

The Virgin Islands Consortium

St. Croix's 2015 Transfer Day Observation Marked By Moving Poetry

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Tuesday's Observation of the 98th Transfer of the Danish West Indies to the Virgin Islands of the United States sponsored by the National Park Service and Friends of the St. Croix National Parks began with remarks from territory officials commemorating the events of March 31, 1917, [when the United States purchased the three islands making up the Danish West Indies](#) from Denmark for \$25 million in gold.

National Park Service Superintendent, Joel A. Tutein offered opening remarks at the gathering, which took place at the Christiansted bandstand, and David Goldstein, the park's chief of interpretation, followed an African tradition by asking the elders present for their permission to continue with the program.

It was granted.

With right hand over heart, those in attendance, including Danish students visiting the territory, sang the Virgin Islands March that was followed by old and new renditions of the song by the visiting students.



Danish students singing their national anthem

But when masters of ceremony, Carl Christiansen called on local students to give their performances, little did anyone know that the light mood of the event would change as it did with poetry so raw a hush had settled on the modest crowd in attendance.

In their writings, the young female poets delved into race issues that plagued Africans who were under the control of their Danish slave masters before slavery was abolished in the territory on July 3, 1848.

Shideya Parrilla's poem titled "Slave" set the tone for the poems that would follow hers. Below, a few paragraphs of *Slave* has been reproduced. [WARNING: graphic language]:

The crash of waves against the shore, reminds me of the crack of a whip on my back. I could still feel the blood running down from my flogging yesterday. It was Contract Day, and I was standing in front of Fort Christiansvaern when some Danish spat on my feet. I know I ain't all of that, but I'm not dirt. Obviously he couldn't tell the difference. But they be preaching about this, "Do unto others as you want done unto you in that Lutheran church of theirs; at least that's what the other slaves say. So I spat back on his shoes.

I've never been dragged by my hair so hard before. I was tied to the post just outside the Fort and taught my "lesson". I've never felt a whip sink so deep into my skin; it was like a thousand knives were pricking me all at once. As I felt my warm blood sip through the wounds, I thought I would die of pain. But I wasn't scared until I saw Massa's anger. He dragged me up by my ears to the spot where "Johnny Boy" was hung over in Gallows Bay. He told me: "This is what happens to niggers."

Massa always did things like that; made me watch their victims. So last night, when I was left alone to tend to my wounds, somehow, I got the energy to run. I ran and hid with the crickets cheering and buzzing me on until I got here. I'm no longer their slave but I have nowhere to go, my life has amounted to nothing. All I've been is Susanna O'Reilly, a St. Croix slave.



om some white trunk of a man;
e ever had.

Shideya Parrilla reading a

poem titled "Slave"

The poems continued with other students, including Torhera Durand, who told the tale of a slave owner in "My Dear Anuba" who had grown fond of her maidservant and would eventually help her escape to Puerto Rico or otherwise face death in Gallows Bay. [WARNING: graphic language]:

Each morning, I would be awakened by the sounds of horses and carts, cargo being loaded onto and off of the ships, and business folk doing what business folk do best, selling slaves down at the Guinea Company Warehouse. Then, my darling servant Anuba would greet me at my quarters in Fort Christiansvern with a dainty murmured, "M-mornin Miss Alexandra," and I would joyfully respond, "Good morning, Anuba." But this morning was different, something felt off kilter; my dear Anuba was no where in sight.

I up and left, in search of my husband, General Christoffer Hansen. He was standing in the Raveling Yard, fixing to complain about something or the other. "Christoffer... Christoffer!" I exclaimed. He turned and said, with a bewildered look on his face, "Yes, Alexandra?"

"Where is Anuba?" As I asked this, I could see his face turn sour. "Alexandra, why are you so concerned with that nigger? What happens to them there niggers does not concern you!" Just as he finished scolding me I heard the unmistakable crack of a whip lashing a nigger's skin.

Right then and there, I heard Anuba cry out. I ran through the front gates of Fort Christiansvern and there, to my left, was my dear Anuba. She was tied to the whipping post, having the life beaten out of her. I looked on in shock as the cracker said, "That's what you get nigger, see you and your ma at the gallows in two days' time!" I begged my husband to stop this but he ignored my pleas. They dragged Anuba, my child, seeing as I could have none, half dead with blood pouring out of her back into the fort. I followed closely behind. Into the gates and up those brick steps. I prayed to God that they didn't turn left but they did. Once they dragged her to the left, I knew she would be placed into that filthy dungeon and my chances of helping her were slim. I begged my



one last time, and by the grace

St. Mary's Catholic School

Quadrille Class dancing to music by Stanley and the Ten Sleepless Knights

By this time, it was already high noon. I ran to the dungeon and ordered one of the soldiers to bring her out at once. As the doors to the dungeon opened, a wave of heat, and the stench of urine and feces flooded into my nose. As they emerged, I saw this frail girl with dried blood and sweat pouring off of her. Her coarse black hair was a tattered mess and she breathed heavily. I quickly brought her to the far left of the fort, by the stables. Down there had a small opening to the sea and I laid her in the water. The salt burned her skin, but I knew that it would help. "Anuba... why did you try to run away?" "M-Miss Alexandra, I'm sorry... Please forgive me... My ma and a group of field slaves planned to escape to Puerto Rico, where they would be free," she replied. "But Anuba, you're no field slave, you have a good life." "Miss Alexandria, a life as a slave is no good life, and I need to be with my ma, I'm all she got left." She explained that there will be a boat with other runaway slaves waiting at the North side to take them to Puerto Rico. I could do nothing but want to help; I loved her, and that moment I made a plan. At nightfall, I shall help Anuba and her ma escape.

The crowd offered the poets loud applause at the end of their renditions. The event was brought to a cheerful close with performances by the St. Mary's Catholic School Quadrille Class, backed by Stanley and the Ten Sleepless Knights.

Following the program, *VI Consortium* spoke to one of the visiting Danish students, whose stop on St. Croix during Transfer Day commemorations would be followed by a visit to Florida.

"We'll be staying in three different locations [in the Virgin Islands]. We're starting on St. Croix, then we're going to St. Thomas and unto St. John, and then we're going to Miami for five weeks," said Rebecca Dieu.



Students from Denmark on an educational

tour in the territory

Dieu said the trip's purpose was educational, including on a personal level, and to help strengthen communication and team building. She said they'd heard about Denmark's history with the islands, and will be going on an island tour with Nina York, who gives historic walking tours of Christiansted and Frederiksted. "She is going to show us all around and tell about the history."

Dieu is also loving St. Croix.

"It's so lovely," she said, "especially the weather and it's so beautiful waking up in the morning and it's just warm. And you don't have to put on ten jackets and stuff like that."

Dieu is one of 25 Danish students visiting the territory on the tour.