

The Welcoming Arms

THE NEWSLETTER OF THE ST. THOMAS HISTORICAL TRUST

December 2014



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@STT_Historical



President's Letter

Hello fellow Trusters!

On behalf of the Board and the Members of the St. Thomas Historical Trust, I send you Seasons Greetings.

There have been some big changes in the STHT administration. We have a new Executive Director in our very own Erik Miles who has stepped off the Board as Hassel Island Task Force Chair in order to serve as the Executive Director. We also have an Assistant Executive Director, Michael Sprowles. It is the first time that we have had an Assistant Executive Director. It is evidence of the growth that the STHT has been experiencing. We bid a fond farewell to our former ED Pamela Montegut. We wish her well in her new endeavors.

This year the Trust has made great strides in its mission with the Hassel Island initiative, the Trust Museum, the Hassel Island and Historic Downtown Walking Tours, and our various cultural events, such as The Trust's Annual Coal Pot Cook Off and the continuing cultural crafts workshop classes.

On Hassel Island our task force has been hard at work with preservation projects on numerous structures. Most notably was work performed on Prince Frederik's Battery and the Garrison House. In the coming months a stabilization and restoration project will be started on the Lime Kiln located in Careening Cove. The Trust museum continues to be an attraction. It allows us to open the doors of the past, enabling visitors an opportunity to reflect on the richness and diversity of our cultural heritage.

I would like to take a moment to recognize the work that our volunteers do on behalf of the Trust. From our volunteer tour guides to our Board Members. This is a group of outstanding individuals that put in countless hours to make the Trust the success that it is. There are so many individuals in our community who contribute generously in many ways, making us all beneficiaries of their giving, without whom the place that we call home just wouldn't be "home". Thank all of you!

Your President,

Ronnie

Our Mission Statement...

To identify, protect and preserve the history, sites and culture of St. Thomas.

History Corner

Stories of the Virgin Islands as told by Isidor Paiewonsky

Erik Smidt, a Danish sea captain, took possession of St. Thomas in the name of Denmark on the 30th of March, 1666. It is recorded that just prior to his coming there were 12 planters, Dutch and English, with their families and slaves living on the island.

Another official record of the presence of slaves in St. Thomas is dated June 6, 1672, only 2 weeks after the first Danish Governor, Jorgen Iversen and his party, arrived on the island from Denmark. The Danes had hardly gotten settled when 2 Tortola planters and their families and slaves, 30 persons in all, showed up and asked permission to remain under the protection of the Danish flag.

In 1676, Governor William Stapleton of the nearby Leeward Islands reported approximately 300 persons living in St. Thomas. Four years later, Governor Iversen gave a specific number of inhabitants: 331-175 negro slaves, 156 whites.

During that summer, 1680, Iversen brought 9 slaves. The following year, 48 slaves were added. Iversen succeeded in getting a load of 24 slaves free. He got them from a stranded Portugese slave ship. All in all, Iversen bought or acquired 98 slaves from 1672 to 1679.

There is a humane note in one of the early reports submitted to Copenhagen by Iversen. He had bought a negro slave from a Dutch vessel anchored in the harbor. When the negro was about to enter Iversen's rowboat, another slave grabbed hold of the first one and would not let him go. When Iversen saw how fond the

2 were of each other, he bought them both.

Governor Iversen kept his slaves just outside the Fort, housed in 3 sheds. He did not want to risk slave rebellion from inside the Fort. On the other hand, he did not want anyone to steal them so he kept them just outside where he could keep his eyes on them.



Slave Quarters

By 1686, the number of privately owned plantations on St. Thomas increased from 47 to 85. A head count showed 633 inhabitants, 360 whites, 5 Indians, 140 adult male slaves, 81 female slaves and 57 negro children.

By 1700, slavery was firmly established in St. Thomas with the negroes far outnumbering the whites.

The negroes adjusted quickly. True, the home country's gods and fetishes had been left behind. The white traders and ship captains saw to that. But the negroes found other ways to continue their customs. New symbols were made. New medicine men started practicing and the old customs were kept very much alive.

In 1701, the Jesuit priest, Pierre Labat, visited the island. The account of his observations and experiences appeared in his printed work: "Voyage aux Isles de l'Amerique, Volume II. Labat described the town of St. Thomas as follows:

"At 50 or 60 paces from the Fort, there is a town which takes the form of the bay and constitutes the port.

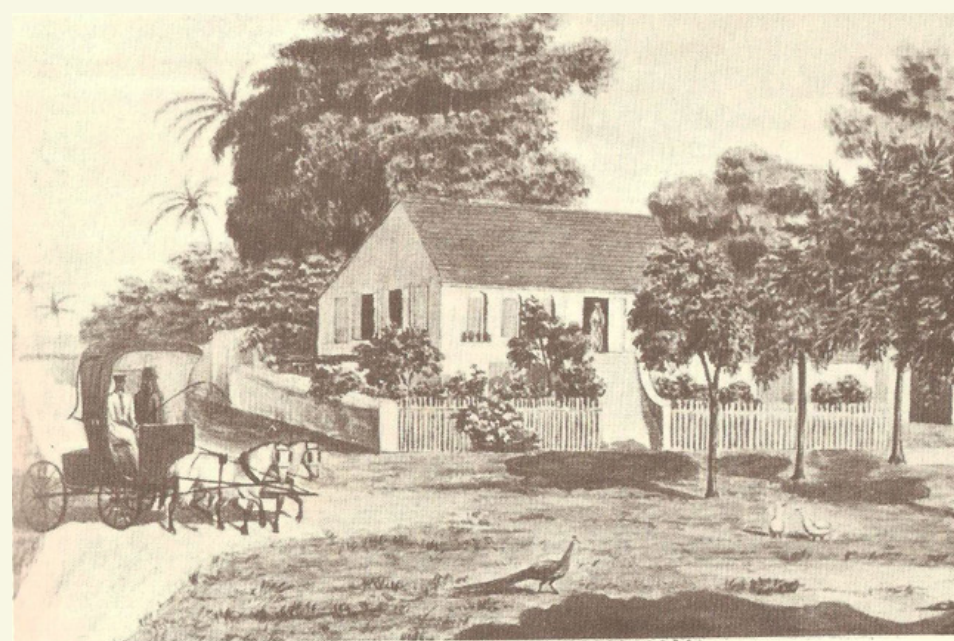
"This town consists of one long street which terminates at the factory or offices of the Company. This is a large and handsome edifice, containing many apartments and commodious magazines for merchandise and for security of the negroes in which this Company carries on a trade with the Spaniards. To the right of the factory are 2 small streets filled with French refugees.

"The houses of the town, which formerly were nothing but huts, are now built of bricks, almost all of one story but well arranged. The pavements are of tiles, and the interiors whitewashed as in Holland...."

Of the estates, he had this to say:

"They are small but well kept. Work is performed during the day only."

"The soil, though light, is very good and produces abundance of manioc, millet, sweet potatoes and all kinds of fruits and herbs."



Planters Quarters

erally arriving in affluence..."

While in St. Thomas, Father Labat enjoyed the bountiful hospitality of Peter Van Belle, director of the Brandenburg factory. During a sumptuous dinner given in Labat's honor in which the wine flowed freely, Van Belle told the Rev'd Father a story about a local Obeahman. Labat repeated the story in his book.

Only a few weeks before, a local witch doctor had been arrested and convicted of Obeahism and sorcery and particularly for having made a little earthen figure speak. He was sentenced by the St. Thomas Judge, a Dane, and the date of his execution had been set. On that day, Van Belle happened to be on the streets

"They have few cows and horses for want of the necessary pasturage, but the inhabitants do not want for meat, the Spaniards in Porto Rico furnishing them with it in abundance."

"They raise young kids, which are excellent, and fowls of all kinds in quantities. Provisions, however, are always dear, money being plentiful and strangers gen-

and noticed a crowd approaching. He discovered that some guards and officials were taking the condemned witch doctor to the place of execution. Van Belle asked the guards to stop so he could speak to the man:

"Well, my fine fellow," said Van Belle, "you will never make your little figure speak again. They have broken it..."

"It make no difference to me, Sir. I can make your walking-stick speak to you if I will it to do so!"

This proposition astonished everyone, and Monsieur Van Belle requested the Judge, who was present, to stay the execution to see if the negro could fulfill his boast. The reprieve being granted, Van Belle gave his cane to the negro who planted it in the ground and performed several ceremonies around it. He then asked Monsieur Van Belle what he wished to know from the walking-stick.

Van Belle replied that he would like to know if a vessel which he expected had left a port in Denmark, when it would arrive in St. Thomas, and if anything had happened to it during the voyage.

The negro, having repeated his incantations, retired a short distance away and requested Van Belle to go close to the walking-stick which would give him the answers required. This being done, Monsieur Van Belle heard to his intense astonishment, a little voice perfectly clear and distinct, coming from the stick, which said to him:

"The vessel you await has left Elsinore on such a day, Captain so-and-so com-



1701, the Jesuit priest, Father Labat



Obeah-man's Hut (Author's private collection)

mands it, and there are Such-and-such passengers with him. You will be content with the cargo, and though the ship has passed through a slight gale of wind on its journey, lost a topmast and had its mizzen sail carried away, it will anchor here before three days expire...

According to Labat, the negro was executed. Three days later, the vessel arrived. The man's prophecy was verified to the letter.

In commenting on this story and Obeahism in general, Dr. Charles Edwin Taylor in his booklet: "Leaflets from the Danish West Indies, 1888", had this to say:

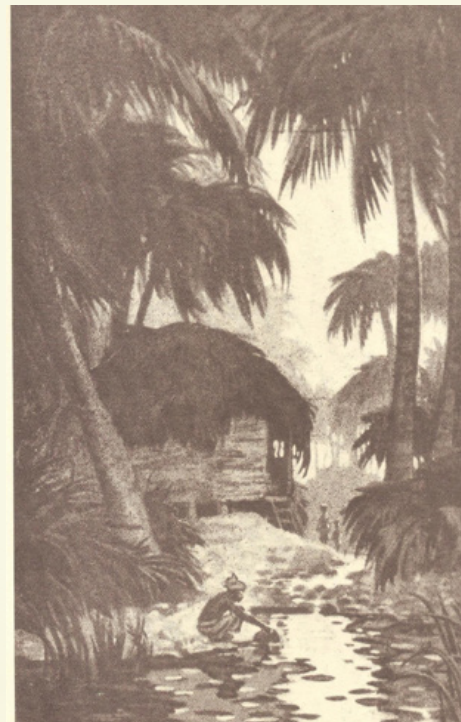
"It would appear that a belief of Obeahism, or Black magic, prevailed among all classes at that time. People of education smile at it now, without knowing very much about it.

"Others, wiser perhaps, attribute the pretended power of Obeahman in many fields to an intimate acquaintance with the properties of the poisonous herbs which grow in these islands and which he employs to produce the effects which so often baffle the skill of physicians.

"We reserve our opinion on the matter, remarking in the meanwhile that the belief in Obeahism, as it exists today

among a great many of the West Indian people, may be looked upon as an important factor in the effects produced by its practitioners..."

Superstitions were rife among the early arrivals from Africa. Life was cheap. Deaths were accepted. Births made them happy. When a birth occurred, the 8th day of life was considered especially dangerous. That day the mother and baby were watched constantly against evil spirits; and little wonder, the mortality rate being so frightfully high.



A Slave Hut

Isidor Paiewonsky wrote a series of historical columns for the Virgin Islands Daily News from 1973 through 1992. We will be featuring these wonderful historical stories in our newsletters. (Slave and Planter Quarters images from Isaac Dookhan's "A History of the Virgin Islands of the United States", 1974 ; and remaining hut images from Isidor Paiewonsky's "Eyewitness Accounts of Slavery in the Danish West Indies", 1987)



Photos from the 2014 Halloween Gala Myths, Magic & Storybook Characters



Hassel Island Tour - November 12, 2014

Ms. Osborne's 9th grade history class from the Seventh-Day Adventist school



VOLUNTEERS NEEDED

Please consider lending us a helping hand.

- Museum Guides
- Walking Tour Guides
- Hassel Island Tour Guides

Upcoming Events:

Hassel Island Members Only Tour Saturday, December 13th

The tour will leave Frenchtown Dock at 9:00 am SHARP. We will be offering two tours depending upon one's physical stamina. The primary tour will last approximately 3 hours and cover the entire island trails. The secondary tour will be a modified experience covering Creque Marine Railway, Careening Cove and Prince Frederik's Battery and will last approximately 2 hours.

Three bottles of water is recommended. Wear sensible hiking attire, footwear (closed toed comfortable shoes with traction) and a hat.

The tour is just \$25, for Trust members and \$50 (for your non-member friends - this includes a 1 year membership). Tours are limited to the first 25 callers for either tour and must be purchased in advance before December 10th by calling 340-774-5541.

See the great things that the Trust has been doing on Hassel Island in the past year. Rain date Dec. 20th.

Call **340-774-5541** for more information