

Lesson 2

Why Build a High School?

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

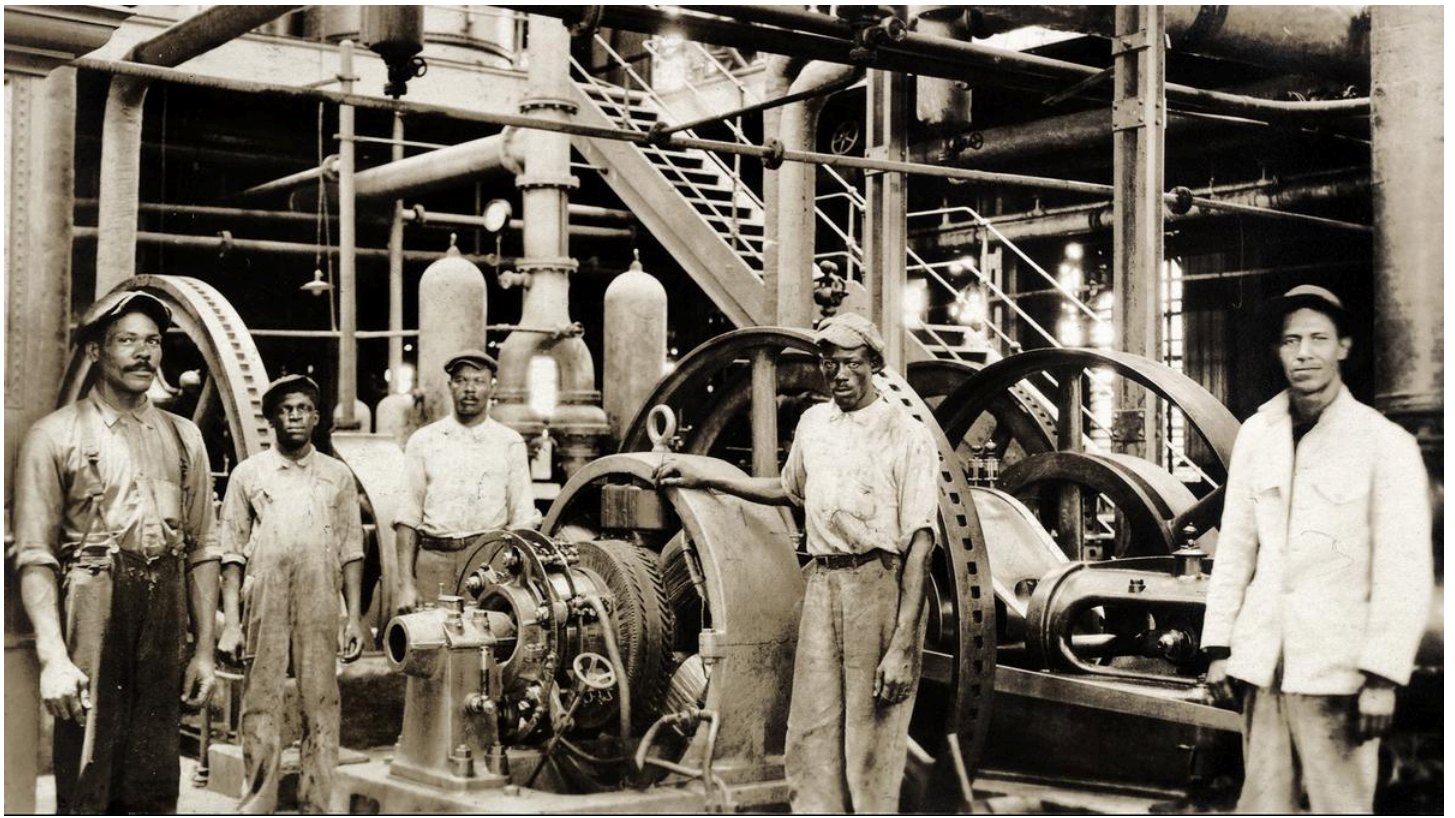
Essential Question

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.





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.
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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
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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.
