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THE VILLAGES OF ST. CROIX

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When one drives along the Center Line Road from Frederiksted to Christiansted, St. Croix (Fig. 1), he cannot fail to notice the plantation villages of the negro sugar workers. Probably he will be more impressed, however, by the ruins which housed many more colored folks a century ago. He may give his imagination rein and picture these ruins as they looked in the heyday of the colonial period—a period when St. Croix supported a planter class in as great a luxury as was known in the world at that time. If he visualizes this late eighteenth or early nineteenth century landscape, he will see besides the long rows of stone houses which quartered the thousands of slaves, the large stone "great houses" of the planters, with gorgeous furnishings and other evidences of material prosperity. He may be so intrigued by this mental reconstruction of vanished island culture that he will shift the stage a few centuries back and bring forth the landscape of a still earlier civilization—that of the Caribs of pre-Columbian time. If he does this he may enjoy a setting even more picturesque than those of the eighteenth century or modern time—a scene in which villages of the aborigines dotted the coast line of St. Croix.

To reproduce the details of this early setting, except in imagination, is impossible, although historians and archeologists have assembled much data on the aboriginal Santa Cruzans. The problem of describing the negro villages, however, is not so difficult, for hundreds of cane workers' cottages still remain. It is the purpose of this article to indicate only the more striking relationships between the local geographic environment and the villages of both cultures. To describe the dwellings of the Carib, the writer must call on the work of the historian, but the story of the negro homes will be drawn from personal observations.

Aboriginal Villages

The St. Croix aborigines which Columbus found on his second voyage to the New World were not primarily agriculturists like the more civilized Arawaks so dominant in the Greater Antilles. On the contrary the coast-dwelling Caribs lived mainly by fishing. This

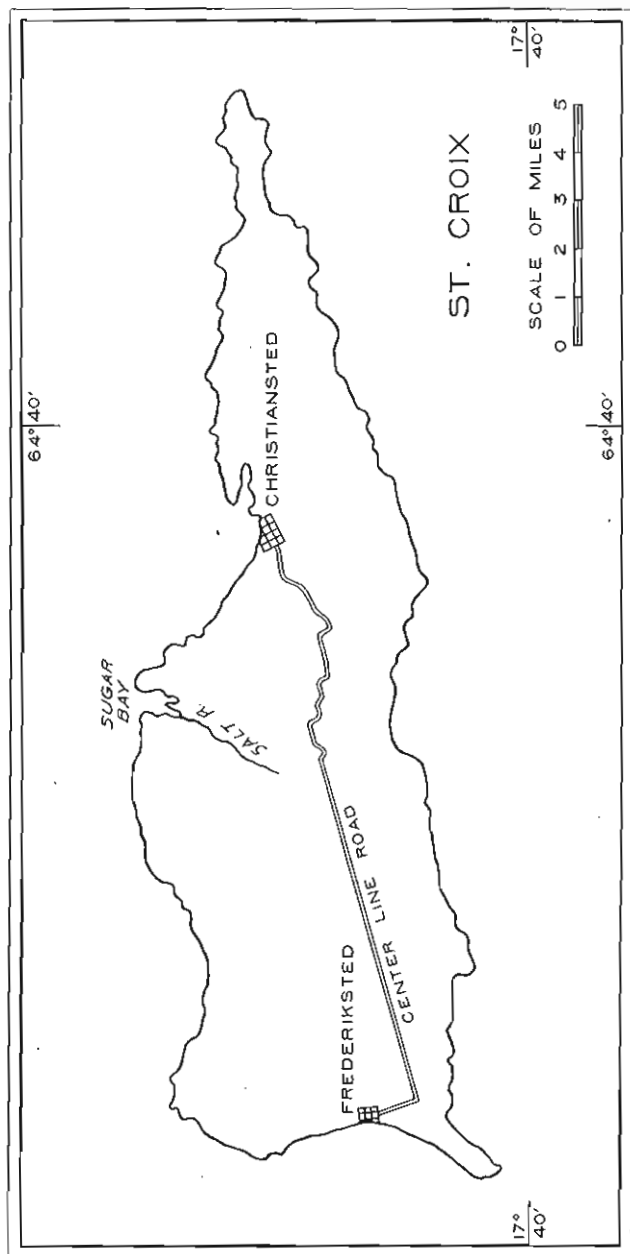


FIG. 1.—St. Croix. St. Croix includes nearly two thirds of the area (84.25 square miles) and approximately half of the population (11,413) of the Virgin Islands of the United States. The northwestern and eastern sections are maturely dissected uplands given over to pasture and woodland and used primarily for grazing. The south-central section, between the uplands, is a nearly level coastal plain where negro villagers produce sugar cane.

they supplemented by practicing some crude farming, by gathering fruits, nuts and root crops from the native vegetation, and, at times, by carrying on marauding expeditions against settlements in other islands.

The Indian tribes of St. Croix lived in villages, and the sites of as many as ten different settlements have already been discovered. The location of the Carib village was influenced by factors differing from those determining the site of the sugar-plantation village of today. Since fish were the principal diet of the early civilization, the red men sought a coastal location to give them proximity to the harvests of the sea. A gently sloping beach made hauling in their canoes an easy matter; nearness to a pond, stream or spring gave them opportunity for water supply to be used for drinking and washing; nearby forests afforded materials for their boats—all these were factors which influenced the location of their homes.

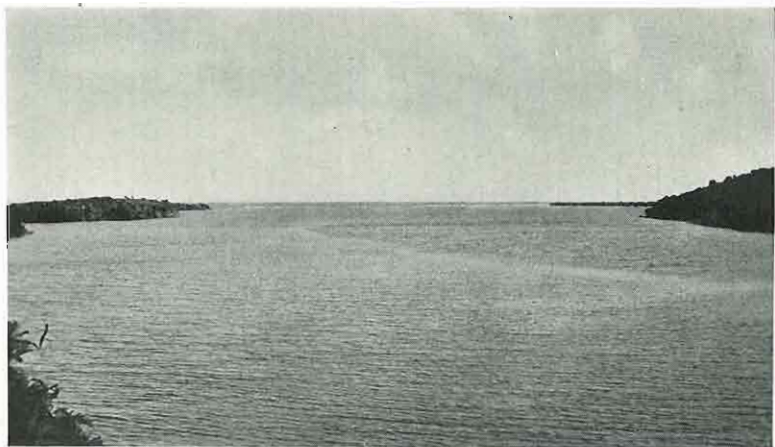


FIG. 2.—Sugar Bay at the Mouth of Salt River. Columbus dropped anchor near here in 1493 on his second voyage to the New World.

One of the largest villages on St. Croix was situated near the mouth of Salt River (Fig. 2), a location that possessed all the above requirements and one which made an ideal spot for a Carib town. The mouth of this stream is bordered by an extensive reef with two channels, making a favorable shelter for small sea craft. The fishing on the confines of the reef is good, and on the roots of the mangrove trees bordering the bay are found "mangrove" oysters which provide shell food. "Mangrove" oysters of this kind gave rise to the story of the early explorers that oysters grew on trees in the Carib-

bean lands.¹ Moreover, other shell fish were plentiful and shell heaps around the old village site indicate that at least two dozen varieties, including numerous conch, found place on the Carib bill of fare. Green turtles and land crabs were not ignored and these were served from the Indian kitchens just as they are from the negro cabins of today.² Salt River, which flows into Sugar Bay, provided fresh water except in times of extreme drought (there are no perennial streams in St. Croix). The giant ceiba trees of the northwest upland, the only part of St. Croix where elevation in the face of the northeast trades brings sufficient rainfall for trees verging on the rain forest type, provided wood for making the Carib boats; other vegetation yielded fruits and nuts for food. Finally, the limestone and marl soils of the hinterland to the south of Salt River favored the growing of root crops to supplement a diet contributed largely by sea and forest.

Just as the Caribs drew on the natural environment for food and for the equipment necessary to obtain it, they resorted to local resources for materials to build their villages. The typical village consisted of twenty or thirty houses built around a kind of public square.³ Some villages consisted of houses made round like bells or circular pavilions, while other coastal settlements were composed of huts built approximately square. The frame of the house was constructed of trees, set close together and inserted in the ground; the trees were sloped inward so that their tops joined together and gave the structure support, whereas within the house, short strong posts were driven and fastened to the trees with hand-fashioned ropes providing a brace which gave the framework considerable stability. A covering of heavy leaves and branches finished the hut, several different types of palm trees furnishing ideal materials for this purpose. "Hamacs," made by the women from the wild cotton, were an important article of the furnishings of each house; and utensils fashioned from clay and from calabashes could be seen in every hut. The use of calabashes for certain utensils persists in St. Croix today, even in some of the better homes; and the Negro

¹ When Columbus told in Spain of the wonders of the West Indies he laid stress on the fact that he had seen oysters growing on trees. The explanation of this phenomenon is relatively simple. The overhanging branches of the mangrove trees which line the brackish lagoon take root in the water and upon these branches the young oysters find hold. Thus the parts of the tree that are submerged at high tide are often completely covered with mollusks.

² de Booy, Theodoor, "Archeological Investigations in the Virgin Islands," *Scientific American Supplements* 2180 and 2189, Oct. 13, 1917 and December 15, 1917.

³ Irving, Washington, *Life and Voyages of Columbus*, Vol. I, pp. 310-311.

prizes the wild cotton tree for the fiber which provides an absorbent and for the leaves which are made into "tea."

The Carib village possessed decided contrasts to the negro village, and not the least of these contrasts was the lack of permanence in the homes of the aborigines. The palm-covered dwellings were not as staunchly constructed as the stone cottages of the colored workers and consequently the early villages did not have the resistance to hurricanes (not uncommon in the Caribbean) which the thick walls of the stone buildings provide. Hence, after each severe tropical storm, the coast-dwelling Caribs were probably compelled either to build their huts anew or to go on a marauding expedition and usurp the settlement of some more fortunate group. No doubt destructive storms were but one of several geographic factors which stimulated the roving, fighting spirit among these West Indian aborigines. Droughts, which dried up the creeks and springs and shut off the fresh water supply as well as limiting the diet to sea food, were doubtless other unsettling factors. Dry spells of months' duration are a significant handicap to St. Croix today and water has been brought in by ship to replenish the local supply. No active volcanoes are present in St. Croix, but these hazards to villages and crops surely disturbed the Carib settlements on some of the Lesser Antilles and gave impetus to the inter-island movements so characteristic of these early Americans.

Geologic and climatic factors may have been indirectly responsible for the complete abandonment of the aboriginal villages in St. Croix. When the Spaniards discovered gold in the stream gravels of some West Indian isles, natives were enslaved to work the placers. Many of the Lesser Antilles were completely depopulated by the slave hunts of the Europeans, and the aborigines, unaccustomed to hard labor in the hot humid environment of the gold fields,⁴ died like flies after short periods of service.⁵ Thus many settlements of the West Indian coast dwellers were left to the mercy of weather and insects, two agencies which in the tropics cause rapid destruction of all wooden structures. Today the only evidences which remain to indicate the sites of this early civilization in St. Croix are the mounds

⁴ Many of the mines were far inland away from the sweep of the refreshing trade winds which were a characteristic feature of the coast villages of the Caribs.

⁵ Whether the Indians of St. Croix were enslaved, killed in attempted capture or driven out by the Spaniards is a matter of conjecture, but it is probable that one of these methods accounted for the early depopulation of the island. Oldendorp, a German historian, claims that the Indians were banished about the year 1555 during the reign of Charles V. When the Earl of Cumberland passed the Virgins in 1596, he described them as wholly uninhabited.

containing the shells of thousands of fish which the Caribs ate, some of the aboriginal stone utensils and pottery, and here and there a skeleton of a pre-Columbian inhabitant.

Negro Villages

The Carib shore villages had disappeared from St. Croix many years before the negro villages became a part of the cultural landscape. It is true that desultory settlements of Dutch, English, Spanish and French took place on the southern Virgin for a century prior to its purchase by Denmark from France in 1733. But all these



FIG. 3.—A Remodeled "Great House." This view of the owner's home on Prosperity Estate gives some idea of the old colonial "great house." It is a structure with heavy stone walls which have been given a coating of white stucco. Two stories with ceilings at least fifteen feet high were built over a full basement. The floor space includes an area of fifty by one hundred feet without allowing for the spacious porches and wide outside steps. Among the many large rooms there are bedrooms twenty-four by thirty feet, a dining room twenty-four by fifty feet and a living room twenty-four by thirty-six feet.

earlier attempts at colonization were short lived, and no plantation ventures developed which might be characterized as permanent until the coming of the Danes. Then plantation agriculture got under way.

In the last analysis, the economic impulse behind the building of the negro villages was the raising of sugar to supply the urgent European demand. During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the importance of the sugar trade for nations in Europe overcame most other considerations, and the country which could grow its own cane and import its own sugar in its own ships had an immense commercial advantage. Indeed, sugar producing regions were held in such high esteem that during the negotiations of the Treaty of Paris in 1763 England seriously considered the choice of a French West Indian Island instead of Canada as a prize of war.

To grow cane and manufacture it into sugar necessitates large numbers of workers and in early times they were brought to the Indies in slave ships from the Guinea Coast of Africa.⁶ These

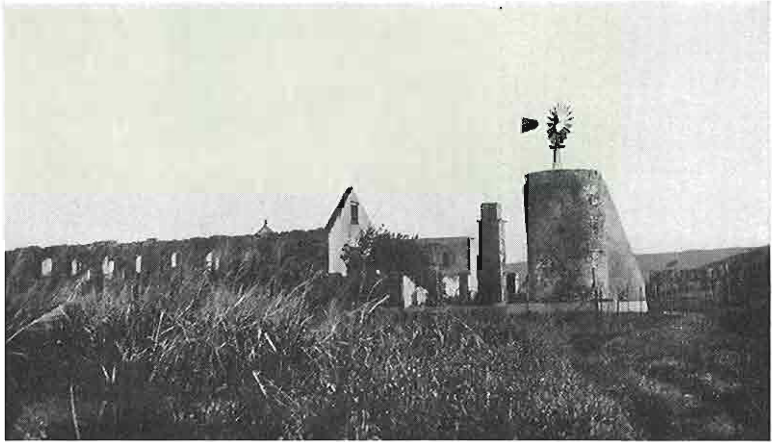


FIG. 4.—Ruins at Judith's Fancy Estate.

Africans had to be housed, and what more natural development could occur than the building of villages on the plantations near the cane fields where the Negroes worked. This was the plan followed by the planters and stone houses for the workers became one of the most characteristic features of St. Croix, and to a lesser extent of the other Virgins as well.

⁶ Indentured servants and criminals, whom the early colonists brought with them from Europe, were the first workers used in the Virgin Islands' cane fields. But the planters found, as others have found who have tried to use Whites for plantation purposes in the tropics, that white labor does not lend itself well to the hot humid environment of the tropical lowlands.

The early villages were constructed of blocks of stone similar to those used in the luxurious "great houses" (Fig. 3) of the wealthy plantation owners.⁷ These stones could be quarried on the island or procured cheaply from the European ships that carried them as ballast on the way out for a sugar cargo. Like the "great house," the negro quarters were substantially built and some have withstood the onslaughts of hurricanes, earthquakes and floods for more than

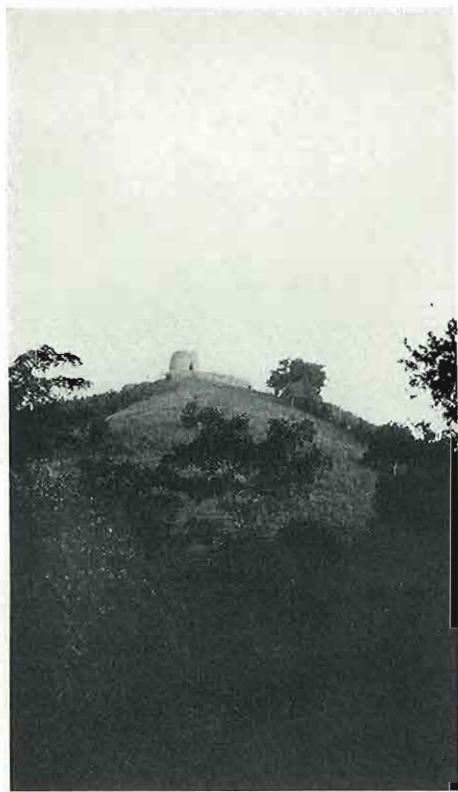


FIG. 5.—An Old Fashioned Sugar Mill.

a century. However, during the last hundred years, with high sugar profits vanished, many of the villages have been abandoned. Planters and laborers have drifted away and the plantation buildings, left without a caretaker, have yielded to age, violent tropical storms and

⁷ Several of the old "great houses" had tessellated floors of imported marble which suggests the luxury in which the early planters lived. Moreover, the ruins of enormous bake ovens alongside the kitchens indicate something of plantation hospitality.

the inroads of tropical vegetation (Fig. 4). The old fashioned sugar mills (Fig. 5) have withstood the years better than "great house" or village and these stand out like sentinels over sections grown up in woodland—over regions which a century ago supported fields of cane (Fig. 6).



FIG. 6.—An Old "Copper" Kettle. Many of the old "copper" (they are made of iron) kettles, which were used for boiling down sugar in early days, are scattered over the island. Some, which are not rusted too badly, are used for watering stock.

The sugar industry of St. Croix is today a declining occupation. True, it did not succumb to the three decisive blows which killed production in the two northern Virgins; for, when European beet sugar, East Indian cane sugar and the freeing of the Virgin Islands' slaves in 1848 destroyed the luxury profits of early days, St. Croix, on its level coastal plain, developed economies in machine agriculture which were impossible on the rugged uplands of St. Thomas and St. John. Nevertheless, as a result of recent depression prices, St. Croix is

feeling the handicaps of deficient moisture and the small size of its sugar industry to such an extent that the cane area is giving way to cattle raising and villages have been abandoned or destroyed. Several of those that remain are different in structure and type from the prevailing stone cottage of the early days. Some of the old stone villages that received serious damage from several hurricanes have been replaced by less substantial structures (Fig. 7) made of wood or galvanized sheeting. These materials, although showing less resistance to severe tropical storms, can be made into houses much cheaper than the stone blocks of the old colonial village. In the early days when every plantation owner built with stone, slaves could be used for building work during slack times of the sugar-crop cycle. Now when village construction is necessary, slaves are no longer available and planters are constructing buildings which can be made out of cheaper materials with a minimum labor requirement.

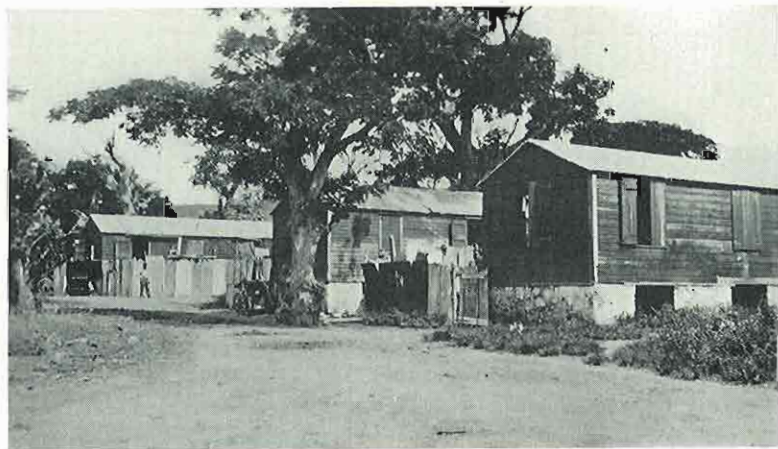


FIG. 7.—Barrack Village on La Grange Estate. The materials for these buildings, all sawed to match, were purchased in continental United States after a recent hurricane had almost destroyed the much repaired stone village.

The location of the villages in St. Croix is definitely influenced by topography. On the maturely dissected uplands of the northwest and east, few clusters of houses may be seen, for the regions are too rugged for the machine cultivation, so necessary in sugar-plantation agriculture. Moreover, exceedingly low rainfall which prevails in eastern St. Croix would prohibit cane production even if the terrane were slightly rolling or flat. Only on the Tertiary coastal plain, which lies in the south-central and southwest sections between the uplands on either side, is machine farming at all feasible and here, as might

be expected, are found the villages of the negro laborers (Fig. 8). Village location with reference to the plantation owner's house varies but little. In almost every case the workers' quarters occupy the lower lying ground, usually to the leeward of the more pretentious dwelling and almost never do they surround it. Long rows of cottages or barracks lie to the south or west. With negro quarters lying in either of these directions from his dwelling, the owner gets none of the village "smell"; for the prevailing northeast trades carry it toward the animal pens (Figs. 9 and 10) which are built still farther away.



FIG. 8.—The Sugar Area of St. Croix. The Center Line Road passes through the most arable section of St. Croix, the Tertiary coastal plain; this uplifted sea bottom is limited to a small section of the island by dissected Cretaceous uplands to the northwest and east. One may see the stack of an old sugar mill and negro villages beyond the palm-bordered road.

The number of laborers' cottages or barracks varies with the size of the plantation and the amount of cane ground. Some of the larger villages contain housing room for as many as two hundred workers, whereas other smaller layouts accommodate but fifty to one hundred Negroes (Fig. 11). Cottages or barracks are all one story in height and may contain from two to twelve rooms. The old stone dwellings usually have from four to eight divisions while the newer wooden barracks may be divided into a dozen rooms. Villages are seldom crowded and not often do the rooms average more than two persons—one family usually occupying two rooms. Moreover, St. Croix families, averaging 2.5 persons each, are not so large as those of many sugar producing lands, Puerto Rico, for instance, with an average of 5.3 persons per family (United States Census, 1930). The Negro

who works on the plantation pays no rent for his living quarters—he is given a daily wage for the time he works, but room as well as a plot to grow vegetables are extras which he receives for attaching himself to the plantation. Not all colored folks who live in the cottages work on the farm where the village stands. The outsiders pay a weekly rent, and many of them are squatters who drive back and forth to their few acres of hand-cultivated cane in the hilly northwest upland.

The villages, and cottages within the same village, vary in the amount and kinds of furniture which their occupants possess, yet there are certain furnishings which are common to all houses. Sev-



FIG. 9.—Animal Pens to the South of Williams Estate Village. The stone cottages for the laborers may be seen in the background. The manager's house is on the higher ground to the right, just outside the picture.

eral of the Negroes each own a four poster bed, which may have been a gift from some planter who was leaving the island. Many such beds are found in St. Croix and a large proportion belong to the colored villagers. All Negroes have a longing for glassware, and every family has its cup table with glass dishes and drinking cups which include a wide range of size and color. Most of these are never used, but the Negro who possesses a large, well stocked cup table gains a distinction analogous to the "main street" owner of a luxurious motor car in continental United States. Chairs are not in great supply, but nearly every villager affords a rocker. He may not use it, in fact it may be hanging from a rafter; but whether the chair is used or not, the Negro gets a pleasure from ownership just the same. The bare floors of the cottages indicate that carpets are not characteristic of St. Croix villages. The expense, and the ease of cleaning floors without coverings, are inhibiting factors. Moreover, carpets

would not blend well with the newspaper and catalogue pages which take the place of wall paper. The Negro has two books whose pages are never used for wall covering. These volumes make up the bulk

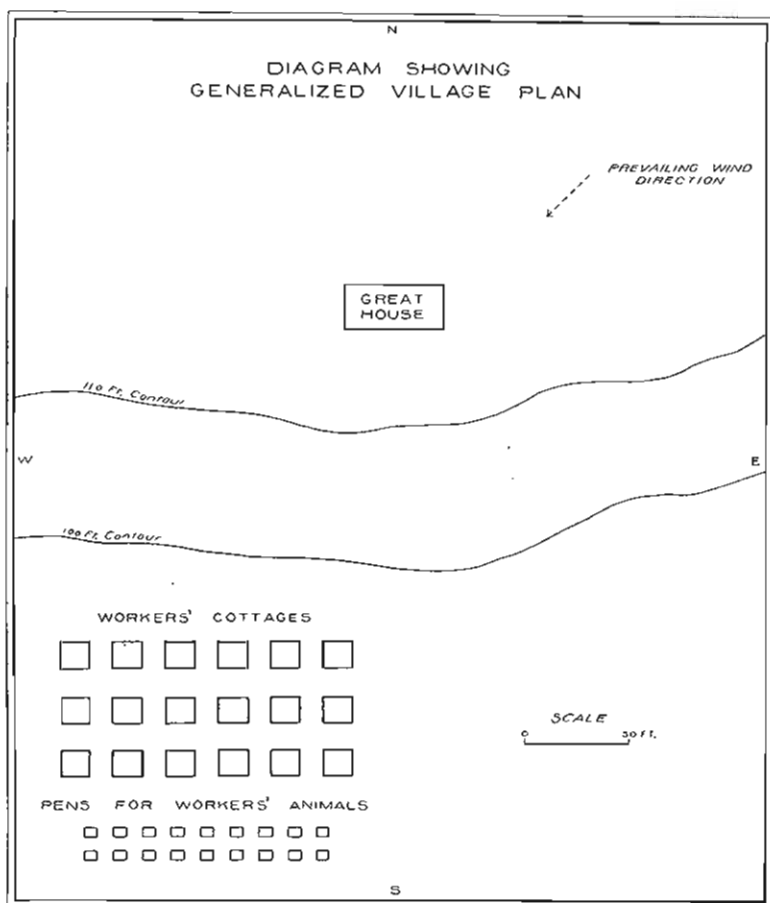


FIG. 10.—Diagram Showing Village Plan in St. Croix. Not all groups of plantation buildings on the sugar lands of St. Croix show this arrangement in site location, but the observer cannot fail to see that this general plan is followed quite consistently. As indicated elsewhere, few "great houses" remain, but other houses, smaller and less luxurious, have replaced them.

of his library. It is not large, obviously, and it contains just the works one might expect to see in such an environment; one is the bible, for the Negro is very religious, and the other is a dream book, which satisfies the old African heritage of superstition. Both books show signs of consistent usage.

Few stoves may be seen within the cottages, for the Negro does his cooking either in a small shed adjoining his quarters or in the village street just in front of his house. Some use an inexpensive charcoal burner, but others rest the pot of food on a little iron triangle which is balanced on three stones. Charcoal fires warming the pots of fish, fungi, soup or "tea" are characteristic features of the village "main street." Other activities afford prominent competition; a number of negro women may be doing the family wash—for



FIG. 11.—Negro Workers. The head load is common in St. Croix as well as in the other Virgin Islands. Many of the Negroes burn charcoal for fuel but a few use wood for cooking.

unlike many places in the Caribbean the stream bank is not always the village washboard (one of the main reasons being the lack of perennial streams); a few of the housewives may be cleaning fish with the family dog observing the operation hungrily; and finally naked children may be running about, while several villagers watch their play from the open windows. Doors and windows are seldom

opened at night however, for drafts and Obeah spirits might bring harm. Although the Negro is a faithful attendant at church, many still believe in Obeah; the mark of Africa is yet upon them. But in this respect the white man is not so many centuries ahead, for the Salem witchcraft is still comparatively recent history.

The negro villages of St. Croix seem destined to disappear just as the clustered huts of the aborigines did hundreds of years ago. The numerous slave quarters standing in ruins throughout the island seem like an omen presaging a similar fate for the workers' houses that still remain. The cane industry upon which the village economy is based has long since passed its peak, and St. Croix production is giving way to areas with far more suitable conditions for yielding heavier crops. It is unlikely that another village system based upon a different plantation product will develop. Much of the land that is not given over to cattle raising probably will be divided into small plots for the colored folks, a plan which the government is encouraging at present. Hence, if or when **sugar** ceases to be the dominant export from St. Croix, a position it has held for nearly two centuries, the second village system on the island will probably pass completely into history.