

CASPER HOLSTEIN (1876 – 1944)



EARLY LIFE

Casper Holstein was born in St. Croix, Danish West Indies (now the U.S. Virgin Islands), in 1876. In 1894, he moved to New York with his mother and spent most of his teenage years attending high school in Brooklyn. After graduating, he enlisted in the United States Navy shortly before the Spanish-American War. Following his military service, Holstein held various jobs, including positions as a porter and doorman in Manhattan, before advancing to become the head messenger for a Wall Street brokerage firm. While working on Wall Street, he developed an understanding of the stock market and became familiar with the numbers system, an illegal lottery commonly played by many low-income New Yorkers. He eventually created his own lottery, known as Bolito, and by 1920 had earned the nickname "Bolito King." By the mid-1920s, Holstein had amassed significant wealth, which he used to purchase properties, farmland, and luxury items. More importantly, he became known for his philanthropy and commitment to uplifting the African American community. He funded dormitories at historically Black colleges, supported Harlem Renaissance artists, assisted underprivileged children in Harlem, helped establish a Baptist school in Liberia, contributed to the creation of a museum in New York, and provided hurricane relief and more for his native Virgin Islands.

MAJOR ACCOMPLISHMENTS

- Became one of Harlem's most successful entrepreneurs during the Harlem Renaissance.
- Donated significant funds to organizations that promoted civil rights, education, and economic opportunity for African Americans.
- Supported scholarships for Black students and funded educational programs.
- Contributed to organizations such as the National Urban League, the NAACP, and the Urban League of New York.
- Provided financial support to artists, writers, musicians, and intellectuals during the Harlem Renaissance.
- Advocated for greater recognition and self-determination for people from the Virgin Islands.
- Co-founded the Virgin Islands Congressional Council, advocating for Virgin Islanders' representation in the U.S.

CHALLENGES FACED

As a Black businessman in the early twentieth century, Holstein faced racial discrimination and limited economic opportunities. Because the numbers game operated outside the legal system, he also encountered scrutiny from law enforcement and criticism from some members of society.

Despite these challenges, Holstein remained committed to helping others and used his influence and resources to uplift his community.

LASTING IMPACT ON THE VIRGIN ISLANDS AND BEYOND

Casper Holstein demonstrated the power of philanthropy and community investment. His financial support helped strengthen civil rights organizations, expand educational opportunities, and sustain the cultural achievements of the Harlem Renaissance.

His generosity extended beyond Harlem to the Virgin Islands, where he supported causes that promoted political awareness and self-improvement. Holstein's life serves as an example of how success can be used to create opportunities for others.

Today, he is remembered as one of the most influential Virgin Islanders of the twentieth century and as a leader whose contributions reached far beyond his birthplace.