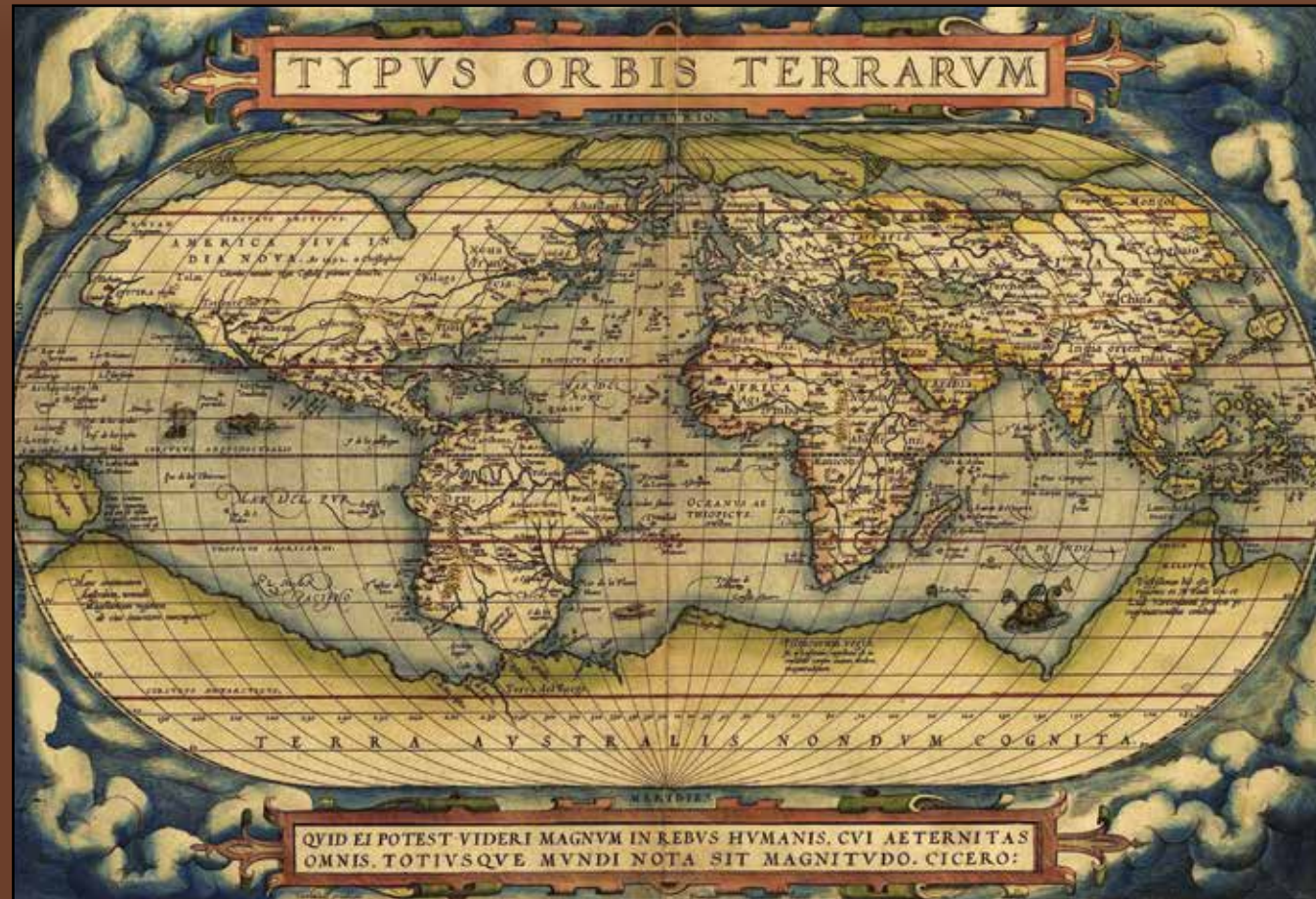


# U.S. Virgin Islands

## Outpost of the Danish Empire

By John Bechtel



16th Century world map - "Theatrum Orbis Terrarum" made by Flemish cartographer and geographer Abraham Ortelius, in 1570, who is generally recognized as the creator of the first modern atlas.

In the 15th and 16th centuries the merchants and royal families of Europe were obsessed with the treasures of the Far East, in the footsteps of Marco Polo. The Portuguese laid claim to many parts of southeast Asia and its East Indian localities to which their earlier explorers had discovered the best sea routes. Beyond the Straits of Malacca they found a high degree of civilization and people with whom they could trade. For a time Lisbon was the commercial epicenter of all of Europe.

In the New World to the west, the Spanish were laying claim to everything in sight, and word was spreading that they had found gold and silver in large quantities, which their bulging ships were hauling back to Spain. This, in turn, was funding more exploration and more and bigger settlements, substantiating their claims to ownership. If the other European powers wanted in on the party, time was of the essence. The race was on.

Going west however, most of what the explorers found in North and Central America were virgin land and "savages" with only the most basic capacity for trading. No one was finding easy mother lodes of precious metals and jewelry as the Spanish had in some locations. Until someone could find resources, either mineral or agricultural, to extract by whatever means and export back to Europe, the Americas were a nuisance and an annoying distraction from the alternative route to the East that all the European explorers sought in vain to find.

So by what twist of fate did Denmark come into possession of what Christopher Columbus christened the Virgin Islands? What could have drawn the blonde, blue eyed traders and sailors from the cold Baltic shores of Denmark to this distant tropical region that came to be famous for its plagues of malaria, smallpox, hookworm, piracy, slave riots, drunkenness and death? The short answer perhaps was envy, the hope for easy wealth, and a distraction from problems at home.

For the competing European powers, there were two big choices for expansion, to go east or to go west, and who could afford to do both?

Then stakes in the power game ratcheted up significantly in 1580, when Phillip II of Spain became king also of Portugal. With Portugal and Spain combined, who could stand against them? The Reformation, which had split Europe in two, intensified this rivalry. Protestant England was ready to challenge Catholic Spain on the open sea, and, in 1581, the seven northern provinces of the Low Country declared their independence from Spain. One by one, the powers chose their sides, and a growing number thirsted to break Spain's hegemony in both the East and the West.

In 1588, the English defeated the Spanish Armada, smashing the myth of Spanish invincibility at sea.



Map showing European "East India Company" countries trading in India. The big players were Portugal, England, France, Netherlands and Denmark.

### The East India companies

When states did not have enough resources and navies to patrol the sea routes necessary to their trade, the merchants would band together and create fleets through joint-stock companies under liberal charters from the crown, heavily armed, and authorized to fight as they saw fit. In this manner the states fought proxy wars through these chartered companies. Private ships became surrogate navies with a license to steal and pillage. By any name, smuggling, piracy, terrorism, or tariff evasion, there were many reasons other than stormy weather why a lot of ships never returned from their destinations. It was open season on the high seas.

In 1591, Phillip II seized hundreds of Dutch ships lying in Spanish and Portuguese harbors, but that same year England sent a naval expedition around the Cape of Good Hope to Cape Comorin, Ceylon, and the Malay Peninsula. In 1595, ten wealthy Dutch traders sent out a small fleet of four ships to the East Indies. All the ships didn't return, but they made their point; they were driving a wedge into the Portuguese monopoly. This achievement was quickly followed by other efforts, and by 1602, an entire group of these companies merged to form the Dutch East India Company.

Two years before, in 1600, merchants in England had formed the London East India Company. They



King Phillip II of Spain

established their first settlement in India in 1611. By 1641, the Dutch had wrested control of the Malay seas from the Portuguese. **The Danes had their own East India Company and had founded a trading post at Tranquebar in 1618, and others near the mouth of the Ganges, at Piple and Balasor, and their ships reached the Spice Islands (Maluku today) looking for cargo.**

(Continued on page 00)



(Continued from page 00)

## The Danes and Norwegians in India

The Danes and Norwegians were joined as one country at this time, and they were weak and undercapitalized but they wanted in the game. They didn't have the resources to control trade routes in the same way the Portuguese, Dutch, or English did in the East Indies, but they managed to hang on to their holdings for over 200 years, mostly by taking advantage of shifting alliances and frequent wars between their competitors. They often ran trade under a neutral flag, which got them in trouble with the English and Dutch, who felt the Danes were getting protection from the Portuguese without paying their fair share of the costs.

**In the case of Tranquebar, the Danes sent a ship, the Øresund with a team to negotiate with a purported emperor only to find out he wasn't the head guy at all. They encountered the Portuguese, who sank the Øresund and killed most of the crew, putting the heads of two of them on the end of their pikes as a warning to the rest. Thirteen of the crew made it to shore, where they were captured by Indians and taken to a village. They persuaded the locals to give them permission to build a stone house, and in exchange they would pay a tribute to the tribal leader. They built Danesborg Fort, which remains a tourist attraction to this day.**

The Danish-Norwegian company had frequent financial reversals and found themselves unable to meet their tribute payments, increasing local tensions. And their country was unable to come to their assistance because national resources were being redirected to the European Thirty Years War. In 1650, the Danish East India Company was abolished by the king, but word of the royal decree didn't reach the colony at Tranquebar until 1669, by which time there was



**An early view of the Danish colony of Tranquebar with the Dansborg fortress (on left, with Danish flag) in southeast India. The painting was executed after the restoration of the fortress by Eskil Andersen Kongsbakke in 1657-58. Later, a wall was built around the town—not visible in the painting. The letters in the town quarters represent various building sites. In the left and right corner of the canvas are figures dressed in various costumes.**

only one Dane left there. Ironically, the Danish fort had been garrisoned by Portuguese hired and paid by the Danish government.

On November 20 of the next year, 1670, the second East India Company was given a 40-year charter. On March 11, 1671, the Danish West India Company was chartered. Denmark was determined to be a serious competitor in the expansionist trade.

## The Swedes and Danes in African slave trade

Just as the Portuguese monopoly on East Indies trade collapsed under the combined onslaught of the Dutch, English, French, and Danish, so the Portuguese monopoly of the slave trade was diminished by the Dutch, French, and in 1614, by the Swedes.

The Swedish Gold Coast was a colony of trading posts and forts in the Gulf of Guinea in what is now Ghana. Akan was the local tribe of blacks, and most of the slaves were acquired as prisoners of war from internal African tribal conflicts. The victors had no sympathies for the captives, who were nothing more than a source of profit to them. Eventually about 10% of all the African slave trade went through this region, which from 1650 to 1663, was managed by Hendrik Carloff, who claimed to be from the Duchy of Finland, and who rose to

Commander of the Dutch West India Company, and subsequently joined the Swedish Africa Company and then the Danish Africa Company. Carloff was promoted to general and knighted by the Swedes, and just three years later defected to the Danes. In 1663, the Danes seized all the Swedish forts and possessions on the Gold Coast.

Europeans rarely entered the interior of Africa, due to fear of disease and fierce African resistance. They relied on local African chieftains to act as their subcontractors of sorts, bringing the product to the ports and forts where they were loaded onto ships. In Africa, convicted criminals could be punished by enslavement, a punishment which became more prevalent as slavery became more lucrative. There were no prison systems in Africa, so selling off the unwanted people was an attractive solution. The African chieftains traded slaves with the Europeans for guns and goods. The more wars the Africans fought with each other the more captives became available to trade for more guns.

The shipping route for the slave trade was known as the triangle: from Europe to Africa loaded with commodities for trading with African suppliers; from Africa to the Americas loaded with slaves; and a return to Europe with raw sugar, cotton, tobacco, rum, and spices. The so-called Middle



**Danish frigate "Fredensborg" sailed the slave trade triangular route in 1778-90.**



**Map of slave trade from the Gold Coast and elsewhere in Africa.**



**Map of the Caribbean, with the Virgin Islands to the far right. The distance from Denmark to the Virgin Islands is 7,358 kilometers (4,572 miles).**

Passage, from Africa across the Atlantic was a horror story for the slaves, who endured unimaginable conditions. Many didn't survive the trip.

## The Danes in the Caribbean

The first Danes left Bergen and arrived three months later in St. Thomas harbor on May 25, 1672. They went ashore the next morning and found the island perfectly suited to their purposes. No one was there! The British had left a couple months earlier. How convenient! Luck was on their side! Land would have to be cleared for the planting of cane. The affable Brits, who had recently taken the nearby island of Tortola from the Dutch, generously provided the Danes cane shoots from their new acquisition.

It quickly became apparent that labor would be a problem. There wasn't any. The local tribes were not suited for the hard work in the plantations and the Danes certainly had no appetite for this type of work far from home. The Danish West India Company was invited by law to take any men in irons in Danish prisons and any women who had been arrested for disorderliness as unpaid labor. This was a common practice for European nations to empty their prison population to do forced labor in foreign colonies. The colonists soon learned that convicts were difficult to manage and often escaped. The obvious and most cost effective solution was going to be the African slave trade. As a matter of fact, they already had it sourced. They controlled some of the key ports and forts in Guinea, on the west coast of Africa. They were in a position to vertically integrate their factors of production, controlling the land and labor in a labor-intensive agricultural economy.

By 1680, there were 156 whites and 175 slaves occupying 47 small plantations on Saint Thomas. About 15% of the free population was Danish and almost 50% was Dutch.

The Danes were in the difficult early learning stages of founding a plantation colony. As word spread about available land, colonists from other islands

(Continued on page 00)



(Continued from page 00)

began to drift in. Even though French, Germans, English, and Jews arrived, Dutch was the most commonly spoken language at the beginning.

Life for the slaves was brutish, and Maroons, or blacks who ran away into the bush were tortured or killed. Whites often lived in constant fear of slave uprisings because of the huge disparity between the respective populations. On Saint Thomas, for example, in 1725, there were 324 whites and 4,490 blacks. Saint Croix had 2,000 whites and 14,000 slaves. A slave rebellion took place on Saint John in 1733, and the island remained under the control of the slaves for a year. When order was restored, there was brutal retribution.

By 1755, the Danish Crown took over from the Company, and the administrators, soldiers, and civil servants were Danes, and Danish became the official language. The majority of the affluent were foreigners, and everyday language was English, although many languages could be heard in this small but cosmopolitan society. Many of the blacks spoke Creole among themselves.

In some respects, life was good for the whites. Agricultural profits were there, and the elite owners and traders and bureaucrats were seemingly in an enviable situation, but the situation was not sustainable. They were sitting on a powder keg. Some were blind to the dangers and wanted to maintain the status quo. Others knew better. And for some, slavery, which had been a part of the human experience from earliest history, was simply wrong.

## The Abolition of slavery

In 1792, the King of Denmark decided that slavery would be abolished, effective 1803. In the interim slavery was actually not only tolerated but encouraged. The slave population in the decade between the edict and the effective date grew from 25,000 to 35,000. The emancipation date came and went, and nothing changed. The plantation owners were clearly opposed to emancipation because it would end life as they knew it. And Denmark had no tidy exit strategy and the financial cost of walking away from a slavery- and-agriculture-based economy could be staggering. But the Brits freed the slaves on their islands in 1833, which put public pressure on the Danish planters; the prices of sugar fell; and the larger islands were industrializing to cut their labor costs. Unrest broke out in Saint Croix in 1848, and in a panic, Governor Peter von Scholten, who had taken a colored mistress on the island, declared slavery abolished, without the permission of the Danish Crown. The governor was recalled to Denmark and put on trial, and although eventually acquitted, he died a poor and broken man. In 1987, a Danish movie, with his name as the title, was released.

Not long after, the U.S. Civil War began and the northern states needed ports for their navy in the Caribbean. They proposed to purchase Saint Thomas and Saint John for their excellent harbors, but the sale didn't go through for political reasons.

Economic and social conditions on the islands plummeted in the latter half of the 19th century, and in

desperation the Danish government in 1902, approached the U.S. government about a sale. This time they came to agreement, but at the 11th hour the Danish Parliament canceled the sale by the narrowest of margins.

---

**By World War I everything in the islands seemed to have come to a complete standstill. The Panama Canal had been built; the big ships no longer needed to stop at the Virgin Islands to get resupplied with coal, and mail was no longer distributed to the various islands in the Caribbean from the Virgin Islands. The slaves were free but desperately poor, and they resorted to rioting in the streets. Once again the U.S. was interested in buying, mostly to prevent the Germans from establishing a naval base there. A price of \$25 million in gold was struck (\$1.6 billion in today's money) and the transfer took place on March 31, 1917.**

---

It took until the end of WWII for the islands to recover economically, mostly through the rise of tourism. Even though all the Danes left after the sale in 1917, their imprint is indelible in the forts, churches, town houses, mills and plantation houses. The Danish street names are still there, and many descendants sport Danish names. One and a half million tourists visit these three tiny islands every year, and you don't have to be Danish to join the fun in the sun!



Early painting of Saint Croix in the Virgin Islands. The Danish West Indies—a Danish colony in the Caribbean, consisted of the islands of Saint Thomas, Saint John and Saint Croix.

When the Danish company went bankrupt in 1755, Denmark-Norway's King Frederick V, assumed direct control of the three islands. The islands were sold to the United States in 1917, and were renamed the United States Virgin Islands.