Residents express hope in mass meetings

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Editor’s note: Part 2 of this two-part series dealt with the effects of the labor strikes under Danish rule in St. Croix and St. Thomas.

Returning to Charlotte Amalie from Puerto Rico, newly appointed Gov. Henri Konow (1862–1939), arriving aboard the Valkyrien, received an impromptu inaugural ceremony on King’s Wharf and then rode in an automobile up the streets, greeting the people. Both he and the population of the islands knew that the Americans had signed the cession treaty on Aug. 2, 1916 in New York City. The headline appeared in the Tidende as “DWI Treaty Signed in Three Minutes.”

Executive orders

On St. Thomas, throughout the next five months, the Tidende kept a close watch on the progress of the treaty, reporting constantly the channels through which the document had passed. By Sept. 9, the document had been ratified by the U.S. Senate and proceeded to the U.S. House of Representatives. In Copenhagen, the treaty had to be voted on by the upper and lower houses of parliament

As there was no definite news which way the treaty would be voted upon in either country, Konow, as acting governor, was put in an awkward situation as a surrogate, holding a place for someone: either for an American naval officer (if the treaty was ratified on all sides) or a replacement governor from Copenhagen. A great deal of political insecurity existed and he demonstrated insecurity, especially at public gatherings.

Now that Konow was the head of the government and had moved into Government
House, his light cruiser, Valkyrien, was either anchored in the harbor or situated off the coast of St. Thomas, captained by the second-in-command, Jessen. Fifteen of the Valkyrien’s marine-soldiers had been assigned to duty at Ft. Frederik, Frederiksted, replacing the gendarmes who were moved to Kingshill to be in the countryside monitoring the movements of the members of the Labor Union.

For the Nov. 1, 1916 commemoration of the Labor Union, the first Liberty Day, Konow had anticipated a problem as he was “unsure” about the crowd’s behavior. He had given the order to the marines and the gendarmes “to warn a potential offender three times and then to shoot.”

In the morning after the sounding of the conch shell called the residents, the parades began to the sounds of the marching music. Labor Union workers marched in between the debris. D. Hamilton Jackson was driven in a car and responded “to the cheers and dances” for him.

Meanwhile, Denmark was putting together “a winding up act” in preparation for the transfer. As part of the Danes’ departure procedure, $4,000 had been sent to the islands to distribute to the poor. These were to be given as “a legacy of human and cultural aims for commemorating Denmark’s name in the West Indies.” The funds were to be distributed in January 1917.

On Aug. 24, the St. Thomas Colonial Council had submitted a letter to the Ministry of Finance outlining its statement for the sale of the islands. Before the telegram was sent, council member Corneiro was concerned that no referendum had been taken among the inhabitants. Others assured him that the vote taken by Jackson in St. Croix, whereby the vote for the sale was 4,000 to 2, was sufficient.

On Oct. 5, each district elected three members to present to the Parliamentary Commission of 1916 the will of the people. In St. Thomas, lawyer J.P. Jorgensen, Dr. Viggio Christensen and teacher James C. Roberts were to represent the different classes of inhabitants. In St. Croix, J. Stakemann, G.B. Fleming and Frank Coulter were selected. The pattern of delegates for both districts was: two Danes and one local inhabitant.

In Copenhagen, two entities — the Radical Left Party and the radical Juvenile Society — were concerned about the inhabitants’ voice and welfare. Under the Tidende headline, “Proposed Sale Aid Fund,” they wanted to be assured that a vote would be taken among the residents. They also recommended that 15 million kroners be set aside for homesteads for farmers, and that a special fund for the old and sickly be established.
Public meetings solidify support

In the islands, a series of meetings was established to learn the will of the inhabitants.

The St. Thomas Labor Union, which wished to include mechanics and women among their ranks, met under the leadership of George Moorehead to establish their demands once the sale was completed. Members wanted higher wages, voting for women and cooperation with the Civic League.

A mass rally sponsored by the Civic League was held on the field at the market. The purpose of this gathering was to raise awareness of the need for the inhabitants to participate in municipal concerns. Members talked about the lack of employment and the need for more participation in agriculture, especially with the worldwide blockades of food stuffs from Europe.

Much like the Mutual Improvement Society in St. Croix, this organization’s goal was to heighten an awareness of civic responsibility in the working class. Representatives of the organizations, such as the Teachers’ Association, were invited to speak for their members.

At a St. Thomas Labor Union meeting, Jackson, who had expressed his dissatisfaction with Denmark’s promises, spoke as he had spoken to the St. Croix Labor Union, stressing there was no option except for sale. He stated, “Denmark talks about raising crops, not (about) uplifting the people.”

In a rally at the Grand Hotel, the general populace was commanded by a forceful poster that attracted participation with the words, “Imperative! Important! Immediate! Inhabitants of St. Thomas, Your presence is requested!

At this session the three St. Thomas delegates, before proceeding on their travels, were strongly urged by the body to learn of the group’s desire for the sale.

Workers aired their concerns regarding the high unemployment due to the cessation of German steamers calling at the port and the West Indian Company’s installation of electric cranes, which loaded and unloaded the coal to and from the ships. Mechanization had taken jobs from the working people.

The presiding officer of this meeting then asked the crowd their intentions. According to the Tidende, “the room swelled an almost unanimous cries of ‘Sale!’” The word, as described by the newspaper, “was repeated with such vigor and frenzy that rendered the manifestation both spontaneous and sincere.”

Riding on that wave of pro-sale enthusiasm, James Chesterfield Roberts, the final
and most determined speaker, concluded the session with pointed question and answer: “Is it impossible to ignore the wishes of the people? It should be looked at by the Mother Country as a moral compulsion to satisfy the peoples’ unconditional demands!”

Following the article was an editorial that had wished that further steps would be taken in the meeting to complete the process of formal affirmation for the sale; however, the writer realized that if there were a plebiscite in St. Thomas, it would be “superfluous after the reiterated pro sale wishes of the people.”

Closer to the time when there was a high probability for the sale, the Civic League had redefined its vision after the transfer. They demanded that the islands not be placed under Puerto Rico, that citizenship be conferred upon the transfer, that the harbor remain a free port, and that there be funding to support these requests, and lastly, and most importantly, that “the West Indies be for the West Indians!”

Delegates as advocates

Armed with the knowledge of the will of the people, the six delegates met with the Parliamentary Commission of 1916 in Copenhagen. To their surprise, the main questions asked by the Danish commissioners revolved around the character and intent of Jackson and the management of the St. Croix Labor Union. Several delegates, however, especially Christensen, tried to focus their comments on their first-hand knowledge of the social and health conditions of the islands.

The commissioners, having realized their mistake in not having Jackson testify, sent $1,500 for him to cable his responses.

Hurricanes

With the preparations for the transfer being put in place, nature was not as cooperative.

A 95-mph hurricane hit the islands from the south-southeast on Aug. 21, centering on Christiansted. Damage was suffered by the people on that island. The greater “gale,” as Virgin Islanders called it, however, was from the south at 110 mph. High winds and torrential rains had slammed into St. Thomas on Oct. 9 to 10.

More than 90 percent of the structures in St. Thomas suffered severe damage. Residents who had lived in wooden dwellings found their homes toppled over by the severity of the wind. Thousands were homeless and living either doubled up with friends and relatives or in shelters at churches and schools.
While there had been a scarcity of food and drinking water before the storm, the lack was exacerbated by the destruction. Orville Kean, a clerk for the Riise Apothecary, described the situation in a letter to the editor. "Desperate people who could not afford new (building) materials were utilizing newspapers to stuff their walls; lard and codfish crates as lumber for repairing exterior walls," he wrote.

Most of the infrastructure of the town was destroyed. The tall cranes at WICO that had supplied coal to the steamers lay in heaps after they were mowed down by the wind. The electricity provided by the company was cut. The telegraph station was damaged. News could come in and out only from the Valkyrian's receiver.

St. John's provision grounds, fruit trees and fishing businesses that sustained its own people and had supplied St. Thomians were wiped out. Donations of money were received from companies that had done business with St. Thomas during the heyday of the harbor. Former Virgin Islanders living in Macoris, Dominican Republic, also donated.

Konow ordered that the poor funds set for distribution in January 1917 be utilized as emergency funding for the thousands of homeless people. Mothers were to receive money for children and those of school age were to receive a hot meal in their classrooms. Women were paid to cook meals; men were employed to work side by side with the crew of the Valkyrien in cleaning debris from the roads.

St. John, without medical personnel, received care and medical supplies from the two doctors on board the Valkyrien, Martenssen and Rosenthal.

In the harbor many vessels were damaged. During the storm, two steamers of the German Hamburg American Line, Calabria and Wasgenwald, had been thrown onto the rocks. The Valkyrien fared better than many of the other boats in the harbor, as the crew rode out the storm in the vessel. Under Denmark's declaration of neutrality during wartime, the governor had no jurisdiction to remove those damaged German vessels.

A local vessel, the Irma II, owned by Capt. Sewer, was floated from the rocks and the body of Capt. Maynard was discovered inside.

**Headline: 'The End of the Troublesome Question'**

The above headline proclaimed that after a second election, the two houses of the Danish parliament had voted for the sale. Upon signing, one parliamentarian had quipped, "The (Danish) patriotic mood must be transferred into dollars and cents."

In St. Thomas, a number of preceding activities were arranged in the months prior
to the actual transfer ceremony.

On Jan. 1, 1917, New Year’s Day, the St. Thomas Labor Union held its commemorative march, celebrating most visibly by their dress and their gait the successful conclusion of the strike of the coal workers on Dec. 13, 1916. In a serious manner, the Labor workers marched in pairs, with officers on horseback at their sides. George Moorhead, president of the union, addressed the gathering.

Proclaiming the Transfer

On Feb. 18, the St. Thomas Reformed Church sponsored a Farewell Prayer service to which the governor, council members and residents were invited. Konow’s public thank you, read aloud and published in the newspaper, became his preliminary speech for the entire island. In it he expressed his appreciation for the residents’ sentiments towards Denmark, which were so outwardly shown during the service.

On March 17, an invitation was issued by Government House for the council members and inhabitants to hear a public reading of the Royal Proclamation from Danish King Christian X. People crowded into the ballroom of the mansion and lined the steps up to the building to hear the governor read the king’s final words, “I, Christian the X, in the firm conviction that the welfare of the islands can be best promoted and developed through a connection with the U.S. of America. . .”

Before the official ceremonies, the governor gathered the Colonial Council members and read a letter to them by the king.

So after many meetings and much discussion with local organizations and the general public, the day of the official ceremony arrived. Konow once again was “unsure” of the intent of the spectators and ordered the Valkyrien men to stand guard in front of the crowds.

But to his and everyone else’s surprise, there was a hushed silence among the crowd when the Danebrog was reverently taken down, and a wild cheer when the Stars and Stripes scurried up the pole. Jackson summed up the event the best, “This is a day not for us, but for our children.”

Author’s note: The photos are included in the forthcoming book, “St. John and St. Thomas–Historic Photos,” by Elizabeth Rezende and Anne Walbom.
Images courtesy of the V.I. Territorial Archives
Posters rally workers on St. Croix and St. Thomas to attend meetings to learn more about the impending sale of the islands to the United States and what it might mean for their civil rights.

Dr. Martenssen sees patients in St. John after the devastating hurricane of August 1916.