

Christiansted High School and the Old Military Barracks



Section 1

Education Before Christiansted High School

The story of Christiansted High School did not begin inside a classroom. It began long before the first student carried books through the doors of the Old Barracks on Hospital Street. To understand why this historic building eventually became one of the Virgin Islands' most important educational institutions, we must first understand how people learned before there were public high schools and why ideas about education changed over time.

During the nineteenth century, education became increasingly connected to larger discussions about slavery, freedom, and social reform. Denmark abolished the transatlantic slave trade in **1803**, although slavery itself continued for another **45 years**. As international pressure to end

slavery increased, the Danish Crown issued an ordinance on **July 28, 1847**, declaring that **all children born to enslaved mothers after that date would be born free** and that slavery would end throughout the Danish West Indies after a **twelve-year transition period**. Governor General Peter von Scholten supported expanding access to education during this period, believing that schools would play an important role in preparing the colony for a changing society. Although educational opportunities remained unequal, these reforms represented an important step toward expanding formal instruction beyond a small segment of the population. Before the gradual plan could take effect, however, events unfolded much more quickly. On **July 3, 1848**, nearly **8,000 enslaved Africans** gathered in Frederiksted demanding immediate freedom. Faced with the possibility of more intensified widespread violence, von Scholten proclaimed the immediate emancipation of approximately **17,000 enslaved people** across St. Croix, St. Thomas, and St. John.

Education became even more significant after emancipation on **July 3, 1848**. Freedom transformed the legal status of thousands of formerly enslaved Africans, but it did not immediately eliminate poverty or create equal opportunity. In **1849**, the Danish colonial government enacted the **Labour Act**, requiring annual labor contracts between estate owners and formerly enslaved workers. Although colonial officials argued that the law would stabilize the plantation economy, many laborers believed its restrictions on wages, mobility, and employment limited the freedom they had fought to achieve. As opportunities beyond plantation labor remained limited, many Virgin Islanders increasingly viewed education as one of the few pathways toward greater economic independence, believing that literacy, mathematics, and skilled training could create opportunities unavailable on the estates.



Although emancipation transformed the colony's labor system, it did not immediately transform its schools. Rather than creating an entirely new educational system, the Danish government continued building upon the schools established during Governor General Peter von Scholten's administration in the 1840s. Developed through a partnership between the colonial government and the Moravian Church, these schools expanded formal educational opportunities for Black children while emphasizing literacy, religious instruction, discipline, and moral education. In **1853**, the Danish government reorganized the school system through a new school ordinance that retained many of the educational structures developed under the Moravians while placing schools under greater public administration after emancipation. This system would educate generations of Virgin Islanders and form the educational foundation that later reformers sought to expand during the American period.

Reading Between the Lines

Primary Source Investigation



Say No. 68. *St. Croix, (Danish West Indies.)*
on Santa Cruz.

The Moravian Day School at the Centre Mission, Friedensfeld. The school is here represented as the pupils come out for breakfast at 10 1/2 o'clock, the usual hour for that meal at this island. The missionaries connected with the school are seen standing upon the right hand side of the steps. — The Moravians are missionaries sent out by the Germans to encourage emigration and educate the common classes, especially the Negroes. They do this through Churches, Schools, and the Sale of Bibles at very low prices. The basement of the House is used for a School Room and the missionaries and School Teachers occupy other portions of the house. The School hours are 8 @ 10 1/2 and 11 @ 2 o'clock. Ages of the pupils 4 to 16 years. Danish & English languages taught.

Moravian Day School at Centre Mission, Friedensfeld, St. Croix

The Moravian Day School at Centre Mission, Friedensfeld, St. Croix

Late nineteenth-century stereograph

Study the photograph and handwritten description carefully.

What details do you notice?

- ☐ Number of students
- ☐ Clothing
- ☐ Building materials
- ☐ Age differences
- ☐ Adults
- ☐ Surroundings
- ☐ School location

Read

The handwritten caption explains that

- students attended breakfast at 10:30 a.m.
- instruction was provided in Danish and English
- children ranged in age from 4 to 15 years
- missionaries lived beside the school
- the basement served as the classroom

Analyze

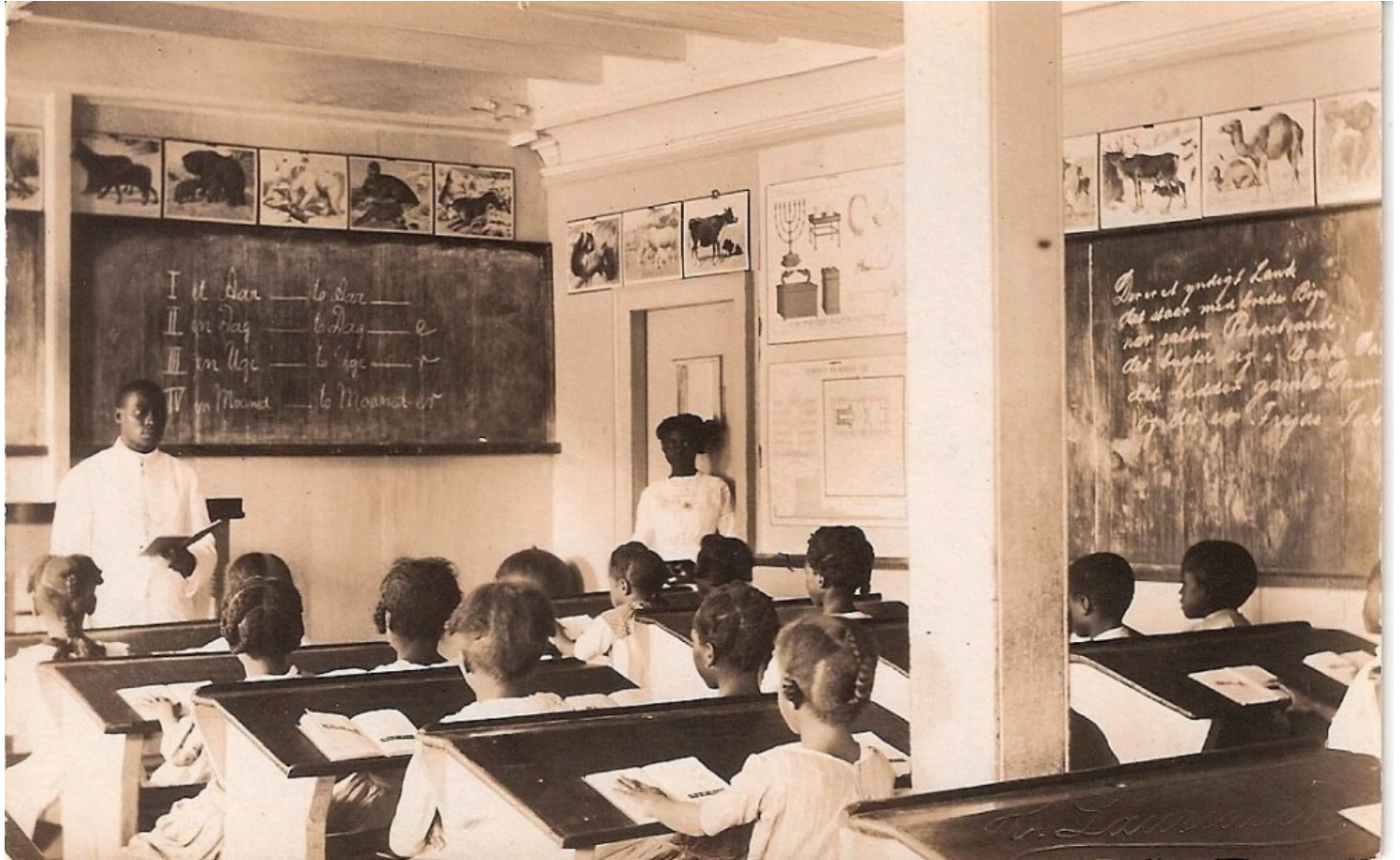
1. Why do you think students of many different ages attended the same school?
2. Why might lessons have been taught in both Danish and English?
3. What does this photograph tell us about education that a written document cannot?
4. Who wrote this caption?
5. Whose perspective is missing

Section 2

Education After Emancipation

The educational system that emerged after emancipation provided many Virgin Islanders with their first opportunities for formal schooling, yet it also revealed the limitations of the Territory's educational system. Most students could receive an elementary education, but opportunities for advanced academic study, teacher preparation, and professional training

remained limited. As the nineteenth century gave way to the twentieth, Virgin Islanders increasingly began asking a new question. **Should schools simply teach children to read, write, and obey authority, or should they prepare students to think critically, participate in public life, and help shape the future of their communities?**



Among the most influential voices raising this question was **David Hamilton Jackson**. Before becoming the territory's leading labor organizer and publisher of *The Herald*, Jackson worked as a teacher within the Danish school system. His teaching career ended following disagreements with colonial and church authorities, experiences that reinforced his belief that education should encourage independent thought rather than unquestioning acceptance of authority. Through *The Herald*, Jackson transformed journalism into a public classroom, writing about workers' rights, political representation, freedom of the press, and civic responsibility. He believed an educated population required more than literacy. Citizens also needed the ability to evaluate evidence, question injustice, and participate actively in democracy. For Jackson, education was not simply preparation for employment. It was preparation for citizenship.

These educational developments reflected larger changes taking place throughout the Caribbean. Following emancipation, colonial governments in Jamaica, Barbados, Trinidad, and British Guiana increasingly expanded public education as they sought to rebuild their economies, prepare skilled workers, and train future teachers and civil servants. Education became closely connected to labor, citizenship, and economic development. Throughout the

Atlantic world, governments increasingly viewed schools as institutions capable of shaping both productive workers and informed citizens.

Section 3

A New Vision for Education

By the beginning of the twentieth century, Virgin Islanders increasingly recognized that elementary education alone could no longer meet the Territory's needs. The islands required trained teachers, nurses, clerks, agricultural specialists, business leaders, and civil servants capable of serving a modernizing society. At the same time, the transfer of the Virgin Islands to the United States in **1917**, the granting of **U.S. citizenship in 1927**, and the end of **U.S. Naval administration in 1931** brought new educational priorities and greater federal involvement in public schools. Under the leadership of Governor **Paul Martin Pearson**, the Territory began expanding secondary education as part of a broader program of economic recovery and modernization during the Great Depression. It was within this changing educational landscape that Christiansted High School emerged in **1935**, becoming the Virgin Islands' first public high school designed to prepare students for higher education, public service, and skilled professions while also responding to the Territory's economic needs.

As educators in the Virgin Islands planned this new public high school, they entered a national conversation that had already shaped Black education across the United States. Following the Civil War, African American educators debated a question that also confronted the Virgin Islands.

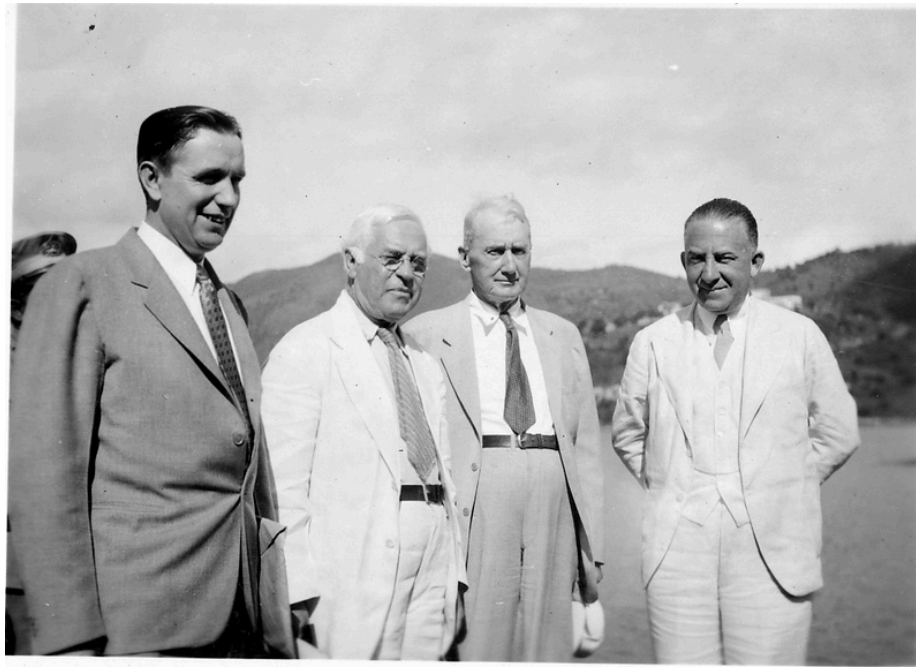


What kind of education best prepares a people for sustainability?



Section 4

What Kind of Education Should the Virgin Islands Offer?



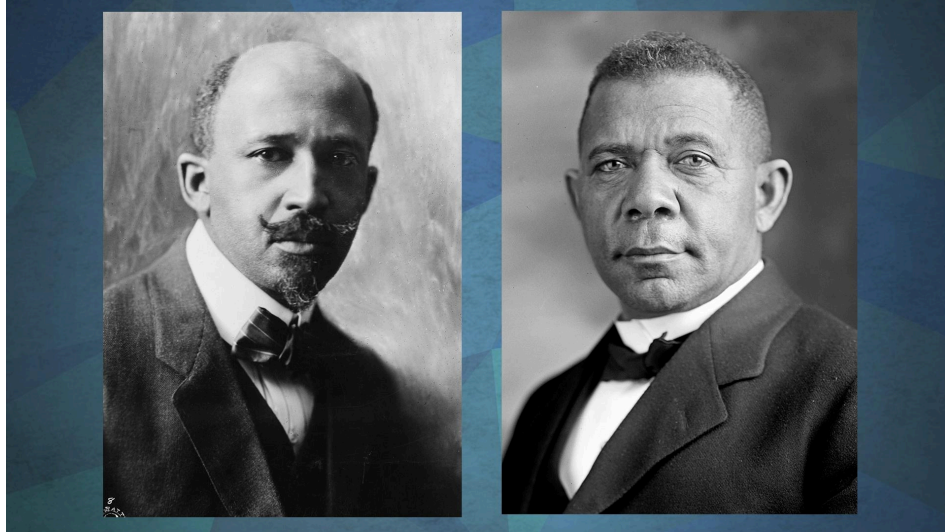
Governor Paul Martin Pearson (second from left, in white suit) stands with administrative officials, during a territorial inspection of the U.S. Virgin Islands, c. 1931–1935.

Christiansted High School was established during the very years these educational debates continued across the United States. Some national organizations, including leaders within the **NAACP**, worried that vocational schools serving Black students often emphasized manual labor at the expense of college preparation and professional careers. Others argued that industrial and agricultural education remained essential because many Black communities lacked economic opportunities. Rather than adopting one philosophy exclusively, Christiansted High School developed a curriculum that reflected both traditions. Students studied English, mathematics, history, science, and foreign languages while also receiving instruction in agriculture, commercial education, home economics, sewing, and other vocational subjects. In doing so, the school sought to prepare graduates for employment, higher education, and leadership within the Virgin Islands.

Booker T. Washington, founder of the Tuskegee Institute in Alabama, believed education should emphasize agriculture, industrial skills, and skilled trades. He argued that economic independence provided the strongest foundation for long-term progress. W. E. B. Du Bois, a Harvard-trained historian and one of the founders of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), believed education should also cultivate scholars, lawyers, physicians, teachers, and political leaders. He argued that every community needed educated men and women who could challenge injustice, expand civil rights, and strengthen democratic institutions.

Although Washington and Du Bois often disagreed publicly, both believed education offered African Americans the greatest opportunity to improve their communities. Their debate

influenced educational policy throughout the United States for decades and eventually shaped conversations about education in American territories, including the Virgin Islands.



<https://wtjx.pbslearningmedia.org/resource/bf10.socst.us.indust.bookert/booker-t-washington-and-web-du-bois-the-conflict/>



**Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. Du Bois: The Conflict
| Grades 9-12 Social Studies Teaching and Lesson...**

Learn about the conflict between two major leaders in the Black community during the era of Jim Crow: Booker T...



PBS LearningMedia

Topic	Booker T. Washington	W. E. B. Du Bois
Who was he?	Founder of the Tuskegee Institute in Alabama and one of the most influential Black educators of the late 1800s and early 1900s.	Historian, sociologist, Harvard scholar, and civil rights leader. A founder of the NAACP and one of America's leading Black intellectuals.
What was his goal?	Help Black Americans achieve economic independence through practical education and skilled work.	Prepare Black Americans to become leaders who could fight for equal rights and expand educational opportunities.
What kind of education did he emphasize?	Agriculture, industrial arts, mechanical trades, business skills, and vocational training.	Liberal arts, science, history, literature, law, medicine, teaching, and higher education.
What did he believe education should accomplish?	Give students practical skills that would help them find employment, build businesses, and strengthen communities.	Develop critical thinkers, scholars, teachers, lawyers, physicians, and civic leaders who could challenge injustice and improve society.
How did he view citizenship?	Economic success would help African Americans gain greater respect and opportunity over time.	Full citizenship required education, political participation, civil rights, and equal access to opportunities.
Famous Idea	Economic progress through vocational education.	The " Talented Tenth "—educating a generation of leaders who could help uplift the broader community.

Reading Between the Lines

Neither Booker T. Washington nor W. E. B. Du Bois believed that only one type of education was valuable. Both wanted African Americans to succeed and believed education was the pathway toward that goal. Their disagreement centered on **which educational strategy would best prepare Black communities for freedom, economic security, and equal citizenship.**

Lesson 2

Why Build a High School?

Education, Migration, and the American Transformation of the Virgin Islands, 1917–1935

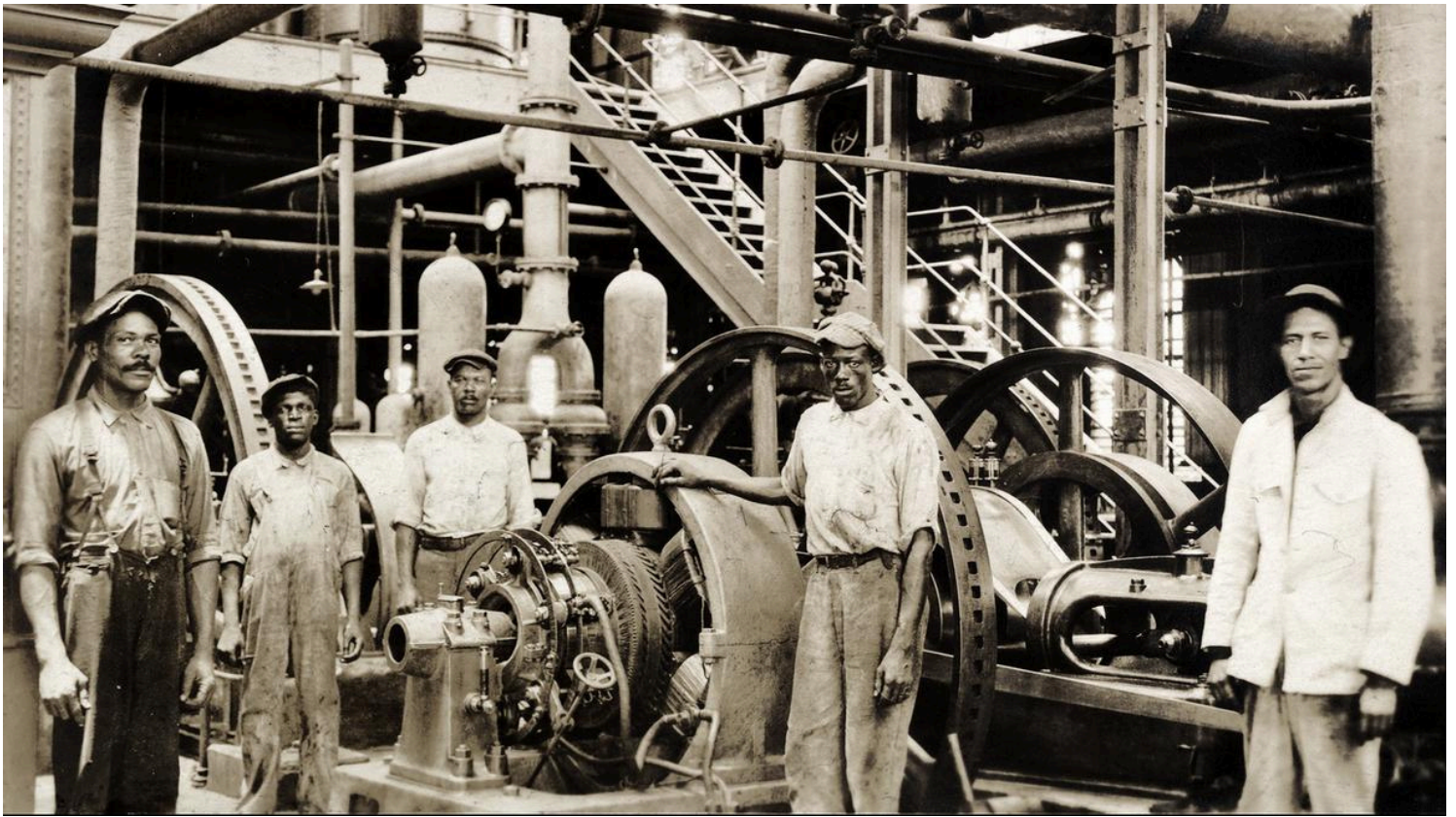
Essential Question

Why did the Virgin Islands establish its first public high school during one of the most challenging economic periods in its history?

Section One

A Territory in Transition

By the beginning of the twentieth century, the Virgin Islands stood at a crossroads. The plantation economy that had once made St. Croix one of the Caribbean's leading sugar producers had been declining for decades. The labor unrest that culminated in the Fireburn of 1878, falling sugar prices, recurring hurricanes, droughts, and changing global markets weakened the territory's economy. As opportunities became increasingly limited, many Virgin Islanders sought employment elsewhere, leaving the islands to work in Puerto Rico, Cuba, the Panama Canal Zone, and later New York City.



Migration brought new opportunities for many families, but it also created new challenges for the Territory. Government officials worried that the Virgin Islands was losing many of its skilled workers, craftsmen, teachers, and young professionals. Reports issued during the 1920s warned that mechanics, carpenters, and other trained workers were leaving the islands in search of higher wages and better opportunities. At the same time, students who wished to continue their education beyond the elementary level often had few options within the Territory.

Families who could afford it sometimes enrolled their children in private schools operated by Catholic institutions or sent them to schools in Puerto Rico, Antigua, or the continental United States. Others arranged for children to live with relatives while attending school away from home. For many working families, however, these opportunities remained financially impossible. Although elementary education had expanded since emancipation, the Virgin Islands still lacked a public secondary school capable of preparing students for higher education, government service, teaching, business, and the professions.

The question became even more urgent after March 31, 1917. Under American rule, Virgin Islanders increasingly asked whether the Territory could provide the educational opportunities needed to prepare future generations at home rather than losing them to migration.



Everett Collection Historical. Barefoot women immigrants at Ellis Island are from the Caribbean. CA. 1910

Section 2

Becoming Americans While Remaining Virgin Islanders

The transfer of the Danish West Indies to the United States on **March 31, 1917**, marked the beginning of a new political era for the islands. For the first time, St. Croix, St. Thomas, and St. John became an American territory governed by the United States. Yet the transfer did not immediately change everyday life. The Virgin Islands remained under the administration of the U.S. Navy, and many of the economic challenges inherited from the Danish colonial period continued.

At the same time, Virgin Islanders living in New York and other American cities increasingly organized to advocate for the future of their homeland. Organizations such as the **Danish West Indian Society** worked to keep the concerns of Virgin Islanders before federal officials while

helping migrants remain connected to the islands they had left behind. Community leaders argued that the people of the former Danish West Indies deserved the rights, opportunities, and political recognition associated with becoming part of the United States.

As increasing numbers of Virgin Islanders settled in New York and other American cities, many remained deeply committed to the future of their homeland. The growing diaspora produced influential labor organizers, journalists, entrepreneurs, and civic leaders whose work extended far beyond the Caribbean. Among them was **Ashley Totten**, a Crucian labor organizer who helped organize the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, the first African American labor union chartered by the American Federation of Labor. Another was **Casper Holstein**, a successful Harlem businessman and philanthropist who supported educational, civic, and political causes within the African American community. Their achievements demonstrated that Virgin Islanders could become leaders on the national stage while maintaining strong ties to the islands



The growing influence of Virgin Islanders living abroad contributed to broader conversations surrounding citizenship and political rights. In **1927**, Congress granted United States citizenship to Virgin Islanders. Citizenship strengthened legal ties between the Territory and the United States, but it also created new expectations. If Virgin Islanders were now American citizens, what educational opportunities should prepare them for participation in American civic life? Should students continue receiving only an elementary education, or did citizenship require a broader system capable of preparing future teachers, civil servants, business leaders, and professionals?

CITIZENSHIP FOR INHABITANTS OF VIRGIN ISLANDS

FEBRUARY 15, 1927.—Referred to the House Calendar and ordered to be printed

Mr. KIESS, from the Committee on Insular Affairs, submitted the following

REPORT

[To accompany S. 2770]

The Committee on Insular Affairs, to whom was referred the bill (S. 2770) to confer United States citizenship upon certain inhabitants of the Virgin Islands and to extend the naturalization laws thereto, having considered the same, report it back to the House without amendment and recommend that the bill do pass.

This bill confers United States citizenship upon certain inhabitants of the Virgin Islands and also extends the opportunity for naturalization to certain other former inhabitants of the Virgin Islands. It will be recalled that the Virgin Islands were acquired by purchase under a treaty with Denmark in January, 1917. At the time it was understood by all that when the United States purchased these islands the citizenship of the inhabitants thereof was transferred to the United States.

The Navy Department, who have been administering the islands ever since 1917, have always contended that this was the case. The State Department, however, have put a different interpretation upon the treaty, with the result that ever since 1917 the inhabitants of the Virgin Islands, formerly citizens of Denmark, have been people "without a country." Whatever the correct interpretation of the treaty may be, it has been admitted by all that there is a moral obligation on the part of the United States to confer United States citizenship on these inhabitants of the Virgin Islands formerly citizens and subjects of Denmark.

Those questions became increasingly important as the Territory entered the Great Depression and the federal government began reconsidering the future of the Virgin Islands.

Section 3

From Naval Rule to Civilian Government

After the United States purchased the Virgin Islands from Denmark in **1917**, the Territory was governed by the **U.S. Navy**. For the next fourteen years, governors were appointed by the President of the United States and managed the islands as a military territory. Although the naval administration improved roads, sanitation, and public health, many Virgin Islanders criticized the government for limiting local participation in decision-making and failing to expand educational opportunities beyond the elementary level.

In 1931, President Herbert Hoover became the first sitting president of the United States to visit the Virgin Islands. The nation was in the midst of the Great Depression, and Hoover wanted to see firsthand the economic conditions of America's newest Caribbean territory. Following his visit, Hoover reportedly described the Virgin Islands as **"an effective poorhouse."** The statement quickly became one of the most discussed descriptions of the Territory during the American period.



Activity: Reading Between the Lines



President Herbert Hoover pictured in the forefront to the left in black suit, along with Paul Pearson 2nd to the left

THE VIRGIN ISLANDS

The Virgin Islands may have some military value sometime – opinion upon this question is much divided. In any event when we paid \$25 million for them we acquired an **effective poorhouse** comprising 90 percent of the population.

The people cannot be self-supporting either in living or government without the discovery of new methods and resources.

The purpose of the transfer of the administration from the naval to a civil department is to see if we can develop some form of industry or agriculture which will relieve us of the present costs and liabilities in support of the population or the local government from the Federal Treasury or from private charity.

Viewed from every point except remote naval contingencies it was unfortunate that we ever acquired these islands. Nevertheless, having assumed the responsibility, we must do our best to assist the inhabitants.

In 1931, President Herbert Hoover addressed Congress after visiting the Virgin Islands. Read the excerpt below carefully. Rather than focusing only on the phrase "an effective poorhouse," examine Hoover's complete argument. What problems did he identify? What assumptions did he make about the Virgin Islands? What evidence supports or challenges his conclusions?

Perspective A

Hoover may have been describing the Territory's economic condition rather than its people.

By 1931,

- sugar production had declined dramatically
- the Great Depression had reduced markets and government revenue
- unemployment and migration had increased
- many public buildings, roads, and schools required investment

Supporters of this interpretation argue that Hoover believed the federal government needed to invest in agriculture, education, and public works to strengthen the Virgin Islands economy.

Perspective B

Others argue that Hoover's description reflected an outsider's perspective that overlooked important strengths within Virgin Islands society.

Although many families experienced economic hardship,

- farming and fishing continued to sustain communities
- neighbors shared labor and resources
- extended families provided social support
- cultural traditions remained strong
- many households measured wealth through land, food production, family networks, and community relationships rather than income alone

Some historians also ask whether racial attitudes common in the United States during the early twentieth century influenced how federal officials interpreted Black Caribbean communities.

Think Like a Historian

What evidence would you need before deciding whether Hoover's description was fair?

☐ Employment records

☐ Agricultural production

☐ Oral histories

☐ Government budgets

☐ Family photographs

☐ Newspaper articles

Historians often reach different conclusions after examining the same evidence. As you continue reading this lesson, collect evidence that either supports or challenges Hoover's assessment of the Virgin Islands. At the end of the chapter, return to this question and defend your interpretation using historical evidence.

In 1931 **Paul Martin Pearson** became the Virgin Islands' **first civilian governor**. Unlike his predecessors, Pearson was an educator before entering public service. He believed that rebuilding the Territory during the Great Depression required investing in education and preparing a new generation of teachers, professionals, civil servants, and community leaders.



One of Pearson's highest priorities was establishing the Virgin Islands' **first public high school**. Rather than constructing an entirely new campus, government officials selected the **Old Barracks on Hospital Street in Christiansted**. The building already belonged to the government, offered substantial interior space, and stood within the island's principal administrative center. Its location also placed students near government offices, libraries, churches, businesses, and the civic institutions that shaped public life. A structure originally built to support colonial military authority would now educate the young men and women expected to lead the Virgin Islands into a new era.

A Nation Watches the Virgin Islands

The appointment of Paul Martin Pearson signaled that the Virgin Islands had become a growing priority for the federal government. During the early years of the New Deal, national leaders increasingly viewed the Territory as a place where investments in education, agriculture, public health, and public works could strengthen both the local economy and American democracy in the Caribbean.

That growing attention became especially visible in 1934, when First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt visited the Virgin Islands. Accompanied by Governor Pearson, she toured public schools, met with residents, and observed living conditions in both St. Thomas and St. Croix, including neighborhoods in Christiansted. Her visit drew national attention to the challenges and possibilities facing the Territory at a time when the federal government was expanding New Deal programs throughout the United States and its territories.





Hoover's 1931 visit had raised difficult questions about poverty and economic recovery. Eleanor Roosevelt's visit, together with Pearson's educational reforms, reflected a growing belief within the federal government that improving schools, infrastructure, and public services could help prepare the Virgin Islands for a stronger future. Within a year, that vision would take physical form when the former Danish Barracks on Hospital Street opened as Christiansted High School.

As plans for Christiansted High School moved forward, educators beyond the Virgin Islands were paying attention. In **1934**, educator **Bess B. Lane** published an article titled *Education in the Virgin Islands* in *The Journal of Negro Education*, one of the nation's leading scholarly journals devoted to Black education. Published by Howard University, the journal served as a forum where educators, researchers, and civil rights leaders debated the future of African American education throughout the United States. Lane's decision to focus on the Virgin Islands demonstrates that the Territory's educational reforms had become part of a much broader national conversation.

The Journal of Negro Education

Volume 84

Spring 2015

Number 2

*A Howard University Quarterly Review of Issues
Incident to the Education of Black People Since 1932*



Section 4 Opening the Doors

When Christiansted High School opened in **1935**, it represented a turning point in the history of education in the Virgin Islands. For nearly a century after emancipation, most students completed only the elementary grades before entering the workforce or helping support their families. Boys often worked alongside parents in agriculture, skilled trades, fishing, or local businesses, while many girls contributed to household labor, domestic service, sewing, or family enterprises. Opportunities for education beyond the elementary level were limited, and

students seeking advanced schooling frequently had to leave the Territory to continue their education in Puerto Rico, Antigua, or the continental United States.

The establishment of Christiansted High School asked Virgin Islands families to imagine a different future. Rather than leaving school after the elementary grades, students could continue their education at home and prepare for careers requiring advanced knowledge and specialized training. Families who enrolled their children made an important investment, choosing to keep young people in school longer rather than having them immediately contribute to household income or family labor. In many ways, Christiansted High School reflected the growing American belief that education was an investment in both individual opportunity and the future prosperity of a community.

The Virgin Islands were not alone in expanding secondary education. Across the United States during the early twentieth century, public high schools grew rapidly as the nation became increasingly industrialized and urbanized. By the 1930s, every state had enacted compulsory school attendance laws, requiring children to remain in school for a minimum number of years. At the same time, the Great Depression transformed how many Americans viewed education. With unemployment reaching nearly **25 percent** nationwide, educators and government leaders increasingly believed that schools could prepare young people for skilled employment, higher education, and responsible citizenship while strengthening the nation's economic future. As an American territory, the Virgin Islands became part of these broader educational reforms.

Christiansted High School reflected these changing priorities. Rather than serving only a small group of students preparing for college, the school sought to educate future teachers, nurses, clerks, business owners, farmers, public employees, and community leaders. The school's first graduating class, in **1936**, consisted of **14 students**, illustrating both the modest beginnings of public secondary education and the enormous potential for future growth. By **1947**, Christiansted High School had expanded to serve students in **grades seven through twelve**, making it the Territory's principal public secondary institution, while Frederiksted operated as a junior high serving grades seven and eight.

Although Christiansted High School was a public institution, attending was not always easy. The school was located in Christiansted, while many students lived in Frederiksted and rural communities throughout St. Croix. Public transportation was limited, and daily travel across the island could be difficult. Some students therefore lived with relatives or family friends in Christiansted during the school year so they could attend classes regularly. Families made significant sacrifices because they believed education offered opportunities that previous generations had never possessed.

Unlike many public schools in the segregated American South during the 1930s, Christiansted High School was **not established as a legally segregated school**. Students were admitted from

across St. Croix regardless of race. In practice, however, the student body was predominantly Afro-Crucian because public education served the broadest cross-section of the Territory's population. Some families with greater financial resources, including white, Hispanic, and Afro-Crucian families, continued sending their children to private schools or to secondary schools in Puerto Rico, Antigua, and the continental United States. Christiansted High School therefore expanded educational opportunity by providing a public pathway to secondary education that had never before existed in the Virgin Islands.



Lesson 2 Assessment

Part A — Check Your Understanding (4 Questions)

1. Why did the Virgin Islands establish Christiansted High School in 1935?
 2. Explain how the transition from Naval Rule to civilian government changed educational priorities.
 3. Why was the Old Barracks selected as the location for Christiansted High School?
 4. Describe two sacrifices families made so students could attend Christiansted High School.
-

Part B — Analyze a Primary Source

Re-read President Herbert Hoover's statement describing the Virgin Islands as **"an effective poorhouse."**

Using evidence from both Hoover's statement and this lesson, answer the following:

Do you believe Hoover accurately described the Virgin Islands in 1931? Why or why not? Support your answer with at least three pieces of historical evidence.

Part C — Timeline

Place the following events in chronological order by numbering them from 1 (earliest) to 6 (latest).

- ___ Christiansted High School opens
 - ___ Paul Martin Pearson becomes the first civilian governor
 - ___ Virgin Islanders become U.S. citizens
 - ___ United States purchases the Virgin Islands from Denmark
 - ___ President Herbert Hoover visits the Virgin Islands
 - ___ First graduating class of Christiansted High School
-

Part D — Think Like a Historian (2 Questions)

1. Why do historians study buildings such as the Old Barracks to understand the history of the Virgin Islands?

2. Do you think education was the most important investment the Virgin Islands could have made during the Great Depression? Explain your answer using evidence from the lesson.

Exit Ticket

Look back at the first photograph of the Old Barracks.

Write **three sentences** explaining how the building symbolizes the changing history of the Virgin Islands between Danish rule and the American period.

Lesson 3

Inside the Old Barracks

Learning, Leadership, and the Making of Modern Virgin Islanders

Essential Question

How did Christiansted High School prepare students for life in an American territory while responding to the needs of the Virgin Islands?

Section One

Building Citizens for a New Era

The curriculum developed inside the Old Barracks reflected one of the most important educational transformations taking place in the United States during the early twentieth century. Rather than limiting students to traditional academic subjects, educators increasingly believed that public schools should prepare young people for both higher education and the workforce. English, mathematics, science, history, and civics remained central to the curriculum, but schools also expanded instruction in agriculture, commercial education, home economics, industrial arts, and mechanical training. The goal was to prepare students not only to earn a living but also to participate actively in civic and community life.

This educational philosophy received significant federal support through the **Smith-Hughes Act of 1917**, the first major law to provide federal funding specifically for vocational education. The legislation encouraged states to develop programs in agriculture, trade and industry, and home economics while preparing students for employment in a rapidly changing economy. By the late 1930s, **more than one million students** across the United States were enrolled in federally supported vocational education programs, reflecting the nation's growing investment in practical education alongside traditional academic instruction.

Educational reformers also challenged the idea that students learned best by memorizing facts from textbooks. Philosopher and educator **John Dewey** argued that schools should connect learning to real-world experiences through observation, experimentation, and problem-solving. His philosophy of **"learning by doing"** influenced Progressive Era schools throughout the United States and encouraged teachers to use laboratories, workshops, farms, and communities as extensions of the classroom. These ideas also appeared in the Virgin Islands. In 1934, educator

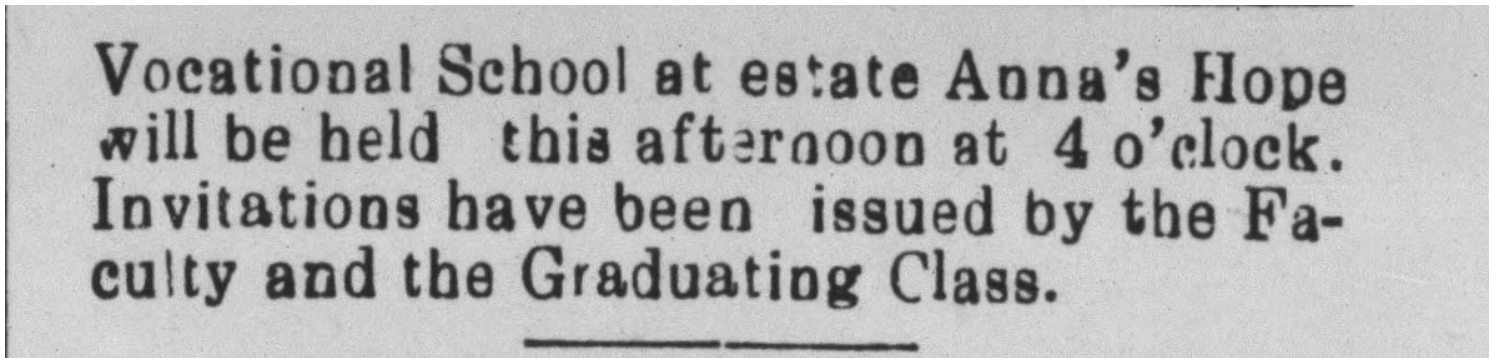
Bess B. Lane argued that schools in the Territory should encourage students to learn through "doing, planning, judging, and evaluating," believing that education should prepare young people for democratic participation as well as employment.

Christiansted High School reflected many of these educational reforms while adapting them to the needs of the Virgin Islands. Students studied academic subjects alongside practical courses that responded directly to the Territory's economy and workforce. Sewing and home economics prepared students for careers in education, household management, and public service. Commercial courses developed bookkeeping, typing, and office skills needed in government agencies and private businesses. Industrial arts and mechanical training supported the growing demand for skilled trades, while agriculture remained essential in a society still shaped by farming and food production.



Learning frequently extended beyond the walls of the Old Barracks. Biology classes traveled to the Agricultural Experiment Station at **Anna's Hope**, where students observed tropical crops, livestock, soil conservation, and scientific farming methods firsthand. Field studies also brought students to estates such as **Jolly Hill**, **Annaly**, and **Little La Grange**, demonstrating that the

Virgin Islands landscape itself served as a classroom. Rather than separating education from everyday life, teachers encouraged students to understand the relationship between science, agriculture, economics, and the communities in which they lived.



History instruction reflected many of these same educational realities. Students studied American and world history as part of the standard curriculum, but there was no stand-alone course devoted exclusively to Virgin Islands or Caribbean history. Local history was generally incorporated into broader history classes, and the depth of instruction often depended upon the knowledge, interests, and experiences of individual teachers. Because few published textbooks focused specifically on the Virgin Islands, educators frequently supplemented lessons with local newspapers, oral traditions, family histories, community memory, and their own lived experiences. As a result, events such as the **1848 Emancipation** and the **1878 Fireburn** were often remembered through stories shared by parents, grandparents, and elders as much as through formal classroom instruction. This reflected the limited availability of written instructional materials rather than a lack of importance placed on Virgin Islands history.

Section Two

Who Built the School System?

When historians study Christiansted High School, one pattern quickly becomes clear. Women appear throughout its history as teachers, department heads, supervisors, principals, librarians, and educational leaders. By the middle of the twentieth century, women had become the backbone of public education in both the United States and the Virgin Islands. Yet their growing presence reflected different historical experiences shaped by race, gender, and opportunity.

During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the women's rights movement in the United States sought greater access to education, professional careers, property ownership, and political participation. These efforts culminated in the ratification of the **Nineteenth Amendment** in **1920**, granting many American women the right to vote. As educational opportunities expanded, teaching became one of the nation's largest professions for women. By **1940**, nearly **70 percent** of public school teachers in the United States were women, making

education one of the few professions that offered women opportunities for leadership and long-term careers.

For Black women, however, the story unfolded differently. Unlike many white middle-class women, who often debated whether they should enter the workforce, most Black women had long worked out of economic necessity. During slavery they labored in fields, homes, workshops, and markets. After emancipation many continued working as domestic workers, laundresses, seamstresses, agricultural laborers, and caregivers because few other opportunities existed. Historians have noted that education became one of the most important avenues through which Black women entered professions that offered greater economic security, public leadership, and opportunities to strengthen their communities. Teaching, in particular, emerged as one of the most respected careers available to Black women during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Historically Black Colleges and Universities played a central role in that transformation. Institutions such as **Hampton Institute**, **Howard University**, **Tuskegee Institute**, and **Spelman College** trained thousands of Black educators who established schools, supervised instruction, developed curriculum, and expanded educational opportunities throughout the American South and other underserved communities.



Established in the early 20th century, the Hampton-supported Jeanes Teachers program exemplified the institution's commitment to training experienced Black educators to uplift underfunded school systems through community-centered instruction. As this educational

philosophy professionalized in the 1930s, Hampton graduates transformed from local supervisors into global agents of educational equity. Armed with this robust pedagogical training, standout educators expanded these foundational principles far beyond the American South. Among these pioneering leaders was Pearl B. Larsen, a Hampton graduate who brought this specialized educational expertise to the Caribbean when she relocated for a teaching assignment.

Born in **Montgomery, Alabama**, in **1894**, Larsen graduated from **Hampton Institute**, one of the nation's leading institutions for preparing Black teachers and school leaders. Hampton believed that education should strengthen entire communities by preparing educators who could improve schools, mentor teachers, supervise curriculum, and develop future leaders. When Larsen arrived in the Virgin Islands in **1932**, she brought those ideas with her at a time when the Territory was expanding its public school system under Governor Paul Martin Pearson.

Larsen's influence extended far beyond her own classroom. As **Supervisor** and later **Superintendent of Education** on St. Croix, she helped strengthen curriculum, improve teacher preparation, and expand professional development throughout the Territory. Recognizing that many Virgin Islands teachers could not afford to leave home to complete college degrees, Larsen established partnerships with Hampton Institute that brought university professors to St. Croix to teach extension courses. Rather than sending every educator to the mainland, she helped bring higher education to the Virgin Islands, allowing teachers to earn college credit while continuing to serve their own communities. Her work connected Christiansted High School to a broader network of Black educational leadership stretching from the American South to the Caribbean.



The impact of those efforts can be seen in the graduates of Christiansted High School itself. One measure of a school's success is not simply how many students graduate but how many return to strengthen the communities that educated them. By the mid-1940s, Christiansted High School had begun producing graduates who continued their studies at colleges and universities on the mainland before returning home as teachers.

A **September 6, 1945**, edition of **The St. Croix Avis** provides a remarkable snapshot of this educational pipeline. The newspaper announced that **Gertrude James**, a graduate of Christiansted High School, had earned a **Bachelor of Science in Home Economics** from **Hampton Institute** and had been appointed to teach Home Economics at her alma mater. In the same issue, **Miriam Williams** returned to St. Croix after earning a **Bachelor of Science in Business Education** from Hampton Institute to teach commercial subjects at Christiansted High School. The newspaper also announced the appointments of **Claire Todman**, **Grace Rivera**, and **Eileen Joseph**, all graduates of the **Christiansted High School Class of 1945**, who accepted teaching positions throughout the public school system.

This single newspaper tells a larger story. Christiansted High School prepared students for college. Institutions such as Hampton Institute prepared them as professional educators. Many then returned home to teach the next generation of Virgin Islanders. Rather than depending entirely on teachers recruited from outside the Territory, the public school system increasingly invested in its own graduates, creating a cycle in which students became teachers, teachers became educational leaders, and those leaders continued strengthening the school system.

The Virgin Islands also brought its own traditions to this story. Long before public schools expanded, women exercised leadership through churches, families, mutual aid societies, marketplaces, and cultural organizations. Public education did not create women leaders. Instead, it provided new public institutions where their leadership became increasingly visible and professionally recognized. Among the most influential of these educators was **Elena L. Christian**, whose career spanned decades of service to Christiansted High School and the Virgin Islands Department of Education. Like Pearl B. Larsen, Christian believed that schools should develop both academic excellence and civic responsibility. Her leadership shaped generations of students and educators, and her enduring contributions are reflected today in **Elena L. Christian Junior High School**, named in her honor.



Pearl B. Larsen, Elena L. Christian, and countless other women transformed the Old Barracks into far more than a secondary school. They built an institution that prepared students for college, trained future teachers, strengthened public education, and developed leaders whose influence extended throughout the Virgin Islands for generations.

The ST. CROIX AVIS

Champion of Public Right and Justice

Est. 1844

Saint Croix, Virgin Islands, U. S. A., Thursday, September 6, 1945

No. 195

Changes In Teaching Staffs Of Public Schools Announced

Several changes have been effected in the teaching staffs of the Island's schools with the new school year which began September 4, it was made known by Mrs. P. L. Byrd Larsen, Superintendent of Education.

Moving from the Slob School to the Frederiksted Public Grammar School is Mrs. Beryl Adams Armstrong, who returns to teaching after leave of absence. Ezra Naughton who taught at the Slob School has been assigned to the Frederiksted Junior High School. Presently on the staff of the Slob School are James Andrews, principal, Mrs. Evelyn Williams, Theodore Jackson, added this year.

Also returning after a leave of absence is Mrs. Alatha Williams, to the Christiansted High School, and Mrs. Agatha Simmonds Sergeant to the Christiansted Public Grammar School.

Personal Mention

Clarence Payne, owner of Town Hall Theatre which was burned down recently, arrived here yesterday on business in connection with the building of his new modern fireproof theatre.

He returned to St. Thomas today.

Miss Gertrude James To Be On High School Faculty

Miss Gertrude James of Frederiksted has been appointed to teach at the Christiansted High School, to take up duties when she arrives in the latter part of this week. She will teach Home Economics.

Miss James is a graduate of the Christiansted High School, and holds the degree of Bachelor of Science in Home Economics from Hampton Institute.

Miss Miriam Williams To Teach At High School Here

A new member of the faculty of the Christiansted High School is Miss Miriam Williams of Frederiksted. She has been assigned to teach Commercial subjects.

Miss Williams is a graduate of the St. Patrick's School in Frederiksted, and completed her high school in New York City. She studied in the School of Business at Hampton Institute from which she received the B. S. degree.

She is expected to arrive from the mainland shortly.

Christiansted Theatre

8:15 Tonight 8:15

ANN DVORAK & ERIC RORTMAN IN

Squadron Leader X

A Nazi Rat in the RAF blazing a blood-stained track of murder & terror under the very reach of British Intelligence..... Even his own Gestapo despised him! Be sure to see this thrilling Suspense Sensation of the war.

Admission as usual

James Keans, Mrs. Keans Leave To Study On Mainland

James Kean, former teller at the Virgin Islands National Bank in St. Thomas, and who has served as manager of the Bank here for short periods, left for the mainland on Monday. He was accompanied by Mrs. Kean.

Mr. Kean will study law at the Kent School and Mrs. Kean, who is a teacher in the Charlotte Amalie High School, will work for her master's degree in history at the University of Chicago.

Misses Claire Todman, Grace Rivera And Eileen Joseph To Teach

Miss Claire Todman, Miss Eileen Joseph and Miss Grace Rivera have been appointed to teach in positions in the Island's public schools, it was announced by Mrs. Pearl Larsen, Superintendent of Education. The appointment of these teachers became effective upon the confirmation of the Municipal Council.

Misses Todman Joseph and Rivera are graduates of the Christiansted High School, all of the Class of 1945.

Miss Todman had the distinction of being the first young lady to be elected president of her class. She has been assigned to teach at the Frederiksted Grammar School.

Miss Joseph will be on the staff of the Princesse School, and Miss Rivera will be at the Slob School.

Bough, Hill Return To St. Thomas After Hearings

Attorney James A. Bough and Hon. Valdemar Hill, members of the Organic Act Reform Committee, returned to St. Thomas today after holding public discussions on proposed changes in the Organic Act in Christiansted and Frederiksted.

Mr. Bough, chairman of the committee, returned on the early plane. Mr. Hill left on the afternoon plane.

Generals Arnold, Spaatz Favors Unification

General Henry H. Arnold and General Carl Spaatz has come out flatly for consolidation of the Army, Navy and Air forces, a radio report said.

Due to shortage of clothing the Navy has rescinded the order which permitted naval personnel to wear plain clothes when off duty.

Primary Source Investigation

The St. Croix Avis

September 6, 1945

Look carefully at the newspaper before answering the questions.

1. How many women mentioned on this page accepted positions in the Virgin Islands public schools?
2. Which colleges or universities prepared these educators?
3. What patterns do you notice about where these teachers were educated and where they chose to work?
4. What does this newspaper suggest about opportunities available to Virgin Islands women through education?
5. How does this article support the idea that Christiansted High School became part of a larger Black educational network connecting the Virgin Islands to historically Black Colleges and Universities?

LESSON 4

The End of One Chapter

Section One

Outgrowing the Old Barracks

By the early 1950s, Christiansted High School had fulfilled the vision that inspired its founding nearly two decades earlier. The school had become far more than the Virgin Islands' first public high school. It had prepared teachers, nurses, business professionals, agricultural specialists, civil servants, skilled tradesmen, and community leaders who helped shape the Territory during a period of tremendous change. Graduates returned from colleges and universities to teach in local classrooms, vocational programs expanded, and new educational opportunities continued to emerge.

The growth of the school reflected broader changes taking place throughout the Virgin Islands. Enrollment continued to increase as more families recognized the value of a secondary education. At the same time, the curriculum became more specialized. Science laboratories, commercial education, home economics, agriculture, industrial arts, drafting, woodworking, and vocational electricity all required classrooms and equipment that the former Danish Barracks had never been designed to accommodate.

This Is Our Story

We will begin our story when we were ninth graders in Christiansted High School. There were 78 students enrolled at the end of the school year which was June, 1955. The Principal was Mr. Horace Thornton, Jr. Mrs. Elena L. Christian was Dean of Girls. Mrs. E. P. Coff was homeroom teacher of the IX-B and Mr. Austin A. de Chabert was homeroom teacher of the IX-A. The subjects taught were Algebra, English, General Science, World History, Home Economics, informal Spanish and vocational subjects.

During the Easter vacation the school was moved to its new quarters, and we were able to enjoy the facilities of a very modern building.

In the tenth grade we were joined by the students who graduated from Frederiksted Junior High. The enrollment was then 96. Mr. Horace Thornton was still principal. Mrs. Elena L. Christian was Dean of Girls, assisting the principal. Mr. G. Luz James was homeroom teacher for the commercial students; Miss Lena Abel for the academic and Mr. James Livas for the vocational. The subjects taught were Biology, English, Spanish I, Home Economics, Geometry and vocational and commercial subjects.

During the eleventh year we were divided as before. The same teachers were homeroom teachers as in the 10th grade. The subjects taught were Int. Algebra, Chemistry, English, European History, Problems of Democracy, Spanish, Home Economics, commercial subjects and vocational subjects such as carpentry, electricity, and plumbing. The enrollment was 81. *Mrs. Christian was principal.*

Our last year came and we were very enthusiastic and happy. Mrs. Juanita F. Gardine was appointed principal. Mrs. Elena L. Christian was principal teacher. There were only two divisions. Miss L. Abel was homeroom teacher for the academic group and Mr. G. Luz James for the commercial and vocational. Mr. G. Luz James went to army camp from October to February. Mr. Ivan James substituted for him.

One of our students, Ethel Jackson, won Miss C. H. S. contest. She was crowned with appropriate ceremony.

Many of us took part in the Inter-Island Meet which resulted in a victory for Christiansted High School. Horace Clerke was the star of the meet, even though many others were quite outstanding.

National educational policy also continued to evolve. Following World War II, Congress passed the **George-Barden Act of 1946**, more than doubling federal support for vocational education while expanding programs in agriculture, home economics, industrial arts, and vocational teacher preparation. The legislation also strengthened student leadership organizations such as the **Future Farmers of America (FFA)** and the **New Farmers of America (NFA)**. These reforms reflected a growing belief that schools should prepare students not only for college but also for the technical, agricultural, and industrial careers needed in a modern economy. Christiansted High School increasingly reflected these national priorities while adapting them to the needs of the Virgin Islands.



Ninth Grade Vocational - Woodwork

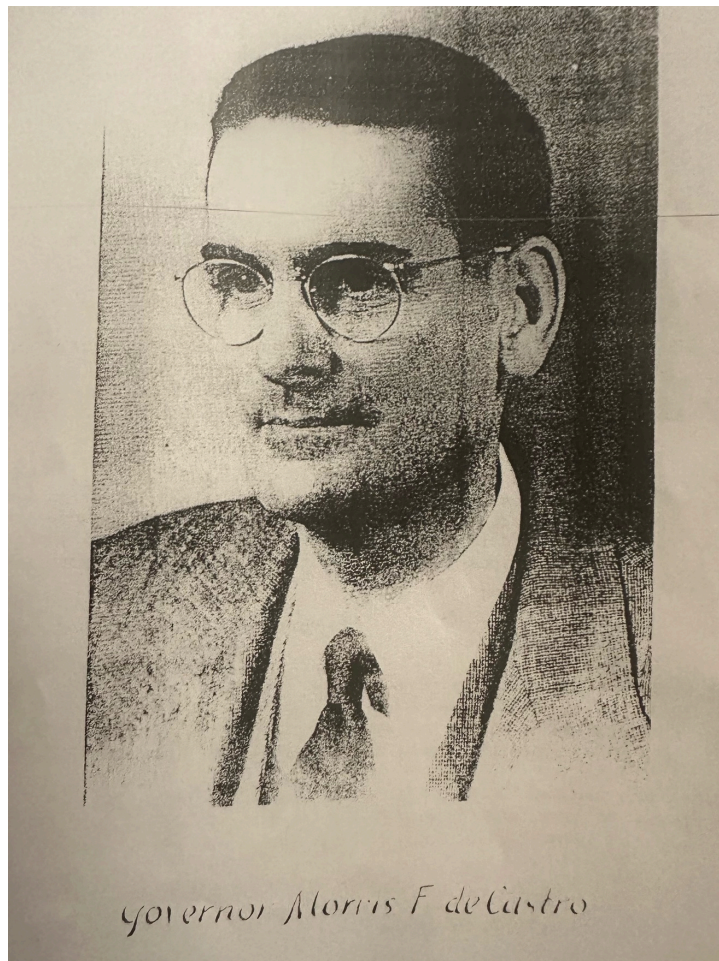


Home Economics & Commercial Bldg

New Home Makers of V-I Club

The school's yearbooks also reveal how educational priorities had expanded. Biology students traveled to the Agricultural Station at Anna's Hope and its substation at Jolly Hill to study tropical agriculture firsthand. Students participated in vocational drafting, woodworking, electricity, commercial education, and home economics while learning from educators such as Elena L. Christian, Enid Hodge, William Thurland, Alexander Henderson, Octavia Ross, and Assistant Superintendent Juanita Gardine. Former students, including Charles Emanuel, even returned to join the faculty, illustrating how Christiansted High School increasingly educated the very teachers who would sustain the Territory's public schools.

The expectations placed upon graduates also reflected the changing world around them. In his message to the **Class of 1951**, Governor **Morris F. de Castro** reminded students that they were graduating during a period of "national emergency" and urged them to embrace production, leadership, self-determination, and self-dependence. His message came at the beginning of the Cold War and during the Korean War, when governments throughout the United States emphasized education, technical training, and economic productivity as essential to national security and economic growth. While these concerns reflected global events, they also spoke directly to the Virgin Islands, where leaders hoped educated citizens would help diversify the economy, strengthen public institutions, and reduce dependence on outside assistance.



By the middle of the twentieth century, one reality had become impossible to ignore. The Old Barracks had outgrown its original purpose. Built during the Danish colonial period to house soldiers, the building had successfully served as the home of the Virgin Islands' first public high school, but it could no longer meet the needs of an expanding educational system. Larger student enrollment, specialized classrooms, science laboratories, vocational workshops, athletic facilities, and modern educational standards required a new campus designed specifically for secondary education.

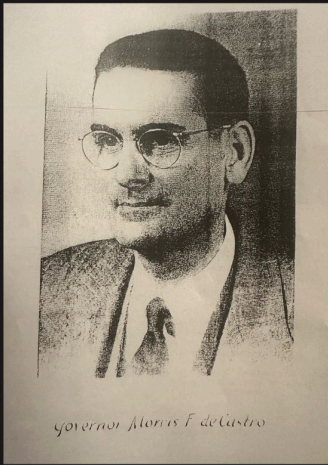
Christiansted High School eventually relocated to a new campus at **Estate Richmond**, where it continued operating under the name **Christiansted High School**. In later years, that campus became the home of what is now **Juanita Gardine PreK-8 School**, named in honor of longtime educator and Assistant Superintendent **Juanita Gardine**, whose leadership helped shape public education in the Virgin Islands. The move marked the end of one chapter in the school's history but not the end of its legacy.

Although students no longer attend high school inside the Old Barracks, the building remains one of the most significant educational landmarks in the Virgin Islands. Its classrooms helped launch the careers of educators, public servants, business leaders, scientists, and community advocates whose work extended far beyond Christiansted. The history of the building reminds us that schools are more than places where lessons are taught. They are institutions where communities invest in their future, where ideas are passed from one generation to the next, and where young people begin preparing to shape the society they will one day inherit.

Reading Between the Lines

Primary Source Investigation

HISTORY OF CLASS ON 51
SEPTEMBER 1947 - JUNE 1951



Governor Morris F. de Castro

Governor's Message

Production is receiving appreciable importance these days of national emergency, as we are urged to use Less, conserve more, and supply in greater abundance than ever before. Especially in our insular position, there is unusual opportunity for us to develop this desirable quality, preferably as normal routine, with full employment of our resources and minimum reliance upon outside support.

Perhaps you are already aware of the growing demands for more and better leadership in our various fields of community endeavor. As our horizons of self-determination and self-dependence assume wider proportions, it is necessary that you seek and maintain vantage positions in the developing pattern. The services and facilities of the school system have been made available to you, and your culmination of high school study shows that you and your parents have recognized and appreciated the character of and preparation for leadership opportunities.

You have been adequately provided with good tools for your future advancement. I want you to know that the promotion of your best interests now depends upon your diligence in producing material response to the confidence which the community has reposed in you. Future production is your responsibility.

Morris F. de Castro, Governor.

Governor Morris F. de Castro's Message to the Class of 1951

Read the Governor's message carefully.

Think Like a Historian

1. Why do you think Governor de Castro repeatedly uses the words **production**, **leadership**, **self-determination**, and **self-dependence**?
 2. What world events occurring in 1951 might have influenced his message to graduates?
 3. How do his remarks reflect the educational goals of Christiansted High School?
 4. Do you think the Governor viewed education primarily as a way to improve individual lives, strengthen the economy, build democratic citizenship, or all three? Support your answer with evidence from the document.
-

Lesson 3 Review

Key Terms

- Americanization
 - Vocational Education
 - Smith-Hughes Act
 - George-Barden Act
 - Hampton Institute
 - Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs)
 - Curriculum
 - Self-determination
 - Civic Leadership
-

Check Your Understanding

1. Why did Christiansted High School combine academic and vocational education?
 2. How did national educational reforms influence the school's curriculum?
 3. Why were Historically Black Colleges and Universities important to the development of education in the Virgin Islands?
 4. How did educators such as Pearl B. Larsen and Elena L. Christian strengthen public education?
 5. What does the September 6, 1945, edition of *The St. Croix Avis* reveal about opportunities available to Christiansted High School graduates?
 6. Why did Christiansted High School eventually outgrow the Old Barracks?
-

Timeline

Place these events in chronological order.

- _____ Smith-Hughes Act encourages vocational education.
 - _____ Christiansted High School opens in the Old Barracks.
 - _____ George-Barden Act expands vocational education.
 - _____ Class of 1951 graduates.
 - _____ Christiansted High School relocates to Estate Richmond.
 - _____ Estate Richmond campus later becomes Juanita Gardine PreK–8 School.
-

Writing Like a Historian

Using evidence from this lesson, explain how Christiansted High School reflected both national educational reforms and the needs of the Virgin Islands.

In your response, discuss:

- one national educational policy,
- one local educational leader,
- one primary source,
- and one way the school influenced the future of the Virgin Islands.

Material Witness



Between 1935 and its relocation to Estate Richmond, the Old Barracks witnessed the emergence of public secondary education in the Virgin Islands. Within its walls, students prepared for college, entered the skilled trades, returned as teachers, and became leaders in government, business, and community life. Although Christiansted High School eventually moved, the building remains one of the Territory's most important educational landmarks because it preserves the story of where public secondary education began.

