

population had always been small in proportion to the black population, and by 1803 was just over 6 percent.¹⁰

In 1833, enslaved Africans in the colonies of the British Caribbean were emancipated by order of the British Parliament. This event has been viewed by historians as a turning point for the slaves of the Danish West Indies. The island of Tortola, a British colony, lay only a few miles beyond St. John, and news of the British emancipation undoubtedly had a strong impact.¹¹ Additionally, a number of other factors—including the opening of publicly supported slave schools, the missionary influence, the increased socialization of the now primarily Creole slave population, and humanitarian movements in Europe—forced the Danish government to recognize that emancipation of the slaves was both inevitable and imminent. The British government had compensated its planters for the loss of their slaves, but the Danish government was unable to do the same and so attempted to find another source of amelioration. In the Free Birth Proclamation of 1847 the government conferred freedom on all slaves born after that date and set a date for general emancipation in twelve years. This proclamation became a catalyst for freedom and gave new urgency to the drive for emancipation because the “adult slave population would not postpone their inheritance of a freedom to which they felt that their children were no more legitimate heirs than themselves.”¹²

On July 3, 1848, slaves on St. Croix initiated a bloodless rebellion that resulted in the immediate emancipation of all enslaved in the Danish West Indies. However, employment conditions for the newly freed were so bad and wages so minimal that living conditions were little better (and often worse) than they had been under slavery. These agricultural laborers finally revolted in 1878. Descriptively known as the Fireburn, this organized rebellion purportedly led by a woman, Queen Mary, resulted in the destruction of both plantations and lives but led to the initiation of labor reforms. It also sounded the initial death knell for the plantation economy of St. Croix.

In the latter half of the nineteenth century, the steady demise of sugar cane in favor of the beet as a sugar source, the simultaneous decline of St. Thomas as the shipping center of the Caribbean, and a series of natural disasters contributed to the decreasing economic viability of the islands. Denmark increasingly saw them as financial and social burdens and so were receptive to an offer of purchase from the United States in 1867. This initiative, fueled primarily by Secretary of State William Seward, who saw the need for the United States to protect itself on all sides after the Civil War, failed for lack of congressional support.¹³ A second attempt at purchase in 1892 was not ratified by the Danish parliament. A final agreement was reached in 1916 and the Danish West Indies was sold to the United States for \$25 million and renamed the United States Virgin Islands.

The U.S. Department of the Navy was given the task of administering the new territory through a naval governor appointed by the president. Local agitation and unrest forced the United States to grant citizenship to the in-