

# The Virgin Islands Consortium

## The U.S. Virgin Islands: One Hundred Years Under U.S. Rule

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ST. CROIX -- As the Virgin Islands of the United States realized 100 years together, the territory's leaders, along with Washington representatives and the prime minister of Denmark -- whose ancestors sold the territory to the U.S. in 1917 for \$25 million in gold -- on Friday expressed a balance of celebration and commemoration that marked the event, as leaders remembered the atrocities that had befall Virgin Islanders under the heavy hands of their then-Danish masters, while expressing gratitude for the benefits that came along with being under the U.S. flag.

To be sure, there was no lack of criticism of the U.S.'s treatment of its territories, whose citizens are limboed in an undesirable place, unable to vote for president of the United

States even as the territories' children give their lives in service willingly under the American flag.

Delegate to Congress Stacey Plaskett, Senate President Myron Jackson, Centennial Chairperson Pamela Richards, and Governor Kenneth Mapp all made it a point to highlight the sacrifices made by Virgin Islanders for the U.S., while be unable to enjoy the nation's most hallowed privilege: the right to vote.

And there were protesters who joined a parade organized for the commemoration, with its members calling for self-determination and freedom from colonial status. "Few weeks back, as the Virgin Islands geared up for the Centennial, we authored a petition saying no to the Centennial, really calling on our policymakers to reconsider their positions with respect to celebrating our colonial status," said Genevieve Whitaker, president and co-founder of the Virgin Islands Youth Advocacy Coalition. "In 1970 the United Nations deemed colonization a crime; here we are, one of the last remaining colonies in the world."

Over 8,000 Danes traveled here to witness the great event, with ceremonies on both island districts. The parade on St. Croix was grand; it included a myriad of marching groups from across the island of St. Croix, as well as a Danish ensemble who marched with pride as they played their brass instruments from the Basin Triangle in Christiansted all the way to Fort Christianvaern. The V.I. National Guard led the performance, saluting dignitaries who were stationed on a podium at the bottom of King Street.

There's no justification for slavery. It is unforgivable. And it is a dark and disgraceful part of Danish history. - Denmark Prime Minister Lars Løkke Rasmussen.

Underneath a tent erected at the fort to house the celebration/commemoration, 20 permanent residents pledged allegiance to the flag of the United States in a naturalization ceremony officiated by Chief Judge Wilma Lewis. The nominees for citizenship represented multiple Caribbean islands, including St. Lucia, Antigua, Dominica, The Dominican Republic and St. Kitts. Noting that America has been made stronger by immigrants, Judge Lewis admonished the new citizens to go beyond just being citizens and consider contributing in extraordinary ways.

Remarks were read from President Donald Trump, who praised the territory's residents for their resilience and contributions to the U.S.

"Today we honor the proud history of the U.S. Virgin Islands and its remarkable legacy as part of our nation," wrote the president, whose remarks were read by the new secretary of the Department of Interior, Ryan Zinke. "Virgin Islanders have found great success as part of the American family, distinguishing themselves in the arts, literature and sports, and achieving great acclaim in the fields of education, medicine, science, engineering, agriculture, politics and law."

The president added: "The United States is delighted to share this celebration with the great Danish people, our steadfast ally and partner in nearly every international sphere. We appreciate the indomitable spirit of Denmark, to which our nation's soul is inextricably linked through the beautiful Virgin Islands, and so much more. We look forward to

strengthening our true, historic and lasting friendship and, as we forge ahead, to fostering the joint security and prosperity of our nations."

Remarks were also given on the behalf of U.S. House Speaker Paul D. Ryan, who highlighted the ingrained relationship of the U.S. and the U.S. Virgin Islands.

But perhaps the most significant and touching remarks were given by Denmark Prime Minister Lars Løkke Rasmussen. His delivery carried extra weight because as the leader of Denmark, speaking to a former colony whose people had experienced on many occasions brutal slavery by the Danes, his remarks were to be careful and direct.

Yet, the leader of Denmark delivered a speech that fully accepted responsibility for actions of his ancestors, making no excuses for the horror so many faced. And he was sure to highlight the bravery of legends like Moses "Buddhoe" Gottlieb, known as General Budhoe, the free black man who led the 1848 slave rebellion on St. Croix.

After acknowledging the 100th milestone of U.S. rule of the USVI, Mr. Rasmussen went straight to the core of his speech.

"The preceding years have not been forgotten -- neither in Denmark, nor in the Virgin Islands," he said. The prime minister mentioned the town names such as Christiansted and Frederiksted, as well as the design of the town buildings, stating that they served as reminders of how close the USVI and Denmark were. He also acknowledged the thousands of Danes who visit the territory annually, and said both he and the people of Denmark feel a special bond with Virgin Islanders.

"But although we share a common past, we have not always shared the same story about that past," he said. The prime minister said when he was a child, there was a popular Danish story about the Danish West Indies that spoke of the USVI as an exotic location with peaceful coexisting. He also mentioned a famous Danish King who had abolished slavery, but said Danish slavery of the USVI continued after it had been abolished, and living conditions only improved on paper.

"The true heroes were the men and women who stood up to the injustice," Mr. Rasmussen said, later adding, "I suggest we also look somewhere else in our hearts and minds. I suggest we ask ourselves is there any justification for suppression? Any argument for treating people brutally? And we all know the answer; the answer is no. There's no justification whatsoever for the exploitation of men, women and children that took place in these islands under Danish flags. There's no justification for slavery. It is unforgivable. And it is a dark and disgraceful part of Danish history. So when I search my heart and my mind, there's no doubt that the true heroes of the past are the men and women of the Virgin Islands who defied suppression. They were not given their freedom, they took it back."

Mr. Rasmussen became emotional almost to the point of tears at various points of his address. He continued to praise the pioneers of the uprisings that ultimately led to freedom, including Queen Mary Thomas, Queen Mathilda Macbean and Axeline "Queen Agnes" Salomon, who led a movement that ended with [the famous Fireburn](#).

"We must acknowledge what had happen in the past, and we must acknowledge that what happened in the past has affected where the island is today, because we can't undo

the past, what we can do is to improve the future," Mr. Rasmussen said.

The prime minister said with Denmark now acknowledging the atrocities of the past, and with both sides deciding to embrace the future, "Today the people of Denmark and the people of the Virgin Islands share a common historic path, and today we share the same view of history, and today we share the same heroes. And hopefully we shall also share a bright future."

Mr. Rasmussen will visit UVI in St. Thomas today to launch a scholarship program, with hopes of developing opportunities for the young people of the territory.

"Ladies and gentlemen, this time around we will not hold them back, we will push them forward," the prime minister concluded. He did not apologize for slavery.

*Feature Image: A St. Croix Majorettes dancer drops flower in ocean at Fort Christianvaern in memory of a child who died after being taken to Tivoli in Copenhagen, Denmark, from St. Croix in 1905 to be exhibited in an amusement park. Her name was Alberta Viola Roberts; she died after contracting tuberculosis and was buried on March 31, 1917 -- exactly one hundred years ago -- after dying on March 24, 1917. (Credit: Reemy-Reemz Photography)*