

ROTHSCHILD FRANCIS (1891–1963)

EARLY LIFE



Rothschild "Polly" Francis was born in 1891 on St. Thomas, U.S. Virgin Islands, when the islands were part of the Danish West Indies. He witnessed the transfer of the islands from Denmark to the United States in 1917 and believed that Virgin Islanders would soon receive the same rights and freedoms guaranteed to other Americans. However, this was not immediately the case.

Largely self-educated, Francis developed a strong understanding of the U.S. Constitution and democratic principles. Motivated by a deep commitment to justice and equality, he became a passionate advocate for civil rights, freedom of the press, and self-government for the people of the Virgin Islands.

MAJOR ACCOMPLISHMENTS

- Founded The Emancipator newspaper in 1921 to advocate for social justice, civil rights, and freedom of the press.
- Campaigned for U.S. citizenship for Virgin Islanders and greater political representation.
- Fought for an end to U.S. Naval rule and demanded a civilian government for the Virgin Islands.
- Served on the Colonial Council, where he advocated for self-government and constitutional rights.
- Used speeches, editorials, and testimony before government officials to raise awareness about racial inequality and the lack of civil liberties in the territory.

CHALLENGES FACED

Francis faced strong opposition from government officials because of his activism. His newspaper was threatened with censorship, and he was repeatedly arrested and jailed on charges including criminal libel and contempt of court after criticizing the naval administration. He was denied a trial by jury and spent years battling legal persecution. Eventually, continued harassment forced him to leave the Virgin Islands and move to New York in 1931.

LASTING IMPACT ON THE VIRGIN ISLANDS AND BEYOND

Rothschild Francis helped lay the foundation for many of the rights Virgin Islanders enjoy today. His advocacy contributed to the movement for U.S. citizenship, which was granted to Virgin Islanders in 1927, and to the establishment of civilian government in 1931. His fight for freedom of the press, voting rights, and self-government continues to influence conversations about political status and civil rights in the territory. His legacy is honored through Rothschild Francis Market Square in St. Thomas and a statue recognizing his contributions to the Virgin Islands.