

SAVANNE

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A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

The port town of Charlotte Amalie on St. Thomas was founded to serve the needs of early Danish traders and planters. Savanne, or Savan, the northwestern subdivision of Charlotte Amalie, was established to provide housing for an increasing number of manumitted slaves or "free coloureds," as they were called. This group, having gained their freedom by direct purchase or by baptism, left the rural estates on which they worked and lived and moved to the town. Although legally free, they were treated as an inferior class and were subjected to rigid restrictions. As reported in *Emancipation in the Danish West Indies, Eye Witness Accounts II*, by Eva Lawaetz, "the free colored were banned from certain punishment for certain offenses. In addition, they had to always have on their person a FRIBREV (Letter of Freedom) to prove they were not slaves." In the mid 1700s Governor General Peter Von Scholten passed several laws to protect the rights of the free coloureds. Unfortunately, many of the freed Blacks were never apprised of their rights. So large was their number in St. Thomas that it was agreed to sell lots in the Savanne area to facilitate their needs. Thus, the neighborhood was established around 1764-65.

The character of the neighborhood was evidenced by the construction of its houses. In contrast to the masonry, European-styled buildings and homes of the commercial district, houses of Savanne were small wooden frames covered with shingles. Described by some architects as vernacular row, the prevailing design was a long row of contiguous houses that formed an L- or U-shaped structure. Others were individual houses of the same wooden frames but having a small balcony. Built a few feet above the ground these elevated homes were reached by wooden or masonry steps. Under the raised houses children found safe havens for play, and nesting hens used these shaded areas as good hiding places for their eggs. One long, winding road ran through the center of the neighborhood.

and other businesses of the commercial district. The people of Savanne were obligated to leave their neighborhood to seek employment. Many women and a few men were engaged in "carrying coal," a job that involved carrying huge baskets of bituminous coal on their heads up the planks of ships calling on St. Thomas. Coal was used as fuel by the ships. Working from mid-day into the wee hours of the next morning, coal workers were paid with tallies which, when redeemed, netted two or three cents per basket.

Another source of employment for women was laundry, which involved washing uniforms worn by gendarmes and other uniformed officers. The uniforms were made of heavy cotton like khaki, twill or denim, and when wet, the clothes exacted much energy from the women who did their work without modern machinery and detergents. They hand scrubbed the garments, slapped them on rocks, boiled them on an outdoor fire and finally bleached them dry in the sun. Ironing was almost as tedious a chore done with a charcoal fired "goose."

Some women earned a living as vendors in the Bungalow at Market Square, now called the Rothschild Francis Square, or as peddlers throughout the town. The Bungalow vendors were a distinctive group. Colorful in dress and spirited in temperament, they added a special flavor to the area. Each woman had her individual spot or table, which she guarded jealously. As a group they regulated prices and conformed to unwritten norms as they bargained their wares of fresh fruits, vegetables, herbs, spices, food and drinks.

Men earned their living as cargo men, common laborers, janitors, or fishermen. Skilled workers emerged years later from this group. These artisans exercised great influence in the community. Operating small trade shops within and outside the area, they satisfied the community's needs in such areas as cabinet making, furniture repair, masonry, joinery, brick laying, barbering, dressmaking, needleworking, and cooking.

ECONOMY OF THE AREA

There was no alternative in Savanne to the trading

SOCIAL SERVICES

Before local government provided social services for

the needy, fraternal organizations played an important role in furnishing these services for the Savaneros. These institutions, in addition to providing financial assistance in time of need, supplied counseling and other services. Two such fraternal organizations in Savanne were the United Brethren of the St. Joseph Association and the Beloved Sisters of Mary and Joseph. The Harmonic Lodge and the Old Unity Lodge were also popular among Savaneros even though they were located outside the boundaries of Savanne.

ENTERTAINMENT

Unlike the courtyards of the commercial district, which served as extended work areas or as stables of wealthy merchants, the Big Yards of Savanne were for entertainment and informal, traditional education. These wide open spaces bordering the long row houses were identified by landlord's name or by location. There were the Lockhart's Big Yard, Richard's Big Yard and the Sealey Big Yard. Three popular yards outside of the Savanne area were Ross's Yard, Buck Hole, and Barracks Yard. On moonlight nights families gathered to share stories, jokes, gossip, and family events; they recited poems, danced and sang in the Big Yards. Daytime activities were also plentiful. The people of Savanne also frequented two popular dance halls, Jubilee Hall and Dilley Hall. Additionally, the fraternal lodges were available for social affairs.

POLITICAL LIFE

Since Savanne was one of the most densely populated areas on the island, it attracted the attention of politicians, who stumped the area at election time wooing voters. In the 1940s and later, the strength of a political party or its candidates hinged on support from Savanne. The old Banaba Well, a popular landmark formerly used as a water source, became the rostrum from which political candidates delivered fiery speeches. After these performances people gathered at nearby "Eva Grants Corner" for drinks and conversation. Middle-class and wealthy political candidates were sometimes viewed ironically by the Savaneros who were aware that their small homes and their food and drink would ordinarily be scorned by these candidates outside of an election year.

Several leaders were elected from Savanne. These individuals fought tenaciously for improved wage laws, improved roads, better health facilities and most importantly, for job opportunities. Today, people with their roots in Savanne can be counted among the society's list of legislators, doctors, lawyers, civic and religious leaders and other professionals.

OTHER IMPACTS

From the 1930s education became high priority, and

graduation from high school was considered an outstanding milestone in one's life. Unlike parents in the commercial district, few Savaneros could send their children to the mainland or to Europe for higher education. Therefore, after high school graduation most young men and women worked for the Virgin Islands Government. Many of these individuals continued their education in the 1950s.

SAVANNE TODAY

Visible change in the area is reflected in the houses. Quite different from their predecessors, many homes are now two- and three-story concrete buildings. Glass and aluminum shutters have replaced wooden windows and doors. Several wooden homes with shingles remain, however, as testimonies to the early character of the area.

Unlike commercial Charlotte Amalie, few historic sites in Savanne remain to tell the community's history. One surviving site is the Jewish Cemetery, which served the group of Jews who fled from the island of St. Eustatius in 1781 after the attack of Sir Rodney on that island. These Jewish members of the community became ship owners, ship chandlers and brokers and participated in the slave trade. They became a vital part of the community and lived primarily in other urban areas, but they were buried in Savanne, on "Jode (from Judah) Street." Other street names in Savanne are Pile Strade, Vester Gade, Slagter Gade, Gamble Gade, Silke Gade, and Levkoi Strade.

Currently Savanne is home to immigrant populations from Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic and the eastern Islands. Blacks of Savanne earned a living in conditions resembling servitude while the Whites of the commercial district flourished financially from the bustling trade of the town and its harbor. The sociology of the two groups reflected this difference.

CITATIONS AND FURTHER READINGS

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