



*by Nina York  
St Croix Friends of Denmark*

In 1917, a major transformation took place in what had been known as the Danish West Indies, with their ownership transferred to the United States through [purchase](#). Now the US Navy would be the administrative power, protecting us and the Panama Canal from a wartime threat by Germany.

The Danes that had been stationed here as government workers and gendarmes had not had an easy time dealing with the climate, illness, absence from their homeland, friends and family. Still, many felt sentimentally attached to this place, which led to the establishment, in June 1917, of the Danish West Indian Society (DWIS) with headquarters in Copenhagen, an organization of persons promoting a friendly connection, staying informed about life in their old stomping grounds, and sharing recollections of their adventures there.

As time passed, the organization evolved from those having served duty here to descendants, along with various professionals and persons having visited the islands being caught by their charm. In 1967, a large group of over 100 members arrived here to participate in the first Danish West Indies Festival on the 50th anniversary of the Transfer. It was, in part, hosted by a new local organization, the St. Croix Friends of Denmark, that had been established in 1964 and was later followed by a St. Thomas branch. The only requirement for membership, which still holds, was a friendly interest in Denmark and its legacy and history in the islands.

For two weeks, the visitors enjoyed shared excursions to landmarks of mutual interest as well as visiting beaches and enjoying island cuisine but mainly social interaction with the Virgin Islanders.

The visiting Danes were housed in Friends of Denmark homes, and the idea of alternating exchange visits, associated with a Festival, was born. In 1969, a contingent of Virgin Islanders went to Denmark as guests of the DWIS for a second festival, and this custom of alternating visits every two years has prevailed since then.

On both sides of the Atlantic, the respective societies sponsor many activities; in St. Croix that includes celebrating several Danish holidays. St. Hans Aften, a

solstice bonfire event associated with purification from evil spirits, is held in late June at a beachside location. Christmas is celebrated with a party, and the Transfer Day commemorations on March 31, also known as Danish Heritage Day, feature a gathering with cultural presentations. The Society sponsors (often in cooperation with DWIS) cultural events, e.g. the January 2017 scholarly presentations on the shared Denmark – VI history, part of the Transfer Centennial events. It also supports visits by Danish cultural and sports groups, this year bringing a large variety. Let us welcome them all as friends on this special occasion observing 100 years of American identity!