

A History of the  
VIRGIN ISLANDS  
of the  
UNITED STATES

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1865, for example, the number of cattle increased by 25 percent from 5,249 to 6,528, and little or no success attended the effort to promote animal husbandry later on.[12] Even so, in St. John the rearing of livestock had superseded agriculture to such an extent that the island could be described as a mere 'sheep-path.' [13]

#### The Labor Problem, 1848-1878

Emancipation came suddenly to the Virgin Islands before adequate preparations could be made for the parties involved. The proclamation of July 3, 1848 was a temporary measure to serve until the relationship between employers and the laboring population could be more fully defined. A working committee of six was appointed on July 10, 1848 from among the planters of St. Croix to formulate rules and regulations to govern the working conditions of the laborers. By an order issued on July 29, 1848 the committee stipulated that the laborers should seek regular employment somewhere, either on the plantation to which they had previously belonged or elsewhere. Laborers had to be on a yearly contract which specified the amount of work and its nature, as well as the wages to be paid. Laborers who refused to work or who demanded higher wages than the average were to be reported to the committee. Because there was little unoccupied land in the Virgin Islands on which the laborers could settle without violating the law of possession, it was confidently believed that they would be compelled to work on the plantations in order to earn their livelihood.[14]

The July, 1848 regulations were replaced six months later, on January 26, 1849 by a more elaborate ordinance issued by the Governor-General Peter Hansen.[15] Contracts were to be effective from October to October, and notice of non-renewal by either side could only be given once a year in the month of August. The working week was to consist of five days as during slavery with Saturday and Sunday free, though workers were subject to compensatory employment on Saturday. Laborers were free to take on, or to refuse extra work, but they had to look after the plantation animals as was customary and to serve as watchmen. In return for his services on the plantation, each laborer was to be provided by the employer with a house for his family as well as a plot of land for cultivation.

Laborers were divided into three classes as during slavery and wages were to be 15, 10 and 5 cents a day according to the class. If laborers

were given their customary rations of flour and fish, 25 cents each were to be deducted from their wages each week. Parents were to receive the payments for work done by the children. Artisans, who were also divided into three categories, were in a more favorable position, being allowed 20, 12 or 7 cents a day as the case might be.

For all workers, work on Saturdays could be meted out as punishment for negligence, and the pay was then the regular daily rate. Absence from work by laborers was punished by loss of pay, and parents were fined if they kept their children away from work. No worker could collect wood, grass, vegetables and fruits from the plantation, or to cut cane, or burn charcoal, without permission. Lastly, the maintenance of a sick or aged person rested equally on that person's family and on the employer and was no longer the latter's sole responsibility as before.

For some time after emancipation, laborers remained on the plantations though many of them opposed yearly contracts under the July, 1848 regulations since to them it seemed not very far removed from bondage. Indeed, the regulations issued in January, 1849, were interpreted by the laborers as an attempt to force them back into slavery. The employers themselves contributed to the dissatisfaction. Accustomed as they were to the conditions of slavery, they could not make the adjustments that were necessary under the new state of affairs. They looked forward to operating their plantations with the usual number of laborers at wages they considered reasonable. In addition, they sought to evade the responsibilities for maintenance of old and sick laborers, or of those who were otherwise unable to work.

Even before January, 1849, laborers had begun to leave the plantations for the towns where they sought employment as apprentices in trades. After January, 1849 the process gathered greater momentum,[16] and dissatisfaction crystallized on July 2, 1849 when the laborers on 77 plantations in the center district of St. Croix refused to work. The 'strike' was short-lived for the workers were soon forced back to work by the police and gendarme. Many of them took advantage of their legal right and signified their intention in August, 1849 not to renew or enter into contracts with their employers.[17] Many went into the towns where they took up trades or became servants and seamstresses. Other workers migrated from St. Croix to St. Thomas to seek employment on the docks. However, this practice was curtailed by the adoption of the compulsory passport system; by limiting the number of passports issued, migration from St. Croix to St.

Thomas could be controlled.

Some of the workers who went to live in the towns supplemented their meager earnings by means of wage labor on plantations. These so-called 'porters' were hired on a day-to-day basis instead of being bound by contract, and despite their recruitment, planters complained that workers were too few and unreliable. From an estimated 15,328 workers in 1846, the number had declined by 1853 to 12,865 of whom an estimated 3,000 were unfit for work. It was estimated in 1854 that 25 percent of the effective working force had been lost in the six years since emancipation.

Immigration was one possible means to secure a more adequate and dependable supply of laborers, and in December, 1851 the first immigrants arrived from Madeira destined to work on the plantations. Their numbers were inadequate and as the demand for 'foreigners' became stronger, a committee was appointed to investigate the problem. By 1860 it was necessary to impose additional taxation to pay for the immigration of laborers. An immigration fund was created in St. Croix by floating a loan of \$65,000 and in order to meet immigration expenses, planters had to pay 10c an acre on useful land while those who obtained immigrant laborers for 5 years had to pay \$12.[18]

Laborers from the British islands were attracted by the promise of higher wages and of more favorable conditions of employment. Barbadians began to arrive between 1860 and 1861 and, in addition, a small number of freemen from the Dutch West Indies migrated to St. Croix after they were emancipated on July 1, 1863; by 1864 as many as 1,700 immigrants had arrived from Barbados and St. Eustatius.[19] A relatively large number of laborers also came from the British Virgin Islands but most of them sought employment on the coaling wharves of St. Thomas.

About 318 indentured Indians arrived in 1863 at a cost of \$112 each, but few of them served beyond their first contract of five years. In fact, as many as 253 Indians returned to their home-land in 1868 carrying almost \$12,000. The remainder contracted for a further term until 1873 when nearly all of them left for Trinidad via St. Thomas; the few who stayed remained under the protection of the British consulate.

Generally speaking, the effort to attract agricultural laborers for the plantations did not produce very satisfactory results, as further evidenced by the large group of laborers of French origin who arrived from St. Bartholomew, in the 1870's. Almost without exception, they settled in St. Thomas where they formed two separate and distinct

communities: those who settled in 'Frenchtown' in the west part of Charlotte Amalie were engaged chiefly in fishing; the second group lived in the northwestern side of St. Thomas and were farmers and occasional fishermen.[20]

### The Agricultural Laborers' Revolt in St. Croix, October 1878

Meanwhile, the migration of a large number of dissatisfied workers to the towns could not but threaten the public peace. Dissatisfaction reached boiling point in October, 1878 when violence again broke out in St. Croix. It is significant that the outbreak occurred on October 1, the day that yearly contracts were brought into operation. Indeed, the disorder was in nature a protest against the provisions of the labor regulations in force and the manner in which they were executed.[21] The annual contract itself was declared to be tantamount to slavery, to the extent that laborers who failed to give timely notice of termination of their contract were compelled to work for the plantation for another year even if they did not wish to do so.



THE LABORERS' REVOLT, 1878

Other conditions of employment created grievances, and contributed to the outbreak of violence. Wages were not only low but they fell below the provisions of the labor ordinance, the maximum of ten cents a day being actually paid instead of fifteen cents. The injustice was more strongly felt when the central factory began paying thirty-five cents a day upon its completion in 1878. To discontent over low wages was added complaints of frequent abuse by managers of the prerogative given them by the labor ordinance to impose monetary fines for certain offences. It was to the financial advantage of managers to impose heavy fines as often as possible since these fines accrued to them as added income.[22] Even when workers were permitted to collect firewood, fruits and grass, to burn coal, to keep poultry and livestock, and to receive rations, these were no more than similar privileges granted during slavery. In some cases they were even less, and many laborers came to believe that there was no difference between slavery and freedom.

Laborers seeking to leave St. Croix encountered barriers erected by the police authorities. Applicants for passports had to reveal how much money they possessed, while a further barrier to emigration was government prohibition of passenger transportation between the islands at a crucial time. Thus denied outlets to other islands, workers without contracts could then be forced by the police to take a job after they had gone three days without work.[23]

October 1, 1878 was a critical date in the life of St. Croix with many laborers congregated in Frederiksted, some seeking new jobs, some planning to emigrate and others to enjoy themselves.[24] The rum-shops did a thriving business and the crowd was boisterously gay. By 4:00 p.m. the mood of the crowd had changed: a large group could be seen gathered at the corner of Dronningens and Kongens Tvaergade, and threats of violence could be heard. The cause was a rumor to the effect that passports were no longer being issued, that several dollars were required in order to obtain a passport, and that several persons had been detained in Frederiksted on their way to Vieques. To deal with the threatening crowd, the police were summoned. They dealt rather heavy-handed with a drunk, Henry Trottmann, who fell into a gutter and cut his foot, and he was taken to the hospital. The police then tried to arrest one of the crowd named Joseph LaGrange, but he was rescued by the people.[25]

While the police were trying to entice the people to enter the Fort to lock them up there, or to get them to go home, one Felicia James shouted that Henry Trottmann had died from the treatment he had

received from the police. Apparently this was not so, but the people were aroused. An increasing number gathered before the Fort and started to throw stones to which the police replied with bullets. Consequently, the crowd tore down the outer gate of the Fort and threw it into the sea. However, they were brought up before the inner gate which they tried in vain to storm, and they were stopped by the shooting of the soldiers assisted by a few civilians. The crowd decided to take revenge in the town where shops were ransacked and their contents spilled into the streets and burned. Fires were set to private dwellings in the town as well as to the government Customs House. People seeking shelter from the anger of the crowd escaped on board the ship 'Carib' lying in the harbor, or they sought asylum in the churches.[26]

Meanwhile, a messenger had been dispatched to secure military help from Christiansted, but the dangerous situation caused considerable delay. Not until the morning of October 2, did Lieutenant H. R. L. Ostermann arrive in Frederiksted with an armed force consisting of six cavalymen, thirteen infantry and two wagons.[27] Much of the destruction committed by the people was attributed later to this delay in the arrival of the troops. Assistance from St. Thomas was also delayed because the telegraph connection between St. Croix and St. Thomas was closed for the night. It was not until 7:30 A.M. of October 2, that Governor J. A. Garde in St. Thomas received news of the trouble. Immediately the Governor with Lieutenant Baron H. F. A. Eggers and 52 officers and privates and a Doctor Pontoppidan left for St. Croix on board the Royal Mail Steam Packet ship 'Arno'. Guided by information that Frederiksted and the whole of the West End had fallen to the people, the Governor landed in Christiansted where military preparations were made to defend the town against possible attack. Martial law was declared, and parties of troops were dispatched into the country parts to maintain law and order.[28]

Meanwhile, in Frederiksted, the arrival of Ostermann and his troops turned the tide of the affray. The Fort was reinforced, and the streets cleared. Assisted by civilian volunteers, Ostermann forced the crowd to evacuate the town.[29] The consequences proved disastrous, for the anger of the people was now turned against the plantations and plantation buildings. People who were not originally involved were forced to join the bands. Uncommitted laborers were asked the simple question, 'Our side?'; if they did not answer, or if they answered in the negative, they were beaten. Consequently, many laborers sought to

escape punishment by hiding at the approach of an attacking party. On many plantations managers and drivers were warned before a raiding party arrived, and thus were able to hide. Sticks were the only weapon carried, and fire was the principal means of destruction. Rioters kept a sharp lookout for the approach of troops, and at the cry of 'volunteers' they would seek hasty shelter.[30]

The upheaval lasted several days despite the arrival at Frederiksted of the French warship 'La Bourdonnais' and the British warship 'Tourmaline' on October 4, and of the United States warship 'Plymouth' a little later. These vessels had been summoned by the French, British and American consuls in St. Thomas and the commanders of all three warships offered their assistance to quell the revolt as did the governor of Puerto Rico.

Governor Garde politely refused these offers; he believed that no further assistance was necessary, since the force of the revolt had already been broken and the revolting laborers were sufficiently intimidated. Though he was later severely criticised for not making use of the offers, the Governor believed that his refusal was necessary to avoid further bloodshed and reduction of the labor force. However, some guns were borrowed from the British warship by the St. Croix volunteers.[31]

On October 5, the Governor ordered all laborers to return to their respective plantations on pain of being treated as rebels. They could not leave the plantation without a pass from their employers indicating that they had left on a lawful errand. Despite this proclamation, eighteen persons escaped to Tortola; later attempts to secure their return by extradition failed.[32] At Butler Bay another group of seventeen men was taken, while prisoners were daily taken to the Forts.

Around the middle of October, peace again prevailed on St. Croix and Lieutenant Eggers and twenty-five men returned to St. Thomas. The uprising seemed to have been a spontaneous rather than a planned outbreak, since it did not show any sign of being organized. Indeed, dissension was rife in the ranks of the insurgents, while leadership on an island-wide basis was lacking. Groups operated independently, and individual groups followed the direction of separate leaders such as John Lewis, Thomas Graydon, Francis Leonard, William Jones and William Arnold. Two of the most prominent leaders were James de Silva and Joseph Parris. Women also featured prominently as leaders of the revolt, including Mary Thomas, otherwise known as 'Queen Mary' who called herself Captain, Rebecca Frederik, and Axelline Salomon

known as 'the black Amazon'.

Destruction was great with the districts most seriously affected being King, Queen and Prince's Quarters, as well as West End and Northside Quarters. Out of 87 plantations in these districts, only 37 were spared, and the loss suffered by 53 plantations amounted to \$603,800, including a loss of \$70,000 in crops. Hardest hit were River, Plessens, Mt. Pleasant, Carlton, Whim, Two Williams, Concordia, Good Hope, Camporico, and Wheel of Fortune where most of the mills were destroyed as well as the great houses, and even some of the workers' houses. On 48 plantations the produce, and on 43 the furniture and other miscellaneous items were destroyed. Few animals were lost, even if stables were destroyed. A total of 879 acres were destroyed at a total loss of \$83,320 on 24 plantations where individual losses ranged from \$300 to \$10,500. The destruction in Frederiksted was estimated at \$297,000, of which \$11,516 was suffered by the colonial government resulting from the loss of public buildings such as the customs-house, the courthouse and schools.[33]

In order to relieve the distress, the Danish government gave permission on January 17, 1879 for the colonial government to borrow \$300,000 to help the planters and house-owners. Later, the inhabitants of Frederiksted were granted \$55,000 and a loan of \$50,000 to be repaid in 10 years, in order to repair their losses.[34]

Black fatalities numbering 60 far exceeded those of the whites only three of whom including two soldiers were killed. Statistics of laborers who died do not include 14 women killed as the result of the explosion of the rum casks at Grove Place, and 12 laborers who were condemned to death by a special court convened by Governor Garde on October 5, 1878.[35] The trial of the 403 laborers who had been arrested continued for about one and a half years; eventually 336 were freed and the others sentenced to imprisonment. The trial revealed active participation of the newly arrived immigrants from the other West Indian islands. Of the so-called leaders, two were from Barbados, and one each from St. Eustatius, Antigua, St. Kitts and Jamaica. Among the other participants imprisoned, eleven were from Barbados, nine from Antigua and four from other islands. However, the only four women imprisoned were native born.