

THE EARLY EUROPEAN COLONIZATION OF ST. CROIX (1621-1642)

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The early European colonization of St. Croix usually is dismissed as a sequence of anecdotes (*cf.* Knox 1852), or reduced to two paragraphs (Dookhan 1974: 42-43). This is unfortunate, because through it we can gain insight into the initial stages of European colonization in the eastern Caribbean, and also begin to explain certain later developments on St. Croix itself. The task is made difficult—but not impossible—by very incomplete documentation.¹

This paper is based upon the direct consultation of primary sources. It is therefore irrelevant to debate issues with historians who have not done likewise. The informed reader should check against this narrative any unfounded allegations based upon secondary and/or garbled sources: *e.g.*, the nonsensical statement that St. Croix was settled by Dutch and English colonists in 1625, who partitioned the Island between themselves.

Wright and van Dam (1935: 89, no. 1) have suggested that the earliest European settlement on St. Croix was that of some Frenchmen, who came in 1621 armed with a brief from the Admiral of France, Duc de Montmorency; Lewisohn (1970: 21) has repeated this suggestion, and it is time to dismiss it. According to the original document cited by Wright and van Dam (*loc. cit.*), *i.e.*, an undated letter to the Crown written by Juan de Vargas, governor of Puerto Rico (A.G.I. 54-3-7), and read before the Royal Council of War for the Indies on 29 April 1622 (*ibid.*), all involved was a party of Frenchmen building a long-boat on St. Croix in order to turn pirate. They had been left ashore by a convoy of 6 ships out of Dieppe bound for Guinea, and had finished their long-boat by the time the Spaniards came upon them (*ibid.*).

Juan de Vargas sent two frigates under his aide, Pedro Hernández, to oppose the interlopers, and Hernández was fortunate enough to capture eight Frenchmen and the long-boat, which he brought to San Juan. The captives were punished summarily for piracy, this being quite likely a euphemism for the gallows (*ibid.*). Juan de Vargas acted promptly against a party of boat-builders, but there was no colony with a commission from the Duc de Montmorency: only a thwarted piratical venture.

The importance of this event lies rather in that it is an early indication of French interest in St. Croix, an interest which would grow and lead to colonization eventually. Perhaps more significant is de Cahussac's expedition of 1629, which brought back to France such a glowing report of St. Croix (Lewisohn 1970: 24-25).

¹Signatures preceded by 'A.G.I.' in this paper refer to 'Archivo General de Indias,' Seville, Spain. The system used by Wright and van Dam (1934-1935) has been adopted.

The distinction of being the first European settlers of St. Croix, however, belongs to the English, who in 1631 established a colony on the Island with substantial plantations of tobacco, maize, sweet potatoes, and watermelons (A.G.I. 136-6-13). The English were led by a brother of the governor of Barbados, whose name I have been unable to ascertain, and who had the good sense to bring his mistress along. He was described by his enemy and conqueror, Enrique Enríquez de Sotomayor, as 'a man of intelligence and discourse' (*ibid.*).

Captain Henry Hawley was governor of Barbados in 1631, and he had a brother, William, whom he trusted enough to name deputy governor in 1638 (Southey 1968: I, 269, 281); perhaps William Hawley was the 'brother of the governor of Barbados' who first governed St. Croix for England, and therefore (if we exclude Juan Ponce de León) the first Christian governor of a Virgin Island.

Regardless of whether it was William who first governed St. Croix, or another brother of whom notice has not reached us, it is patent that Captain Henry Hawley was behind the scheme to settle St. Croix, and likely that he (and his brother, particularly if it *was* William) supported later attempts as well. Henry Hawley is a man much abused by his contemporaries and by historians, labelled a firebrand; indeed, a person as often deposed from as appointed to high office (Southey, *loc. cit.*). Perhaps he has been misunderstood; at any rate, Captain Hawley's stature in West Indian history is such that his life must be assessed dispassionately and critically: firebrand or no, he undertook adventures whose consequences are still felt today. His brother, 'a man of intelligence and discourse', also most certainly deserves the attention of the historians of the Virgin Islands.

Four months after the English arrived on St. Croix, Enrique Enríquez de Sotomayor, governor of Puerto Rico, sent a tartan with some infantry to dislodge them. The Spaniards had a colorful time of it, sighting a ship of the Netherlands between Culebra and Vieques, and being set upon by a French ship as they were about to land on St. Croix. After a long struggle, the French broke off at nightfall and turned toward the Main. The Spaniards landed, met the English, and prevailed. The English plantations were uprooted, and all settlers brought as captives to Puerto Rico (A.G.I. 136-6-13).

Enrique Enríquez de Sotomayor reports that the English in Barbados were facing ruin due to depressed prices for tobacco in England, and the lack of fertile soil on the colonies of Barbados and St. Christopher's, which once bore good crops, but no longer did so. Despairing of their plight, they were investigating the possibilities available on St. Croix for agricultural enterprise, with an eye to abandoning Barbados altogether if St. Croix proved more fertile (*ibid.*). Something of Don Enrique's zeal for the defense of San Juan must be read into his report, and our assessment of it tempered accordingly. It is likely that many English settlers on Barbados and on St. Christopher's were dissatisfied

with conditions on those islands; it is unlikely that they were about to abandon either of them altogether.

What is clear is that the English were expanding, and that St. Croix had been selected as a goal for their expansion. Another thing which is clear is that Spain would not allow St. Croix to fall into unfriendly hands, leaving San Juan (in Don Enrique's words):

deprived of intercourse and commerce with Cumaná, Caracas, and Margarita, and almost of the ships from Spain and the Canary Islands as well, since their precise crossing is between Santa Cruz and St. Christopher's, a venture impossible without obvious risk; besides, this land would be deprived of the turtle fishery, which being its chief sustenance it is also upon that Island in which it is more abundantly caught, leaving [the City] scarcely less than beleaguered and difficult to succour [. . .] (*ibid.*)

Don Enrique destroyed the English colony late in 1631 because he did not want 'the fame of this land's fertility to draw the people from the other islands to settle and fortify this one' (*loc. cit.*).

Don Enrique was to face enemies on St. Croix a second time, when the first French colony was established in 1634 (A.G.I. 54-3-7). In his letter to the Crown dated 20 February 1635 (*ibid.*), Don Enrique states how he sent forty men (between soldiers and settlers) in a frigate, to attack the French on St. Croix, and how the Spaniards lost one soldier and one settler in the engagement, taking six Frenchmen prisoners and killing ten, and burning the straw huts [*bujios*] and plantations of the French.

Don Enrique's successor, Iñigo de la Mota Sarmiento, bore the brunt of a massive English onslaught on St. Croix. Don Iñigo is *the* Spaniard vituperated by John Milton (1937:541) for destroying the English on 'Sancta Cruce' in March, 1636; to be fair, the English, evacuating Tortuga, came to St. Croix in great strength; Don Iñigo had only twenty soldiers and a motley following of seamen and settlers to send (as is clear from his letter to the Crown, 27 March 1637—A.G.I. 54-3-7), but he also had a capable lieutenant to lead them, his aide Domingo Rodríguez. The heroism displayed by Rodríguez and his improvised warriors was such that it permitted Don Iñigo to report laconically: 'Enemies occupied the Island of Santa Cruz, so harmful to the safety of this one, with very considerable strength; they were dislodged by these arms, even to the benefit of the royal treasury' (letter to the Crown, 28 August 1638—*loc. cit.*).

A perusal of the governors' reports for these years (so bloody for Spain) is necessary to assess the magnitude of Rodríguez' deed, and the valor of the Puerto Rican settlers: the garrison in San Juan was scarcely manned, its treasury knew only penury. It took the noblest loyalty to King and country to fight (and win!) against superior forces repeatedly, gaining nothing but the satisfaction of a job well done. If the royal governors and their troops acquitted themselves bravely, the creoles did no less, and gave victory its wings.

The years to follow the debacle of 1636 left Spain in control of the Archipelago. Nonetheless, some interesting activity is apparent during these

years, and this activity, it will be seen, foreshadows the developments to come with the next decade.

It was in 1636 that the Zealander Jan Snouck sent two ships to the Caribbean with a charter from the Dutch West India Company to settle St. Croix (Hartog 1964: 54). The fighting on the Island between Spaniards and Englishmen doubtless motivated Snouck's Commander, Pieter van Corselles, to settle St. Eustatius instead, but St. Croix was not forgotten.

How the merchants of Flushing became interested in St. Croix, dragging the United Provinces with them, is something which is unclear at present. The Zealanders were not to forget St. Croix. Three years after their detour, Don Iñigo reports that Dutchmen and Frenchmen had formed a company to settle the Island (first enclosure in letter to the Crown, 6 April 1639—A.G.I. 56-1-13 A). Equally alarming to the Puerto Rican governor were the activities of the English, who visited St. Croix in strength *en route* to Tortuga (second enclosure, *loc. cit.*). Three nations were about to converge on the chief of the Virgins.

The English were the first to arrive once more, probably in February of 1641.² They came ruled by the proprietary patents, in somewhat feudal style, under a Colonel William Caverly, governor, who held a grant from the Earl of Carlisle. Caverly did not govern directly, he sent instead a deputy, Thomas Brainsby, to do so for him. The colonists (including Brainsby) were recruited from St. Christopher's.

The English under Brainsby had uncontested possession of the Island for 14 months (*ibid.*). At the end of that period—probably in mid-April, 1642 (Lewisohn 1970: 26)—the English were set upon by a party of Zealanders, 'the chiefs of whom were one called Capoone & another called Snooke, who landing in the said Isle pistolled the said Deputy Governor Brainsby, hanged 11 of his men and forcibly possessing themselves of the said Isle' initiated a fascinating period in the history of St. Croix (*loc. cit.*).

Louys Capoen, the high-handed new Dutch governor of St. Croix, represented his *patroons* Jan Snouck and Claes Corneliszoon Brouckaert. The Chamber of Zealand of the Dutch West India Company controlled the Island now, and the control was monopolistic (*cf.* Downing 1863: 538).

Snouck and Brouckaert were prominent Flushing merchants involved in many schemes throughout the eastern Caribbean and the Guianas. Their conquest of St. Croix proved to be a 'costly adventure', as the new colony absorbed an investment of £200,000 in gold within three years (Hartog 1964: 60). Let us see how this expense might have been incurred.

For a settlement under the Dutch West India Company to rate a *patroon* (as St. Croix did), it must have a minimum of 20 households of three members each (Goslinga 1971: 263, 493). At least 60 men would have been employed at

²To the right honorable the Committee for forreine affaires: The humble petition of Elizabeth Terresa wife of Colonel William Caverly Esquier Governor of the Island of S^t^cCruse in the behalfe of her said husband, hee being infirm and beyond the Seas' (14 April 1652)—Public Record Office, U.K.

the Dutch fort,³ which mounted 11 cannon as of 23 January 1643 (letter of Juan de Bolaños to the Crown, A.G.I. 54-3-16); the total number of fighting men by this time is set at 300, in three towns (*ibid.*).

It is not our task now to go beyond 1642 and narrate the history of Dutch St. Croix, or to continue through the English (1645-1650) and French (1650-1696) periods that follow: 1642 represents the first major fortification of St. Croix, and hence, to that extent, the beginnings of permanent European settlement. The Island may change hands twice yet, but until 1696 it was never truly abandoned—always, the forts were manned!

Seeds for change were sown in 1642. Capoen, in his arbitrary fashion, overpowered the English, but did not expel them. They remained, to rebel in 1645 and spoil Snouck and Brouckaert's enterprise. It will be remembered also that the French were in league with the Dutch since 1639 in order to settle St. Croix; 120 Frenchmen came to St. Croix under the Dutch (mostly from St. Christopher's); they were to be expelled by the English in 1645 as allies of their enemies the Dutch, but this second experience on St. Croix (the first was in 1634) was to be useful: five years after being expelled, the French returned as masters.

Thus Bolaños, at the very beginning of 1643: three towns, *i.e.*, one Dutch, one English, one French. The Island was not partitioned, but ruled by the misguided Capoen with an iron hand, under the aegis of the monopolistic Dutch West India Company. All shipping, *e.g.*, was in Dutch hulls (*vid. Downing loc. cit.*). If we add that Spain remained (until at least 1686) *actively* interested in destroying any settlements by other powers in the Virgin Islands, many sources of deadly conflict are present, and every one of them came to play its part in turn.

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³Almost certainly on the site of *Fort Salé*.

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