

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.

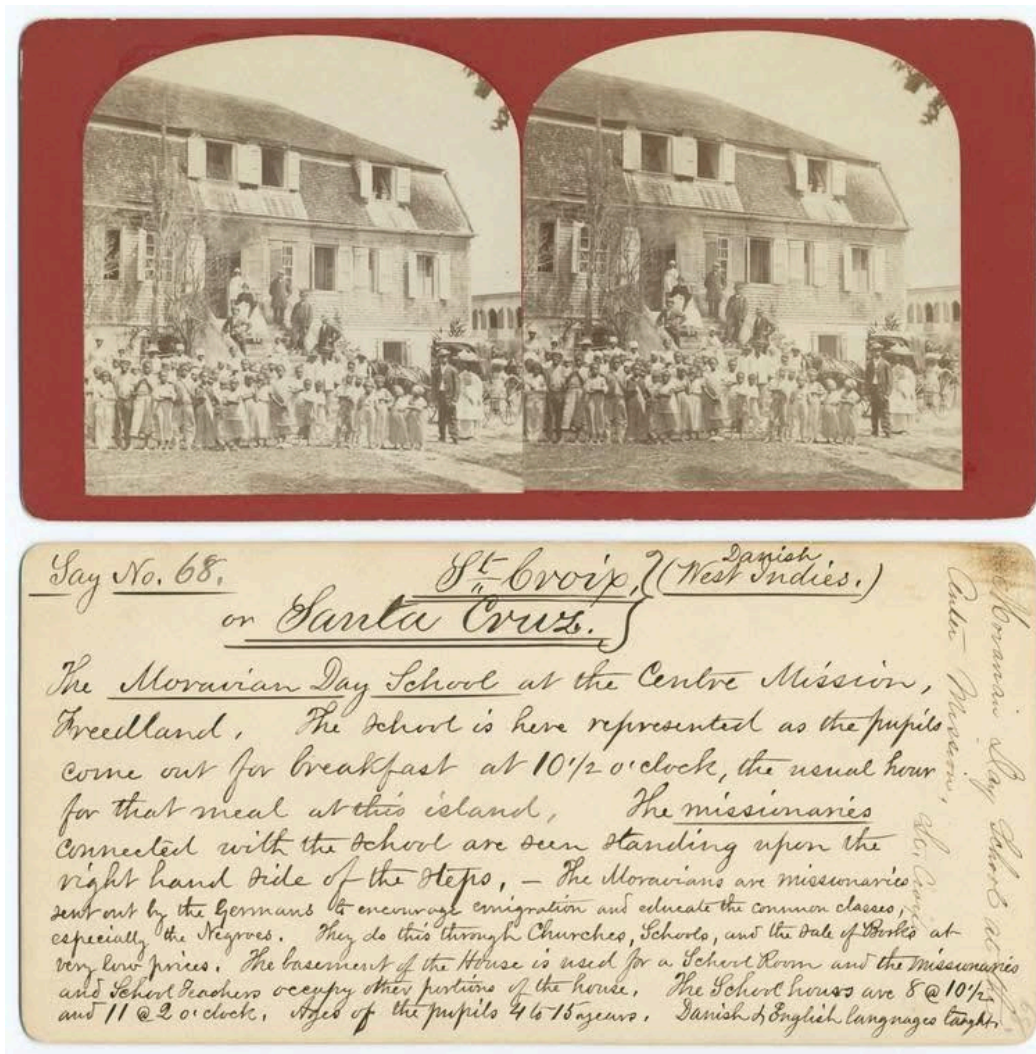


Although emancipation transformed the colony's labor system, it did not immediately transform its schools. Rather than creating an entirely new educational system, the Danish government continued building upon the schools established during Governor General Peter von Scholten's administration in the 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



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

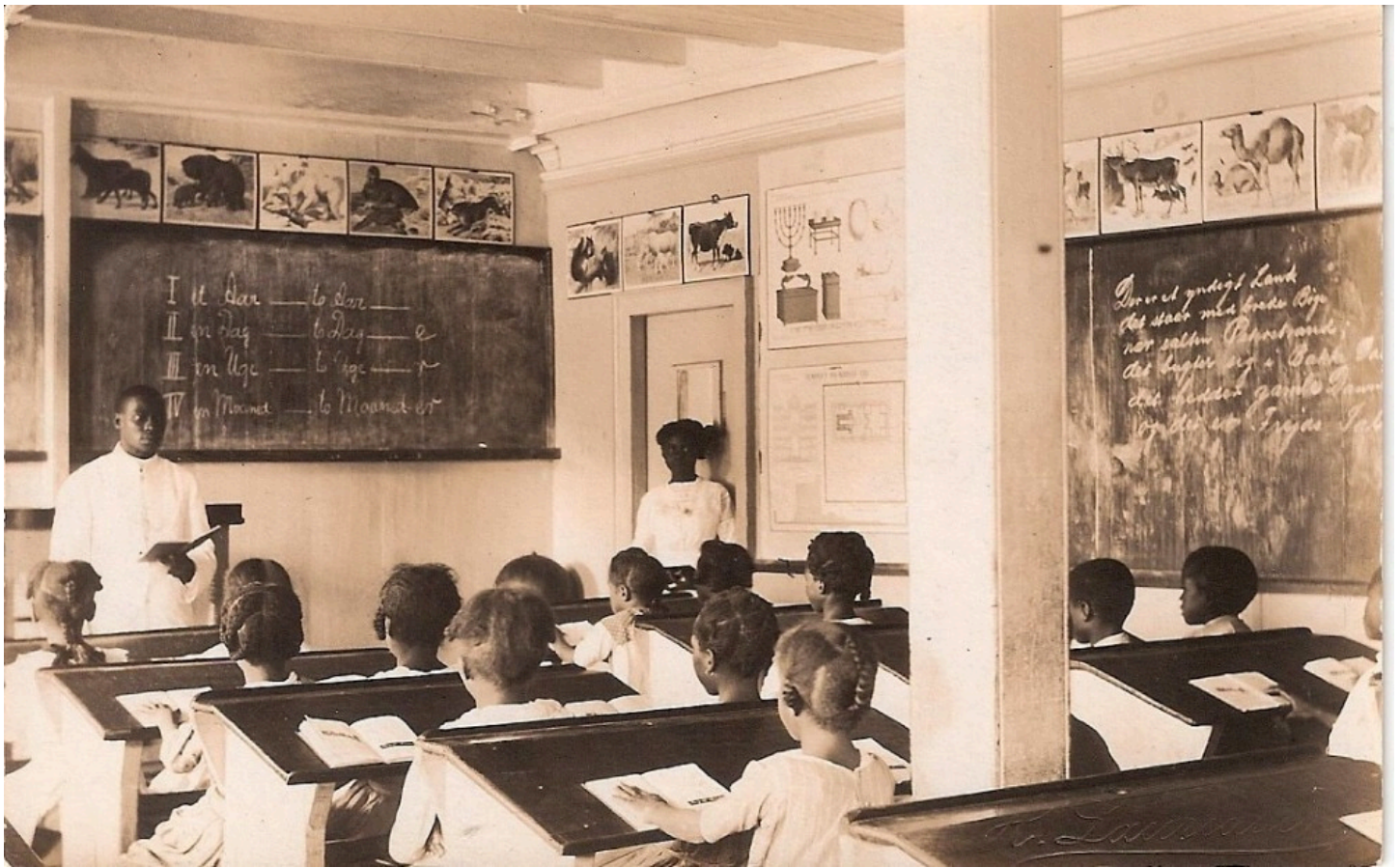
Analyze

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.

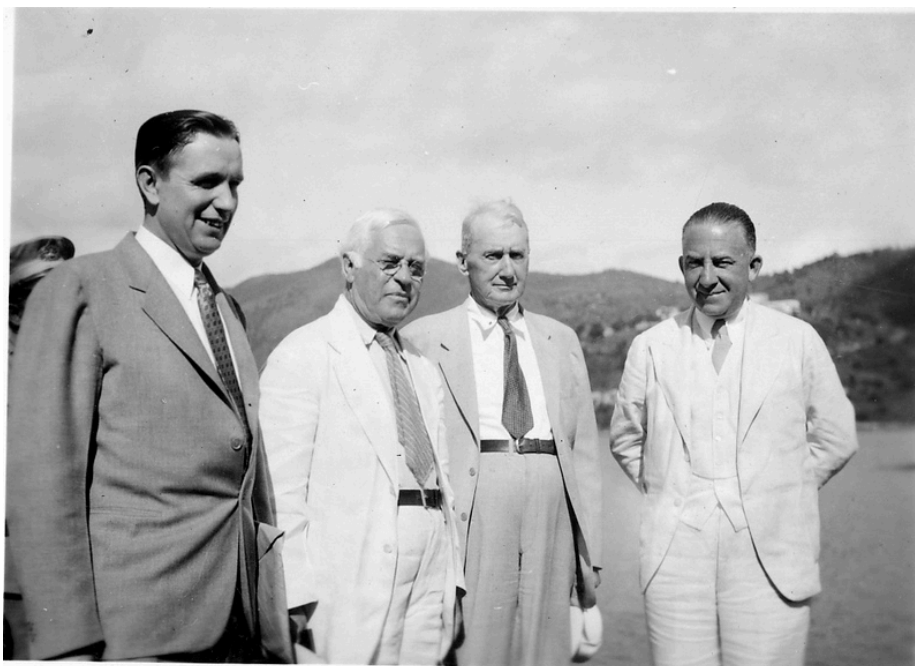
“

What kind of education best prepares a people for sustainability?

”

Section 4

What Kind of Education Should the Virgin Islands Offer?

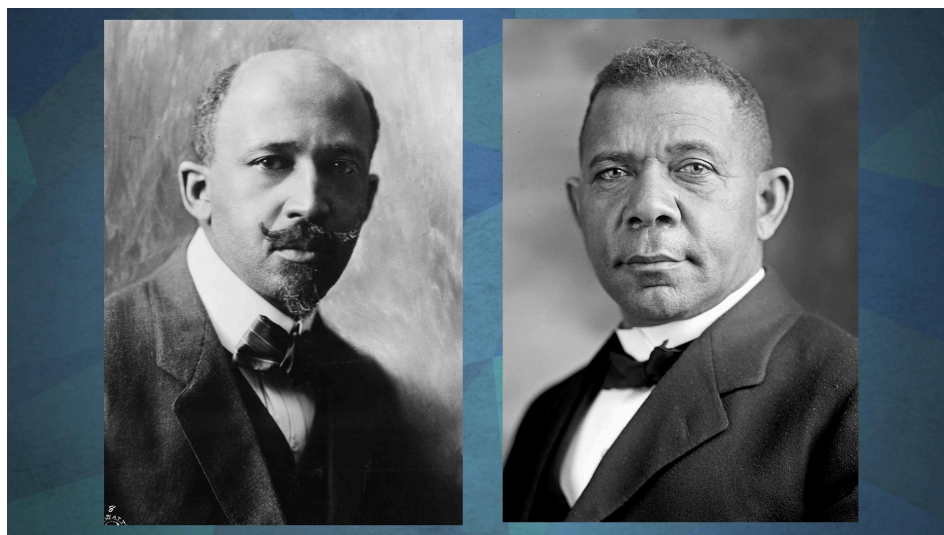


Governor Paul Martin Pearson (second from left, in white suit) stands with administrative officials, during a territorial inspection of the U.S. Virgin Islands, c. 1931-1935.

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.**
