



Uncovering the Stories of St. Croix Tradesmen: A Journey Through the Danish West Indian Archives

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Editor's Note: This is the second installment in an ongoing series exploring the evolution of the Virgin Islands Architecture Center for Built Heritage & Crafts. Through the stories of the people who have shaped and participated in the center, the series examines its mission, growth and impact on preserving the territory's architectural heritage while inspiring future generations.

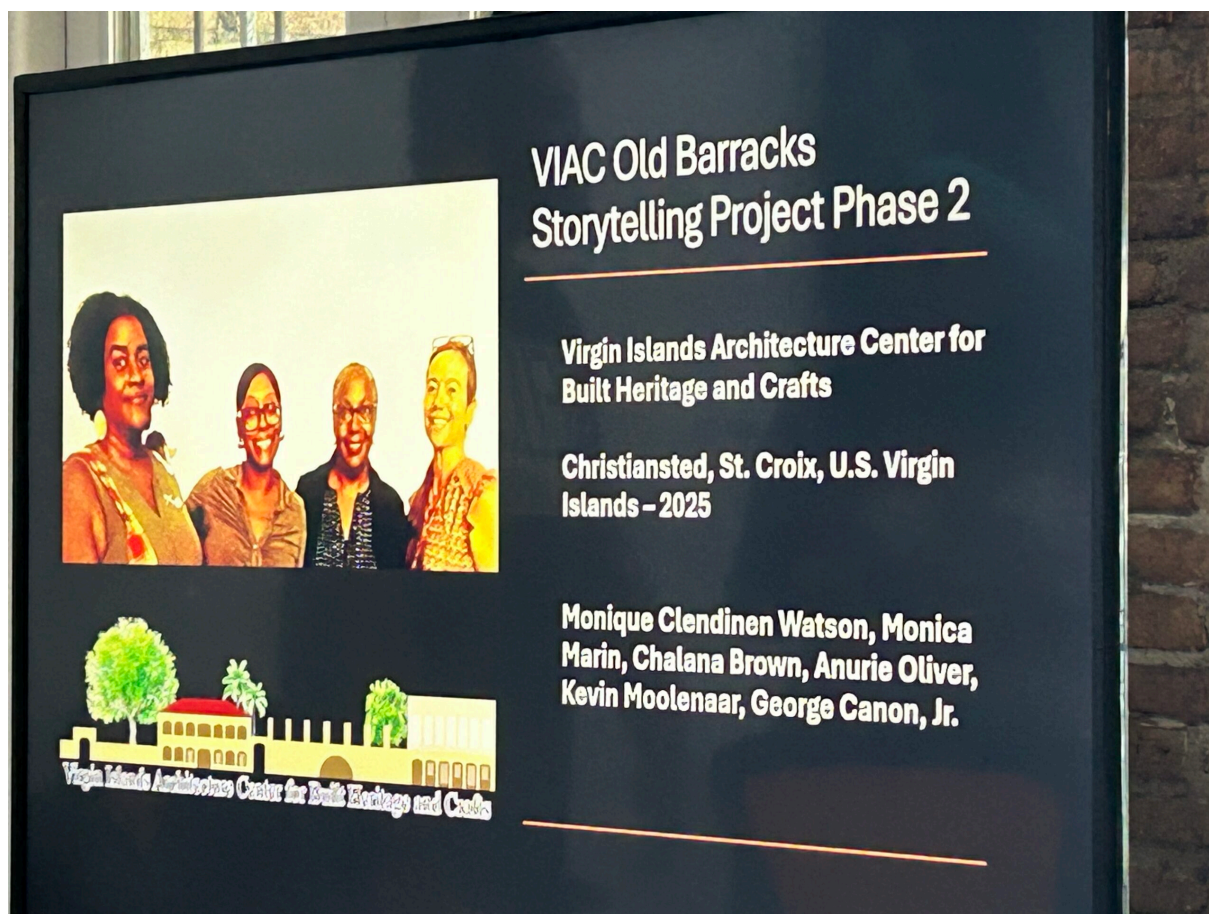
Part 1 is available [here](#).

Students, educators, artists, historians, and interested community members gathered at the Accelerate VI Co-Working Space in Christiansted on Saturday morning to take part in an interactive workshop titled “Uncovering the Stories of St. Croix Craftsmen.”

Presented by the Virgin Islands Architectural Center's ongoing Old Barracks Storytelling Project, the workshop was facilitated by Camila Jensen, a Danish researcher who guided participants as they examined Danish West Indian historical records in an attempt to piece together and reconstruct the story of a West African carpenter baptized “Anthony” at the Moravian Church on St. Croix in 1770.

Monique Clendinen Watson, director of the VIAC's Storytelling Project, welcomed the nearly full room before describing VIAC's efforts to rehabilitate the Old Barracks Property on Hospital Street, transform it into an educational center for historic preservation, architecture, and the building trades, and create a cultural heritage space in Christiansted. Clendinen Watson expressed gratitude to the Community Foundation of the Virgin Islands and the National Endowment for the Humanities for funding the Storytelling Project over the last five years.

“To preserve a building, a structure in a community, you must first know its stories,” Clendinen Watson told the workshop participants. “Like the exposed brick wall of the Old Barracks, Virgin Islands history is as layered and textured and complex as old yellow and red brick and old coral and limestone. It is held together by old and new



"Uncovering the Stories of St. Croix Craftsmen" was part of Phase 2 of VIAC's Old Barracks Storytelling Project.
(Source photo by Joshua Grant Canning)

plaster, and the sweat and tears of ancestors, binding the past, the present, and the future into solid form."

Throughout St. Croix's history, tradesmen and artisans have played a role in the island community. "Christiansted, from the outset has been not a Danish town, but an African-Danish town," writes historian George Tyson, who was in attendance at the workshop. "Not only because Africans and people of African descent employed their skills in its creation, but also because they populated it, transformed it, exploited its potential for survival in the face of most egregious oppression, and used it to create distinctive familial, cultural and community traditions."

Much of the still-standing built heritage of the Virgin Islands is based on the designs of European towns and was planned by Danish architects, but built by enslaved West African iron, wood, and stone craftsmen who used the knowledge and craftsmanship from their cultures to create buildings in the Virgin Islands and the Caribbean. Workshop participants examined the life of one such West African craftsman by piecing together information left behind in Danish West Indian archives.

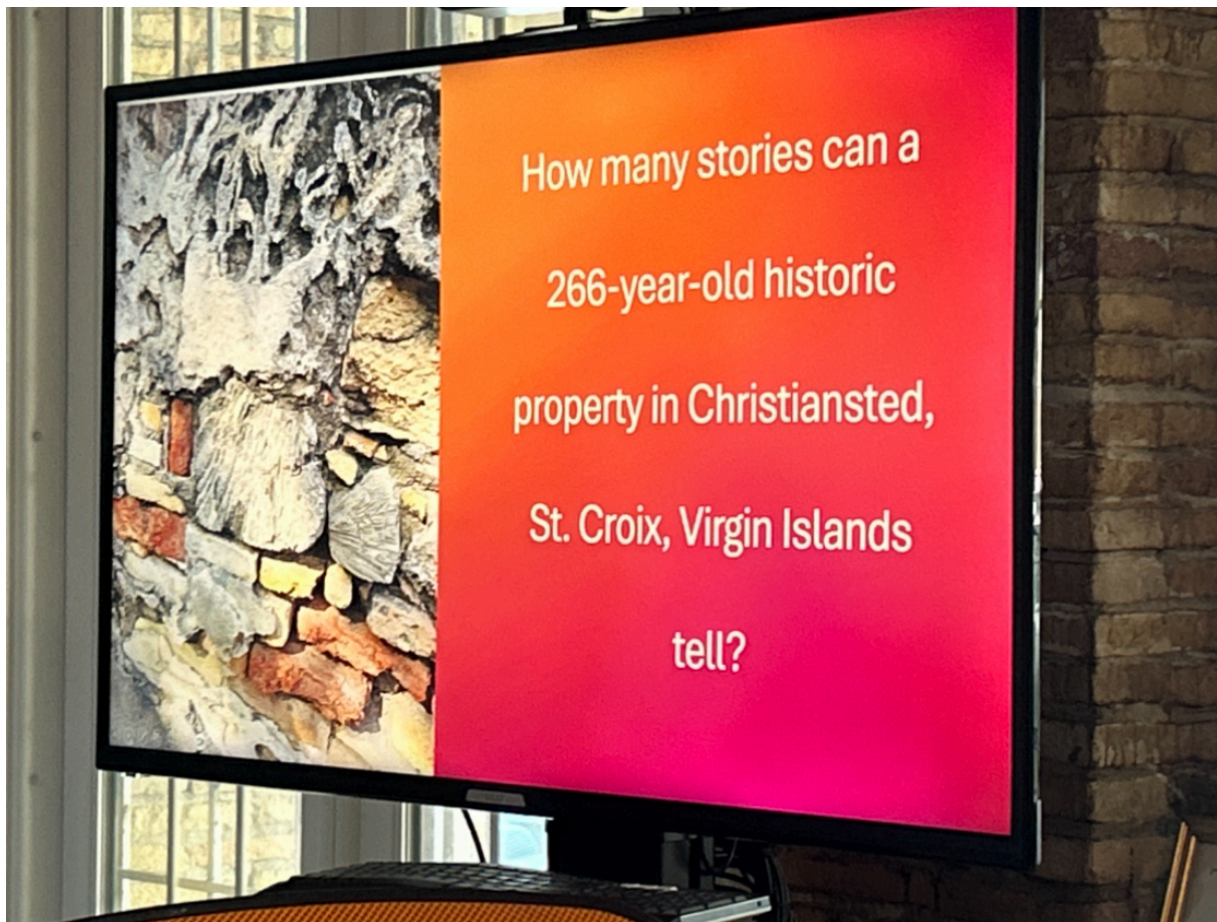
“The stories that we uncover make our historic buildings come alive,” said Clendinen Watson. “They give our people and our visitors access to the history and culture of our people, the good, the bad, the ugly and the beautiful – because it all adds up to who we are.”

The workshop asked participants to look closely at the historical record, “not simply for names or dates or documents,” explained

Amanda Sackey, VIAC’s operational and finance manager, “but for the human being within them. It is the human in the story that we are searching for,” Sackey explained. “Those who endured the brutality of Danish West Indian slavery carried forward knowledge, skills, traditions, and ancestral memory. Within the constraints of enslavement, they maintained bonds of family and community.”

Monica Marin, project lead for the Mellon Foundation Humanities in Place strategic planning project for the development of VIAC’s Cultural Heritage Center, told participants that the initiative seeks to humanize the story of our built environment and historic towns by putting the people back into place. “It honors Virgin Islands ancestors, both enslaved and free Black artisans, builders, and creatives-whose work





Monique Clendinen Watson discusses the layered history of the Virgin Islands during Saturday's "Uncovering the Stories of St. Croix Craftsmen" workshop at Accelerate VI Co-Working Space in Christiansted. (Source photo by Joshua Grant Canning)

continues to shape our towns, identity, and cultural production today," said Marin. "We want to tell the rich story of Virgin Islands' artisans and cultural producers past and present."

Marin told the participants that the organizers hoped the interactive workshop and discussion would inspire them to think more about history, not as something static that gets left behind, but as something constantly evolving as it continues to be reimagined and reinterpreted as new community archives are uncovered and brought to light.

"The Virgin Islands comes from a tradition of so many brilliant storytellers," she said. "We hope today's discussion sparks conversations about how some of the stories researched about everyday community members can often be the most powerful."

The interactive portions of the workshop were facilitated by Camilla Marlene Jensen, a Danish-born professional specializing in historical research, translation, and archival work related to the Danish West Indies. Jensen's work combines her



Much of the still-standing built heritage of the Virgin Islands is based on the designs of European towns and planned by Danish architects, but built by enslaved West African iron, wood, and stone craftsmen who used the knowledge and craftsmanship from their cultures to create buildings that are unique to the Virgin Islands and the Caribbean. (Source photo by Joshua Grant Canning)

expertise with personal family history research and engagement in community education and historical preservation.

Working in small groups at tables around the room, participants examined a series of photocopied documents from the Danish West Indian archives, all of which pertained, in one way or another, to the life of a West African carpenter from St. Thomas who, records indicated, had been baptized “Anthony” at the Moravian Church on St. Croix in 1770. At the time, Anthony was enslaved, and the series of documents participants worked with charted several changes of “ownership” before Anthony was able to purchase his own freedom.

While Jensen provided clues on how to decipher and decode certain aspects of the archival information within the records and read aloud and translated several documents related to Anthony’s story from Gothic Danish, participants worked to piece together incomplete and nonlinear information charting Anthony’s life story.



Workshop organizers Monique Clendinen Watson, director of VIAC's Old Barracks Storytelling Project, and Amanda Sackey, VIAC's operations and finance manager, discuss the workshop as historian George Tyson looks on. (Source photo by Joshua Grant Canning)

One participant compared the pieces of information available in the archival record to pieces of chaney one might find among plantation ruins. The task of the group was to locate and decode as many pieces of chaney as possible before attempting to put them together in the manner of a jigsaw puzzle so that an outline of the story of Anthony's life on St. Croix might come into focus.

An aspect of Anthony's story that came to light over the course of the two-hour workshop was that, after becoming free, he worked as a carpenter to earn the money to purchase the freedom of his enslaved family members. The records showed that

1. <u>Moyses.</u> †	Mathamba.	J. Thom. (riol.	Andr. B...
2. <u>Johannes.</u> †	Mathamba.		
		1763	
3. <u>Abraham.</u> † 71		Criol.	King. E...
4. <u>Abraham.</u> † 84	Chart. (riol.		Salomon
		1764	
5. <u>Cornelius.</u> † 1806		J. Thom. (riol.	Mr. de Wint.
6. <u>Jacob.</u> † 77	James.	Barb. (riol.	J. John. R.
		1769	
7. <u>Pedro.</u> † 72		Mon. (riol.	Mr. Schuster.
		1770	
8. <u>Anton.</u>	Anton.	J. Thom. (riol.	Baron (riol. gra.
9. <u>Petrus.</u>		Span. (riol.	Chaj. Hennrich.
10. <u>Anton.</u> † 94	Anton.	Crango.	Suppl. M. E...
		1771	
11. <u>Barnabas.</u> † 97		Criol.	Beaud'hu.
12. <u>Malachi.</u> † 99		J. Thom. (riol.	Friedensthal.
		1772	
13. <u>Sebastian.</u> †	in D...	J. Thom. (riol.	J. Stapel. Hennrich.
		1773	
14. <u>Gideon.</u> † 13		Criol.	Principi.
15. <u>Augustus.</u>			Barken. Lütting.
		1774	

St. Croix Moravian Church records in the Danish West Indian archive indicate that “Anthony”, a West African carpenter whose life story was a focus of the workshop, was baptized there in 1770. (Image courtesy of the Danish West Indian Historical Archives)

while Anthony was caught within a system in which he was disenfranchised, he worked within that system to purchase the freedom of members of his family.

In a period of reflection that followed the workshop, participants expressed gratitude to Jensen and the workshop organizers. Participants described the workshop as both

“eye-opening” and “transformative.”

One participant spoke of how the glimpse into the life of a particular individual whose handiwork may still survive today among the historic structures of Christiansted gave him a sense of intimacy with and awareness of local history that he did not previously possess.

For many participants, over the course of the workshop, “Anthony” had become a symbolic figure representing the West African tradesmen whose craftsmanship remains in the built heritage of the island’s towns today. Their knowledge and skills contributed to buildings that have withstood the passage of time. The preservation of that built heritage provides a connection between the lives of people today and the tradesmen of the past.