

U.S. Virgin Islands Commemorates It's 'Transfer' Centennial in 2017 – The Week After the St. Thomas International Regatta

The U.S. Virgin Islands commemorates Transfer Day, an annual territorial holiday, each year on March 31. This date in 2017 is extra special because it marks the centennial or 100 years since March 31, 1917 when the U.S. purchased the Virgin Islands – St. Thomas, St. Croix, St. John and its surrounding islands – from Denmark in order to for the U.S. to have a strategic presence in the Caribbean during World War I.

The Danish West Indies (the U.S. Virgin Islands today) were founded in 1666. The early plantation economy was fueled by sugar cane production. St. Thomas's excellent natural harbor proved ideal for trade. In 1691, the primary settlement was renamed Charlotte Amalie in honor of the wife of Denmark's King Christian V. It was later declared a free port by Frederick V. The end of the sugar trade and emancipation sent the islands into economic decline in the early 19th century. St. Thomas retained a strategic importance because of its harbor and forts. In 1917, all three U.S. Virgin Islands were purchased from the Danes for \$25 million in gold.

Two facets for sailors are particularly interesting. First, the US Virgin Islands are the only islands in the Caribbean with Danish heritage. The streets of Charlotte Amalie are still named 'gade', the red roofs in town are signature to one of the primary colors on the Danish flag, and there are forts and houses of worship that date to Danish days that are still in use today. Secondly, the islands and the sea have been inseparable. Schooners lined Charlotte Amalie harbor waiting to offload goods and the stores on Main Street were built out of these warehouses. Even in the decline years, ferrying, fishing and freight-carrying were all life-sustaining trades. When tourism started in a big way in the 1950s, sailing for pleasure came into vogue. The charter yacht industries as well as St. Thomas Yacht Club were both founded in the 1960s. The St. Thomas International Regatta, formerly called the International Rolex Regatta, started in in 1974. Today, the U.S. Virgin Islands boast not only the Virgin Islands, but entirety of the Caribbean's only Olympic sailing medal winner, Peter Holmberg. The comparatively small (by European standards) St. Thomas Yacht Club has produced Olympians, America's Cup sailors, world champions, top match racers and college All-Americans. This makes the USVI a compelling place to visit for Danish history and sailing.

Interestingly, the Transfer Ceremony in 1917 took place at the edge of Charlotte Amalie's harbor. Each year, the St. Thomas International Regatta starts with a first day sail to the harbor and back. Below you can see harbor a century ago and now.



Here are a few references that may be of interest:

USVI Centennial 2017 Facebook Page:

<https://www.facebook.com/United-States-Virgin-Islands-Centennial-2017-1636531436572306/>

Transfer Centennial Commission: www.vitransfercentennial.org

Brief Background on Virgin Islands History:

http://www.virgin-islands-history.dk/eng/vi_hist.asp

St. Thomas Yacht Club History: <http://www.styc.club/history.html>

St. Thomas International Regatta Facebook Page:

https://www.facebook.com/stirvi/?ref=br_rs

USVI Film Office: www.filmusvi.com