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'A Place Where Imagination Runs Free': Florence Augusta Stevens Williams Library Set For April 9th Reopening

From debates to poetry, the library's legacy of fostering knowledge and community engagement continues

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Inside the Florence Augusta Stevens Williams Library in downtown Christiansted, St. Croix. By. GOVERNMENT HOUSE

A key component of community life in Christiansted has been restored and is almost ready to once again foster curiosity and learning among residents of St. Croix.

Government officials gathered at the Florence Augusta Stevens Williams Library on Wednesday afternoon for a grand reopening and ribbon cutting ceremony for the facility, which has now been restored after the 2017 twin hurricanes forced its closure.

Dating back to December of 1920, the library was named after the first native-born Crucian librarian. Ms. Williams, a multi-lingual, college educated woman, was celebrated both at home and abroad for her breadth of knowledge of Caribbean and Latin American history. The library served as a hub for St. Croix intellectual life, hosting poetry readings, debates, news conferences, and constitutional conventions, among other events.

Battered by the storms which periodically ravage the island, the library was destroyed by Hurricane Hugo in 1989, and again by Hurricane Marilyn in 1995. After being rebuilt for the second time, Irma and Maria in 2017 destroyed the facility again, necessitating this latest restoration effort.



Exterior of the Florence Augusta Stevens Williams Library in downtown Christiansted, St. Croix (Credit: Gov't House)

During the rehabilitation process, the facility was not just restored but enhanced. Department of Planning and Natural Resources Commissioner Jean Pierre Oriol noted that the library now boasts an upgraded computer center, and also houses the offerings of the Library for the blind and physically challenged in digital format. A collaborative project with Danish archivists is also digitizing colonial archives and providing online access to the materials, Mr. Oriol said. Remarking on the importance of libraries to a community's development, the DPNR head said "the joy of a young person or a young mind experiencing infinite possibilities through stories is invaluable."

Senate President Novelle Francis Jr. also spoke of the importance of libraries to the community, saying that the facilities exist for "more than just checking out books. Libraries are where we access information and resources, both traditionally and digitally. It's a hub for community meetings that promote civic and social engagements. Libraries are home to our archives, our culture, and our history," he remarked. "A library is where your imagination can run free."

Lieutenant Governor Tregenza Roach harkened back to his experiences in the library, recounting when Nobel Laureate Derek Walcott, a Saint Lucian author and artist, came to town. “This is where a lot of us exchanged ideas about writing, and about what our aspirations were for the people of these islands,” Mr. Roach noted. “Libraries are really the mark of civilization.”

Governor Albert Bryan Jr. mused that the library might help to restore some measure of community spirit that has been lost with the modernization of society. “We don’t trust our kids to be unsupervised or supervised by people anymore.” The library, he said, is a safe space that might help young people regain some of the autonomy and independence of previous generations of Crucian children.

The Florence Augusta Stevens Williams Library will be officially open to the public on April 9, and will operate from Tuesdays through Saturdays, with exact hours still to be determined.

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