

# Lesson 3

## Inside the Old Barracks

# Learning, Leadership, and the Making of Modern Virgin Islanders

### Essential Question

How did Christiansted High School prepare students for life in an American territory while responding to the needs of the Virgin Islands?

### Section One

#### Building Citizens for a New Era

The curriculum developed inside the Old Barracks reflected one of the most important educational transformations taking place in the United States during the early twentieth century. Rather than limiting students to traditional academic subjects, educators increasingly believed that public schools should prepare young people for both higher education and the workforce. English, mathematics, science, history, and civics remained central to the curriculum, but schools also expanded instruction in agriculture, commercial education, home economics, industrial arts, and mechanical training. The goal was to prepare students not only to earn a living but also to participate actively in civic and community life.

This educational philosophy received significant federal support through the **Smith-Hughes Act of 1917**, the first major law to provide federal funding specifically for vocational education. The legislation encouraged states to develop programs in agriculture, trade and industry, and home economics while preparing students for employment in a rapidly changing economy. By the late 1930s, **more than one million students** across the United States were enrolled in federally supported vocational education programs, reflecting the nation's growing investment in practical education alongside traditional academic instruction.

Educational reformers also challenged the idea that students learned best by memorizing facts from textbooks. Philosopher and educator **John Dewey** argued that schools should connect learning to real-world experiences through observation, experimentation, and problem-solving. His philosophy of "**learning by doing**" influenced Progressive Era schools throughout the United States and encouraged teachers to use laboratories, workshops, farms, and communities as extensions of the classroom. These ideas also appeared in the Virgin Islands. In 1934, educator **Bess B. Lane** argued that schools in the Territory should

encourage students to learn through "doing, planning, judging, and evaluating," believing that education should prepare young people for democratic participation as well as employment.

Christiansted High School reflected many of these educational reforms while adapting them to the needs of the Virgin Islands. Students studied academic subjects alongside practical courses that responded directly to the Territory's economy and workforce. Sewing and home economics prepared students for careers in education, household management, and public service. Commercial courses developed bookkeeping, typing, and office skills needed in government agencies and private businesses. Industrial arts and mechanical training supported the growing demand for skilled trades, while agriculture remained essential in a society still shaped by farming and food production.



Learning frequently extended beyond the walls of the Old Barracks. Biology classes traveled to the Agricultural Experiment Station at **Anna's Hope**, where students observed tropical crops, livestock, soil conservation, and scientific farming methods firsthand. Field studies also brought students to estates such as **Jolly Hill**, **Annaly**, and **Little La Grange**, demonstrating that the Virgin Islands landscape itself served as a classroom. Rather than separating education from everyday life, teachers encouraged students to understand the relationship between science, agriculture, economics, and the communities in which they lived.

Vocational School at estate Anna's Hope  
will be held this afternoon at 4 o'clock.  
Invitations have been issued by the Faculty and the Graduating Class.

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History instruction reflected many of these same educational realities. Students studied American and world history as part of the standard curriculum, but there was no stand-alone course devoted exclusively to Virgin Islands or Caribbean history. Local history was generally incorporated into broader history classes, and the depth of instruction often depended upon the knowledge, interests, and experiences of individual teachers. Because few published textbooks focused specifically on the Virgin Islands, educators frequently supplemented lessons with local newspapers, oral traditions, family histories, community memory, and their own lived experiences. As a result, events such as the **1848 Emancipation** and the **1878 Fireburn** were often remembered through stories shared by parents, grandparents, and elders as much as through formal classroom instruction. This reflected the limited availability of written instructional materials rather than a lack of importance placed on Virgin Islands history.

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## Section Two

### Who Built the School System?

When historians study Christiansted High School, one pattern quickly becomes clear. Women appear throughout its history as teachers, department heads, supervisors, principals, librarians, and educational leaders. By the middle of the twentieth century, women had become the backbone of public education in both the United States and the Virgin Islands. Yet their growing presence reflected different historical experiences shaped by race, gender, and opportunity.

During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the women's rights movement in the United States sought greater access to education, professional careers, property ownership, and political participation. These efforts culminated in the ratification of the **Nineteenth Amendment** in **1920**, granting many American women the right to vote. As educational opportunities expanded, teaching became one of the nation's largest professions for women. By **1940**, nearly **70 percent** of public school teachers in the United States were women, making education one of the few professions that offered women opportunities for leadership and long-term careers.

For Black women, however, the story unfolded differently. Unlike many white middle-class women, who often debated whether they should enter the workforce, most Black women had

long worked out of economic necessity. During slavery they labored in fields, homes, workshops, and markets. After emancipation many continued working as domestic workers, laundresses, seamstresses, agricultural laborers, and caregivers because few other opportunities existed. Historians have noted that education became one of the most important avenues through which Black women entered professions that offered greater economic security, public leadership, and opportunities to strengthen their communities. Teaching, in particular, emerged as one of the most respected careers available to Black women during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Historically Black Colleges and Universities played a central role in that transformation. Institutions such as **Hampton Institute**, **Howard University**, **Tuskegee Institute**, and **Spelman College** trained thousands of Black educators who established schools, supervised instruction, developed curriculum, and expanded educational opportunities throughout the American South and other underserved communities.



Established in the early 20th century, the Hampton-supported Jeanes Teachers program exemplified the institution's commitment to training experienced Black educators to uplift underfunded school systems through community-centered instruction. As this educational philosophy professionalized in the 1930s, Hampton graduates transformed from local supervisors into global agents of educational equity. Armed with this robust pedagogical training, standout educators expanded these foundational principles far beyond the American South. Among these pioneering leaders was Pearl B. Larsen, a Hampton graduate who brought this specialized educational expertise to the Caribbean when she relocated for a teaching assignment.

Born in **Montgomery, Alabama**, in **1894**, Larsen graduated from **Hampton Institute**, one of the nation's leading institutions for preparing Black teachers and school leaders. Hampton believed that education should strengthen entire communities by preparing educators who could improve schools, mentor teachers, supervise curriculum, and develop future leaders. When Larsen arrived in the Virgin Islands in **1932**, she brought those ideas with her at a time when the Territory was expanding its public school system under Governor Paul Martin Pearson.

Larsen's influence extended far beyond her own classroom. As **Supervisor** and later **Superintendent of Education** on St. Croix, she helped strengthen curriculum, improve teacher preparation, and expand professional development throughout the Territory. Recognizing that many Virgin Islands teachers could not afford to leave home to complete college degrees, Larsen established partnerships with Hampton Institute that brought university professors to St. Croix to teach extension courses. Rather than sending every educator to the mainland, she helped bring higher education to the Virgin Islands, allowing teachers to earn college credit while continuing to serve their own communities. Her work connected Christiansted High School to a broader network of Black educational leadership stretching from the American South to the Caribbean.



The impact of those efforts can be seen in the graduates of Christiansted High School itself. One measure of a school's success is not simply how many students graduate but how many return to strengthen the communities that educated them. By the mid-1940s, Christiansted High School had begun producing graduates who continued their studies at colleges and universities on the mainland before returning home as teachers.

A **September 6, 1945**, edition of **The St. Croix Avis** provides a remarkable snapshot of this educational pipeline. The newspaper announced that **Gertrude James**, a graduate of Christiansted High School, had earned a **Bachelor of Science in Home Economics** from **Hampton Institute** and had been appointed to teach Home Economics at her alma mater. In the same issue, **Miriam Williams** returned to St. Croix after earning a **Bachelor of Science in Business Education** from Hampton Institute to teach commercial subjects at Christiansted High School. The newspaper also announced the appointments of **Claire Todman**, **Grace Rivera**, and **Eileen Joseph**, all graduates of the **Christiansted High School Class of 1945**, who accepted teaching positions throughout the public school system.

This single newspaper tells a larger story. Christiansted High School prepared students for college. Institutions such as Hampton Institute prepared them as professional educators. Many then returned home to teach the next generation of Virgin Islanders. Rather than depending entirely on teachers recruited from outside the Territory, the public school system increasingly invested in its own graduates, creating a cycle in which students became teachers, teachers became educational leaders, and those leaders continued strengthening the school system.

The Virgin Islands also brought its own traditions to this story. Long before public schools expanded, women exercised leadership through churches, families, mutual aid societies, marketplaces, and cultural organizations. Public education did not create women leaders. Instead, it provided new public institutions where their leadership became increasingly visible and professionally recognized. Among the most influential of these educators was **Elena L. Christian**, whose career spanned decades of service to Christiansted High School and the Virgin Islands Department of Education. Like Pearl B. Larsen, Christian believed that schools should develop both academic excellence and civic responsibility. Her leadership shaped generations of students and educators, and her enduring contributions are reflected today in **Elena L. Christian Junior High School**, named in her honor.

## *Faculty Sponsor's Message*



Pearl B. Larsen, Elena L. Christian, and countless other women transformed the Old Barracks into far more than a secondary school. They built an institution that prepared students for college, trained future teachers, strengthened public education, and developed leaders whose influence extended throughout the Virgin Islands for generations.

# The ST. CROIX AVIS

Champion of Public Right and Justice

Est. 1844

Saint Croix, Virgin Islands, U. S. A., Thursday, September 6, 1945

No. 195

## Changes In Teaching Staffs Of Public Schools Announced

Several changes have been effected in the teaching staffs of the Island's schools with the new school year which began September 4, it was made known by Mrs. P. L. Byrd Larsen, Superintendent of Education.

Moving from the Slob School to the Frederiksted Public Grammar School is Mrs. Beryl Adams Armstrong, who returns to teaching after leave of absence. Ezra Naughton who taught at the Slob School has been assigned to the Frederiksted Junior High School. Presently on the staff of the Slob School are James Andrews, principal, Mrs. Evelyn Williams, Theodore Jackson, added this year.

Also returning after a leave of absence is Mrs. Alatha Williams, to the Christiansted High School, and Mrs. Agatha Simmonds Sergeant to the Christiansted Public Grammar School.

## Personal Mention

Clarence Payne, owner of Town Hall Theatre which was burned down recently, arrived here yesterday on business in connection with the building of his new modern fireproof theatre.

He returned to St. Thomas today.

## Miss Gertrude James To Be On High School Faculty

Miss Gertrude James of Frederiksted has been appointed to teach at the Christiansted High School, to take up duties when she arrives in the latter part of this week. She will teach Home Economics.

Miss James is a graduate of the Christiansted High School, and holds the degree of Bachelor of Science in Home Economics from Hampton Institute.

## Miss Miriam Williams To Teach At High School Here

A new member of the faculty of the Christiansted High School is Miss Miriam Williams of Frederiksted. She has been assigned to teach Commercial subjects.

Miss Williams is a graduate of the St. Patrick's School in Frederiksted, and completed her high school in New York City. She studied in the School of Business at Hampton Institute from which she received the B. S. degree.

She is expected to arrive from the mainland shortly.

Christiansted Theatre  
8:15 Tonight 8:15

ANN DVORAK & ERIC RORTMAN  
IN

## Squadron Leader X

A Nazi Rat in the RAF blazing a blood-stained track of murder & terror under the very reach of British Intelligence. . . . Even his own Gestapo despised him! . . . Be sure to see this thrilling Suspense Sensation of the war.

Admission as usual

## James Keans, Mrs. Keans Leave To Study On Mainland

James Keans, former teller at the Virgin Islands National Bank in St. Thomas, and who has served as manager of the Bank here for short periods, left for the mainland on Monday. He was accompanied by Mrs. Keans.

Mr. Keans will study law at the Kent School and Mrs. Keans, who is a teacher in the Charlotte Amalie High School, will work for her master's degree in history at the University of Chicago.

## Misses Claire Todman, Grace Rivera And Eileen Joseph To Teach

Miss Claire Todman, Miss Eileen Joseph and Miss Grace Rivera have been appointed to teach in positions in the Island's public schools, it was announced by Mrs. Pearl Larsen, Superintendent of Education. The appointment of these teachers became effective upon the confirmation of the Municipal Council.

Misses Todman Joseph and Rivera are graduates of the Christiansted High School, all of the Class of 1945.

Miss Todman had the distinction of being the first young lady to be elected president of her class. She has been assigned to teach at the Frederiksted Grammar School.

Miss Joseph will be on the staff of the Princesse School, and Miss Rivera will teach the Slob School.

## Bough, Hill Return To St. Thomas After Hearings

Attorney James A. Bough and Hon. Valdemar Hill, members of the Organic Act Reform Committee, returned to St. Thomas today after holding public discussions on proposed changes in the Organic Act in Christiansted and Frederiksted.

Mr. Bough, chairman of the committee, returned on the early plane. Mr. Hill left on the afternoon plane.

## Generals Arnold, Spaatz Favors Unification

General Henry H. Arnold and General Carl Spaatz have come out flatly for consolidation of the Army, Navy and Air forces, a radio report said.

Due to shortage of clothing the Navy has rescinded the order which permitted naval personnel to wear plain clothes when off duty.

## Primary Source Investigation

### The St. Croix Avis

September 6, 1945

Look carefully at the newspaper before answering the questions.

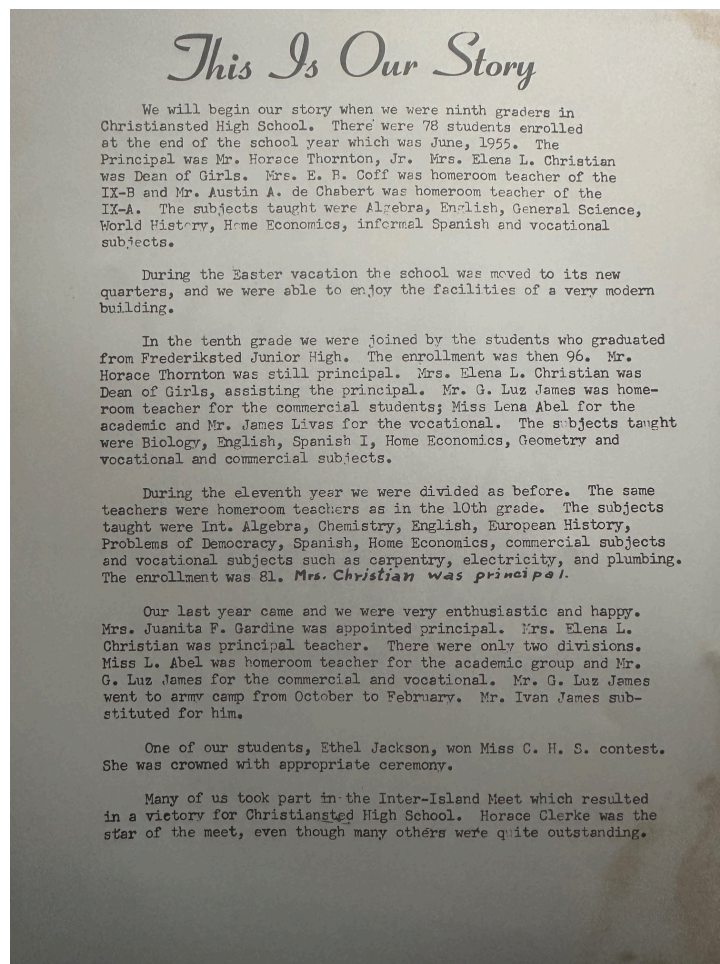
1. How many women mentioned on this page accepted positions in the Virgin Islands public schools?
2. Which colleges or universities prepared these educators?
3. What patterns do you notice about where these teachers were educated and where they chose to work?
4. What does this newspaper suggest about opportunities available to Virgin Islands women through education?
5. How does this article support the idea that Christiansted High School became part of a larger Black educational network connecting the Virgin Islands to historically Black Colleges and Universities?

## Section Three.

## Outgrowing the Old Barracks

By the early 1950s, Christiansted High School had fulfilled the vision that inspired its founding nearly two decades earlier. The school had become far more than the Virgin Islands' first public high school. It had prepared teachers, nurses, business professionals, agricultural specialists, civil servants, skilled tradesmen, and community leaders who helped shape the Territory during a period of tremendous change. Graduates returned from colleges and universities to teach in local classrooms, vocational programs expanded, and new educational opportunities continued to emerge.

The growth of the school reflected broader changes taking place throughout the Virgin Islands. Enrollment continued to increase as more families recognized the value of a secondary education. At the same time, the curriculum became more specialized. Science laboratories, commercial education, home economics, agriculture, industrial arts, drafting, woodworking, and vocational electricity all required classrooms and equipment that the former Danish Barracks had never been designed to accommodate.



National educational policy also continued to evolve. Following World War II, Congress passed the **George-Barden Act of 1946**, more than doubling federal support for vocational education while expanding programs in agriculture, home economics, industrial arts, and vocational teacher preparation. The legislation also strengthened student leadership organizations such as the **Future Farmers of America (FFA)** and the **New Farmers of America**

**(NFA).** These reforms reflected a growing belief that schools should prepare students not only for college but also for the technical, agricultural, and industrial careers needed in a modern economy. Christiansted High School increasingly reflected these national priorities while adapting them to the needs of the Virgin Islands.



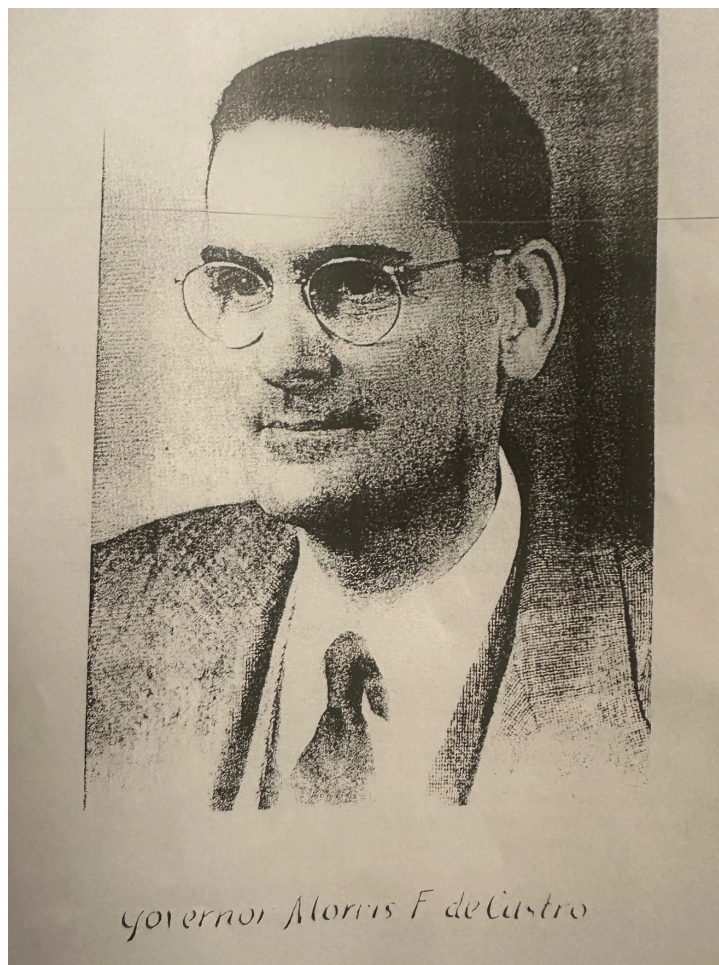
*Ninth Grade Vocational • Woodwork*



*New Home Makers of V.I. Club*

The school's yearbooks also reveal how educational priorities had expanded. Biology students traveled to the Agricultural Station at Anna's Hope and its substation at Jolly Hill to study tropical agriculture firsthand. Students participated in vocational drafting, woodworking, electricity, commercial education, and home economics while learning from educators such as Elena L. Christian, Enid Hodge, William Thurland, Alexander Henderson, Octavia Ross, and Assistant Superintendent Juanita Gardine. Former students, including Charles Emanuel, even returned to join the faculty, illustrating how Christiansted High School increasingly educated the very teachers who would sustain the Territory's public schools.

The expectations placed upon graduates also reflected the changing world around them. In his message to the **Class of 1951**, Governor **Morris F. de Castro** reminded students that they were graduating during a period of "national emergency" and urged them to embrace production, leadership, self-determination, and self-dependence. His message came at the beginning of the Cold War and during the Korean War, when governments throughout the United States emphasized education, technical training, and economic productivity as essential to national security and economic growth. While these concerns reflected global events, they also spoke directly to the Virgin Islands, where leaders hoped educated citizens would help diversify the economy, strengthen public institutions, and reduce dependence on outside assistance.



By the middle of the twentieth century, one reality had become impossible to ignore. The Old Barracks had outgrown its original purpose. Built during the Danish colonial period to house soldiers, the building had successfully served as the home of the Virgin Islands' first public high school, but it could no longer meet the needs of an expanding educational system. Larger student enrollment, specialized classrooms, science laboratories, vocational workshops, athletic facilities, and modern educational standards required a new campus designed specifically for secondary education.

Christiansted High School eventually relocated to a new campus at **Estate Richmond**, where it continued operating under the name **Christiansted High School**. In later years, that campus became the home of what is now **Juanita Gardine PreK-8 School**, named in honor of longtime educator and Assistant Superintendent **Juanita Gardine**, whose leadership helped shape public education in the Virgin Islands. The move marked the end of one chapter in the school's history but not the end of its legacy.

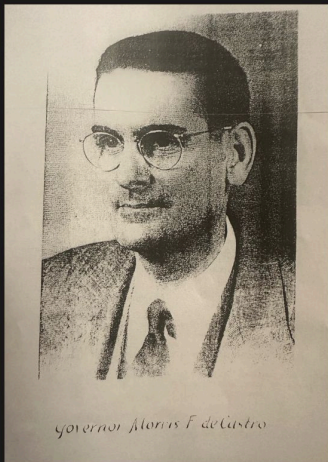
Although students no longer attend high school inside the Old Barracks, the building remains one of the most significant educational landmarks in the Virgin Islands. Its classrooms helped launch the careers of educators, public servants, business leaders, scientists, and community advocates whose work extended far beyond Christiansted. The history of the building reminds us that schools are more than places where lessons are taught. They are institutions where communities invest in their future, where ideas are passed from one generation to the next, and where young people begin preparing to shape the society they will one day inherit.

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## Reading Between the Lines

### Primary Source Investigation

**HISTORY OF CLASS ON 51**  
**SEPTEMBER 1947 - JUNE 1951**



*Governor Morris F. de Castro*

Governor's Message

Production is receiving appreciable importance these days of national emergency, as we are urged to use Less, conserve more, and supply in greater abundance than ever before. Especially in our insular position, there is unusual opportunity for us to develop this desirable quality, preferably as normal routine, with full employment of our resources and minimum reliance upon outside support.

Perhaps you are already aware of the growing demands for more and better leadership in our various fields of community endeavor. As our horizons of self-determination and self-dependence assume wider proportions, it is necessary that you seek and maintain vantage positions in the developing pattern. The services and facilities of the school system have been made available to you, and your culmination of high school study shows that you and your parents have recognized and appreciated the character of and preparation for leadership opportunities.

You have been adequately provided with good tools for your future advancement. I want you to know that the promotion of your best interests now depends upon your diligence in producing material response to the confidence which the community has reposed in you. Future production is your responsibility.

Morris F. de Castro, Governor.

### Governor Morris F. de Castro's Message to the Class of 1951

Read the Governor's message carefully.

## Think Like a Historian

1. Why do you think Governor de Castro repeatedly uses the words **production**, **leadership**, **self-determination**, and **self-dependence**?
  2. What world events occurring in 1951 might have influenced his message to graduates?
  3. How do his remarks reflect the educational goals of Christiansted High School?
  4. Do you think the Governor viewed education primarily as a way to improve individual lives, strengthen the economy, build democratic citizenship, or all three? Support your answer with evidence from the document.
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# Lesson 3 Review

## Key Terms

- Americanization
  - Vocational Education
  - Smith-Hughes Act
  - George-Barden Act
  - Hampton Institute
  - Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs)
  - Curriculum
  - Self-determination
  - Civic Leadership
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## Check Your Understanding

1. Why did Christiansted High School combine academic and vocational education?
  2. How did national educational reforms influence the school's curriculum?
  3. Why were Historically Black Colleges and Universities important to the development of education in the Virgin Islands?
  4. How did educators such as Pearl B. Larsen and Elena L. Christian strengthen public education?
  5. What does the September 6, 1945, edition of *The St. Croix Avis* reveal about opportunities available to Christiansted High School graduates?
  6. Why did Christiansted High School eventually outgrow the Old Barracks?
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## Timeline

Place these events in chronological order.

- \_\_\_\_ Smith-Hughes Act encourages vocational education.
- \_\_\_\_ Christiansted High School opens in the Old Barracks.
- \_\_\_\_ George-Barden Act expands vocational education.
- \_\_\_\_ Class of 1951 graduates.

- \_\_\_\_\_ Christiansted High School relocates to Estate Richmond.
  - \_\_\_\_\_ Estate Richmond campus later becomes Juanita Gardine PreK–8 School.
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## Writing Like a Historian

Using evidence from this lesson, explain how Christiansted High School reflected both national educational reforms and the needs of the Virgin Islands.

In your response, discuss:

- one national educational policy,
  - one local educational leader,
  - one primary source,
  - and one way the school influenced the future of the Virgin Islands.
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## Material Witness



Between 1935 and its relocation to Estate Richmond, the Old Barracks witnessed the emergence of public secondary education in the Virgin Islands. Within its walls, students prepared for college, entered the skilled trades, returned as teachers, and became leaders in government, business, and community life. Although Christiansted High School eventually moved, the building remains one of the Territory's most important educational landmarks because it preserves the story of where public secondary education began.