

## Official Testimony

***Presented to:*** Ms. Karin Nodgaard, Chairwoman  
Folketingets Standing Committee on Cultural Affairs  
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Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen of the Folketingets Standing Committee on Cultural Affairs of the Danish Parliament. It is indeed with great honor and pride that I address you today on behalf of the people of the United States Virgin Islands, the former Danish West Indies. Since the year 1915--almost 100 years ago--when David Hamilton Jackson, financed by the modest wages of the plantation workers whose causes he championed, sailed to Denmark in order to present his case for freedom of the press and improved working conditions in the Danish West Indies, no Virgin Islander has come to Denmark to officially address the people of this glorious nation on behalf of the people of the islands. So today we make history.

But the purpose of my testimony today is not to enter the annals of 21<sup>st</sup>-century Danish history; instead, it is to present a case for collaboration in the preservation of the mutual history of Denmark and the Virgin Islands, which extends as far back as the 17<sup>th</sup> century, when the Kingdom of Denmark, like its European counterparts, navigated the turquoise waters of the Caribbean Sea in search of riches and empire. That mutual heritage--both tangible and intangible, obvious and non-obvious--continues to define us to this day, consciously or subconsciously.

I would be disingenuous if I did not mention to you that I am very much aware of the political challenges you faced recently regarding your intended cultural expedition to mainland United States and the Virgin Islands. Like you, I am a political leader and am acutely aware of the delicacy of things political. But while the "petite fiasco" was not widely publicized in the islands--since very few people in the islands were even aware of the scheduled visit--the story did make its way around the islands amongst the "people in the know." And those of us "in the know" were saddened. We were saddened because it was yet another lost attempt to solidify a relationship based on almost 250 years of shared history, heritage, and bloodlines. A relationship, which if not officially embraced, will unofficially fade with the passage of time.

The issue before us today, then, is a simple one: Whether it is the desire and intention of the people of Denmark to reach across the vast expanse of the Atlantic Ocean and embrace the hand of their Caribbean relatives for the purpose of preserving a heritage that defines them both. If the answer is in the negative, then time will itself resolve this issue in one or two more generations, leaving the average Dane, who at best is exposed to a handful of lines in his primary-school history book which innocently describe the former Danish slave-trading colonies as "sugar islands," even more uninformed about Denmark's bitter-sweet history in the Caribbean. If the answer is in the affirmative, however, the work must begin immediately: to acknowledge, then heal, then celebrate and preserve.

Denmark's 250-year-long history in the West Indies is replete with the things legends are made of: pirates and plantations; sugar and slaves; great fortunes and dismal failures; rebellions and regrets. In the height of the colonial era, Charlotte Amalie, the capital of the Danish West Indies, was the third largest city in the Danish empire. And all over historic Copenhagen, from Amalienborg to Schimmelmann's palace on Bredgade, are living monuments to Denmark's presence in their "gamle tropekolonier." Between 1671 when the Danes acquired St. Thomas and 1917 when all three islands, namely St.

Thomas, St. Croix, and St. John were sold to the United States for twenty-five million dollars in gold, Denmark left its indelible “mark” on the islands and their people. Consequently today, besides the historic towns of Christiansted, Frederiksted, and Charlotte Amalie, each filled with blocks of Danish-era architecture and streets which bear Danish names like Kongensgade and Krystalgade, there are numerous entries in the local phonebook of black people bearing surnames like Larsen and Hansen and Christiansen and Ovesen, each the living embodiment of integration. Similarly, when islanders return home after years abroad, one of the first things they crave is their mothers’ “red grout,” the island equivalent of the traditional Danish “Rodgroed med flode.” The St. Croix Avis is one of the local newspapers, having been widely read since 1844; no traditional gathering is complete without dishes of salted cod and smoked herring; and the Lutheran Church generally occupies the highest hill in the historic towns. Today, as a result of colonialism, there are blonde, blue-eyed Danes in Denmark, albeit sometimes with curly hair or a predisposition to obtaining a dark tan, who, often unbeknownst to themselves, have black ancestors. After Americans, Danish tourists represent the largest population of visitors to the Virgin Islands. And many a Dane has slept on wonderful mahogany himmelsengs or sat on caned gyngestols without knowing why such items were revered amongst the family’s furnishings. The connection between Denmark and the islands is a historical, cultural, and biological fact. It cannot be denied or diminished because of misplaced guilt. Instead, it should be celebrated--to our mutual benefit. At the end of the day, we are relatives and we must accept each other, for better or for worse.

When Denmark sailed away from the islands on that fateful day of March in 1917, the islands were left in the hands of the most powerful country on Earth. And it is perhaps for that reason that Denmark has suffered a “cultural amnesia” of sorts vis a vis its former colonies. It was to America that islanders turned for economic opportunity, access to higher education, relief in times of natural disaster, and for an international identity, for example. Meanwhile Denmark, unlike its European counterparts, never had to contend with its former “colonials” knocking upon its doors in search of jobs. The present-day “darkening” of Denmark, regarded by many as a threat to the very foundation of Danish cultural identity, has not come from Virgin Islands blood. Instead, it has come from Denmark’s unwilling embrace of a new, borderless Europe. And ironically, perhaps if Denmark had remained unified to its former colonies, it would have been better equipped today to deal with its role in the European Union and the identity challenges which accompany such liaisons.

Today, despite tangential socio-historical ties to China, Brazil, and the United States, for example, Denmark has established and maintains Cultural Offices in those countries. The Kingdom of Denmark, however, has no official cultural presence in the Virgin Islands, much to the detriment of both peoples. Consequently, socio-cultural exchanges between Denmark and her former islands--and the mutual benefits proven to derive therefrom--have been left to private initiatives: The VIDA Project (Virgin Islands-Danish Apprenticeship Program), a non-profit entity created for the purpose of preserving the traditional architectural crafts of Denmark and the Virgin Islands ; The African Roots Project, an ambitious undertaking with the mission of connecting the descendants of the

100,000-plus enslaved Africans brought to the Danish West Indies during the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade to their ancestors; The Friends of Denmark and its Danish counterpart, Friends of West India, who, for almost 50 years, have encouraged travel and friendship between islanders and Danes ; The Homeward Bound Foundation, its goal being to encourage the healing from the ravages of slavery; and The St. Croix Landmarks Society and the St. Thomas Historical Trust, which have both worked towards the preservation of the architectural, photographic, and literary history of the Danish West Indies.

There are also numerous individual efforts focused on the preservation of the cultural history of Denmark and the islands. Such efforts generally involve the collection of art and artifacts as well as the forging of friendships which transcend geographical boundaries.

Over the past 25 years, for all of my adult life, I have been on a personal mission to do my part to preserve our mutual heritage. And today I boast a private collection of Danish West Indies furniture, paintings, photographs, and books which would be the envy of many a museum. My interest in the area emerged naturally. Besides descending from a family which can trace its numerous branches to the earliest presence of the Danish era in the West Indies, oftentimes to the Africans who established the various lines, four generations of my family, beginning with my paternal grandfather, Isaac Gateword James (1893-1978) in the earliest days of the 1900s, and continuing with my father, Gustav Alexander James (1919-1983) in the 1930s, have come to Denmark in celebration of friendship and scholarship. And we look forward to those who will follow us continuing in our footsteps to preserve what partly defines who we are.

But such initiatives should not be left purely to private concerns; governments must be involved in the preservation of their national treasures, both tangible and intangible. Every day, private collections are bought and sold on the international market, oftentimes not resurfacing for public enjoyment for generations. And as fortunes are made and lost, and as natural disasters come and go, collections, no matter how guarded, are subject to the ravages of time and chance. Most of the Danes with direct contact to the Danish era in the West Indies are dead. And the few still alive are waning quickly. Those persons able to give eyewitness accounts of the era are closing their eyes for eternity. It is therefore incumbent upon us to seize the opportunity that lies before us. We must preserve what is left of Danish West Indies culture.

America, as you are well aware, is a wealthy country, quite capable of preserving whatever initiatives it regards to be of national importance. The history at issue here, however, did not spring from the loins of America. Instead, it was adopted. The preservation of Danish West Indies culture, then, is the responsibility of Denmark and the Virgin Islands.

Together we must set goals and immediately go about the realization of those goals. We must preserve our architectural heritage, both privately and publicly; it serves as the most visible example of our cross-cultural collaboration. Virgin Islands linguistic students

should become fluent in gothic and modern Danish, thereby availing themselves to the vast archival in Denmark which are relevant to the islands. There must be artistic exchanges. And cultural institutes must be established. Non-profit entities that have long worked tirelessly to secure our mutual heritage must be supported. Business opportunities must be facilitated.

When Denmark left the islands in 1917, it quietly and uneventfully ended a colonial relationship which had touched four centuries, from the 17<sup>th</sup> to 20<sup>th</sup>. And the year 2017 will mark the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the closing of Denmark's history in the islands. The challenge as Denmark and the Virgin Islands embrace the 21<sup>st</sup> century is to determine whether we want our shared history to strengthen with the passing of each year or to diminish with the passing of each year. It is my firm belief that it is in our mutual best interest to preserve our history, for it is in the preservation of our history that we preserve ourselves. And it is in the preservation of ourselves that we preserve each other. Such would have been the desire of our ancestors. And such should be the legacy we leave for our descendants.

Thank you for this opportunity to speak to you on the behalf of the people of the Virgin Islands. And thank you for your warm welcome in the cold, Danish winter. Your brothers and sisters in the islands look forward to your arrival upon our warm shores as we embark upon our next journey together.