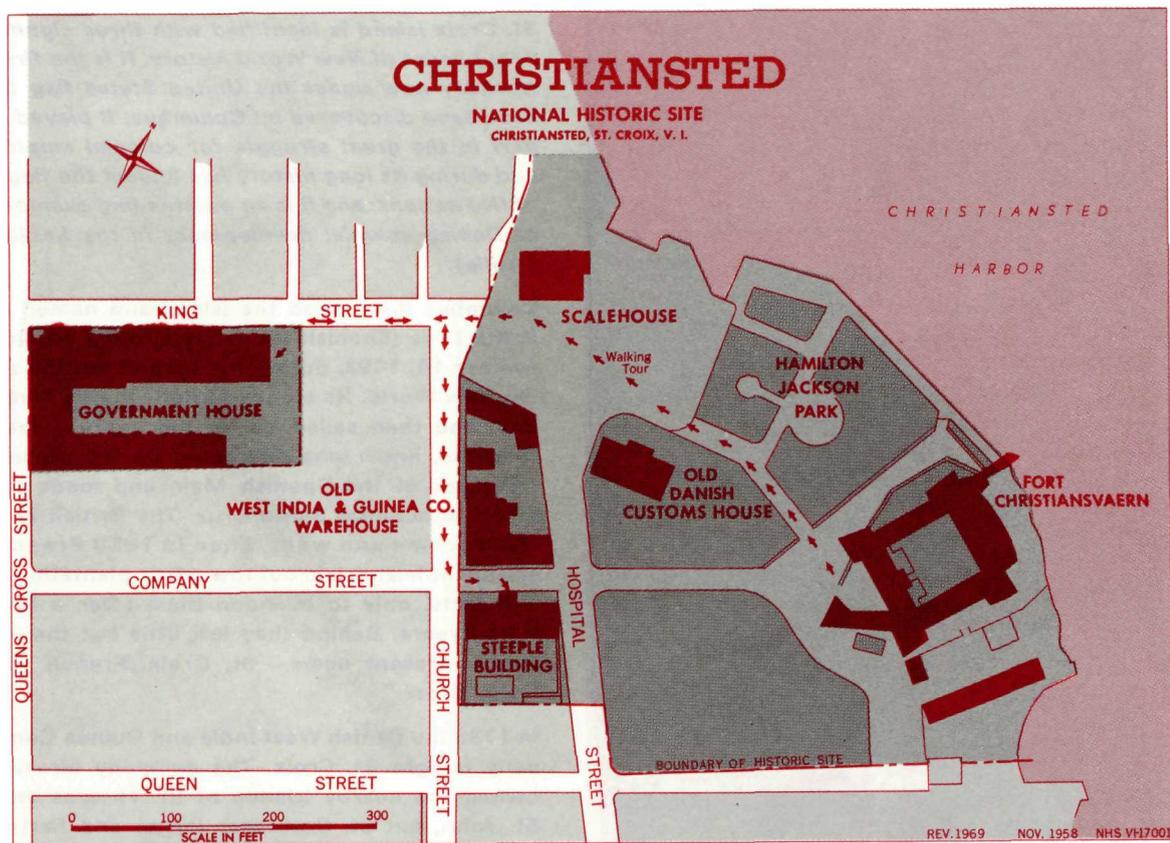
**Scalehouse.** This building, housing the facilities for weighing and inspecting imports and exports, contained an office for the weighmaster and also quarters for troops attached to the Customs Service. Built in the mid-1800's, the structure replaced an earlier wooden building.

**Government House** was originally two separate buildings, constructed at different times but joined together in the 1830's. Part of the older central wing facing King Street dates to 1747. This was once John William Schopen's residence, purchased by the government in 1771 and converted to the Governor's residence.

The western end of the building, at King and Queens Cross Streets, was built between 1794 and 1797 as the residence of the planter and merchant, Adam Søbøtker. Governor General Peter von Scholten purchased it in 1828 for government offices, and later joined it to the Schopen house.

**Danish West India & Guinea Company Warehouse.** The Danish West India Company completed this building in 1749, and used it to house provisions, offices, and personnel. After 1833 the Danish military used it as a depot; eventually it became a telegraph office.

**Steeple Building.** The Church of our Lord of Sabaoth, St. Croix's first Lutheran Church, was completed by 1753. The parish added the steeple about 1794. After 1831 the government used the church as a military bakery, a hospital, and a school. There is a museum here now; be sure to visit it. It is open from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m., Monday through Friday, and from 9 a.m. to noon on Saturday.



From "The Caribbean: A Journey with Pictures," by Fritz Heile and P. E. Knapp. Courtesy: Studio Crowell, Publishers

CHRISTIANSTED HARBOR