

# Virgin Islands of the United States

The **Virgin Islands of the United States** (commonly called the **United States Virgin Islands, U.S. Virgin Islands, American Virgin Islands, or USVI**) are a group of islands in the [Caribbean](#) that are an [insular area](#) of the [United States](#). The islands are geographically part of the [Virgin Islands archipelago](#) and are located in the [Leeward Islands](#) of the [Lesser Antilles](#).

The U.S. Virgin Islands consist of the main islands of [Saint Croix](#), [Saint John](#), and [Saint Thomas](#), along with the much smaller but historically distinct [Water Island](#), and many other surrounding [minor islands](#). The total land area of the territory is 133.73 square miles (346.4 km<sup>2</sup>).<sup>[3]</sup> The territory's capital is [Charlotte Amalie](#) on the island of Saint Thomas.

As of the [2010 U.S. Census](#), the population was 106,405,<sup>[4]</sup> comprising mostly persons of [Afro-Caribbean](#) descent. Tourism is the primary economic activity, although there is a significant rum manufacturing sector.<sup>[3]</sup> Farming is done on a smaller scale on the island of St. Croix, although it has seen a slow resurgence in recent years.

Formerly the [Danish West Indies](#), they were sold to the United States by [Denmark](#) in the [Treaty of the Danish West Indies](#) of 1916. They are classified by the [UN](#) as a [Non-Self-Governing Territory](#), and are currently an [organized, unincorporated United States territory](#). The U.S. Virgin Islands are organized under the 1954 [Revised Organic Act of the Virgin Islands](#) and have since held five constitutional conventions. The last and only proposed Constitution, adopted by the [Fifth Constitutional Convention](#) in 2009, was rejected by the [U.S. Congress](#) in 2010, which urged the convention to reconvene to address the concerns Congress and the [Obama Administration](#) had with the proposed document. The convention reconvened in October 2012 to address these concerns, but was unable to produce a revised Constitution before its October 31 deadline.

## History

The [Virgin Islands](#) were originally inhabited by the [Ciboney](#), [Carib](#), and [Arawaks](#). The islands were named by [Christopher Columbus](#) on his second voyage in 1493 for [Saint Ursula](#) and her [virgin](#) followers. Over the next two hundred years, the islands were held by many European powers, including Spain, Great Britain, the Netherlands, France, and [Denmark-Norway](#).

The [Danish West India Company](#) settled on [Saint Thomas](#) in 1672, on [Saint John](#) in 1694, and purchased [Saint Croix](#) from France in 1733. The islands became royal Danish colonies in 1754, named the Danish-Westindian islands ([Danish](#): *De dansk-vestindiske øer*). [Sugarcane](#), produced by [slave](#) labor, drove the islands' [economy](#) during the 18th and early 19th centuries, until the [abolition of slavery](#) by Governor [Peter von Scholten](#) on July 3, 1848.

The [Danish West India and Guinea Company](#) represented the first Europeans to settle the Virgin Islands. They are also credited with naming the island St. John (Danish: Sankt Jan). The Danish crown took full control of Saint John in 1754, along with St. Thomas and St. Croix. Sugar plantations, such as the famous [Annaberg Sugar Plantation](#), were established in great numbers on St. John because of the intense heat and fertile terrain, which provided ideal growing conditions. The establishment of sugar [plantations](#) also led to the importation of more [slaves](#) from [Africa](#). St. John was the site of one of the [first significant slave rebellions](#) in the New World in 1733, when enslaved Akwamu rebels from the Gold Coast took over the island for six months.

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The Danish were able to defeat the enslaved Africans with help from the French in [Martinique](#). Instead of allowing themselves to be recaptured, more than a dozen men and women shot themselves before the French forces could capture them. It is estimated that by 1775, slaves outnumbered the Danish settlers by a ratio of 5:1. The indigenous Caribs and Arawaks were also used as slave labor, to the point of wiping out their entire population. Slavery was finally abolished in the Virgin Islands on July 3, 1848.

For the remainder of the period of Danish rule, the islands were not economically viable and significant transfers were made from the Danish state budgets to the authorities in the islands. In 1867 a treaty to sell Saint Thomas and Saint John to the United States was agreed, but the sale was never effected.<sup>[5]</sup> A number of reforms aimed at reviving the islands' economy were attempted, but none had great success. A second draft treaty to sell the islands to the United States was negotiated in 1902 but was defeated in the upper house of the Danish parliament in a balanced ballot (because the opposition literally carried a 97-year old life member into the chamber).<sup>[5]</sup>

The onset of World War I brought the reforms to a close and again left the islands isolated and exposed. During the [submarine warfare](#) phases of the First World War, the United States, fearing that the islands might be seized by Germany as a submarine base, again approached Denmark with a view to buying them. After a few months of negotiations, a selling price of \$25 million in United States gold coin was agreed (this is equivalent to \$580 million in 2013 dollars). At the same time the economics of continued possession weighed heavily on the minds of Danish decision makers, and a consensus in favor of selling emerged in the Danish parliament.

The [Treaty of the Danish West Indies](#) was signed in August 1916,<sup>[6]</sup> with a [Danish referendum](#) held in December 1916 to confirm the decision. The deal was finalized on January 17, 1917, when the United States and Denmark exchanged their respective treaty ratifications. The United States took possession of the islands on March 31, 1917 and the territory was renamed the Virgin Islands of the United States. Every year [Transfer Day](#) is recognized as a holiday, to celebrate the acquisition of the islands by the United States.<sup>[7]</sup> U.S. citizenship was granted to the inhabitants of the islands in 1927.

[Water Island](#), a small island to the south of Saint Thomas, was initially administered by the U.S. federal government and did not become a part of the U.S. Virgin Islands territory until 1996, when 50 acres (200,000 m<sup>2</sup>) of land was transferred to the territorial government. The remaining 200 acres (81 ha) of the island were purchased from the [U.S. Department of the Interior](#) in May 2005 for \$10, a transaction which marked the official change in jurisdiction.<sup>[8]</sup>

[Hurricane Hugo](#) struck the Virgin Islands in 1989, causing catastrophic physical and economic damage. The territory was again struck by [Hurricane Marilyn](#) in 1995, killing eight people and causing more than \$2 billion in damage. The islands were again struck by [Hurricane Bertha](#), [Hurricane Georges](#), [Hurricane Lenny](#) and [Hurricane Omar](#) in 1996, 1998, 1999 and 2008, respectively, but damage was not as severe in those storms.

## Source:

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