

# Harlem's Virgin Islanders

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In this paper I will survey the influence of Afro-Caribbeans (West Indians or Caribbean-born blacks) on Harlem and the Harlem Renaissance. I will focus especially on the unique position of U.S. Virgin Islanders (Danish West Indians prior to 1917) and their involvement in both black labor organization and the politics of their homeland in the early twentieth century. I will then consider the specific contributions of four Virgin Islanders: Casper Holstein, Hubert Harrison, Ashley Totten, and Frank Crosswaith.

## **From the Caribbean to Harlem**

Between World War I and the Great Depression, Harlem was home to a thriving community of both native and immigrant blacks, including the handful of literary, artistic, and political greats who formed the core of the Harlem Renaissance.

## **Mass Migration**

Between 1900 and 1930, the foreign-born black (mostly Caribbean) population in the United States, particularly in New York City, increased at a rapid rate. According to the U.S. census,

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in 1900 the foreign-born black population of the United States numbered 20,336 and accounted for 0.2% of the total black population. In 1910, the number of foreign blacks in the United States was 40,339, or 0.4% of the total black population. In 1920 there were 73,803 foreign-born blacks (0.7%), and by 1930 there were 98,620 foreign-born blacks (0.8%), about half of whom lived in Harlem, New York. (Kasinitz, *Caribbean New York*, 25)

Additionally, by 1930 there were 17,625 blacks from Cuba, Puerto Rico, and the Virgin Islands residing on the U.S. mainland (Reid, *The Negro Immigrant*, 42). They are not included in the foreign-born figures because Cuba and Puerto Rico were occupied by the United States following the Spanish-American War of 1898 and the Virgin Islands were purchased from Denmark in 1917 just before the United States entered World War I.

In 1925, Jamaican W.A. Domingo estimated that there were 8,000 natives of the Virgin Islands (St. Croix, St. Thomas, and St. John) in New York (Domingo, *Portable Harlem Renaissance Reader*, 11). This represents both a sizeable influx to the United States and an enormous emigration from the Virgin Islands in the 1910s and 1920s. In 1911 the Virgin Islands (then Danish West Indies) had a population of 27,086, in 1917 (the year of the transfer) the population was 26,051, and in 1930 the population was down to 22,012, an 18.7% decrease in less than 20 years (Willocks, *The Umbilical Cord*, 269).

## **Something Rotten**

Many factors led to this mass migration. Prior to 1917, it was not uncommon for Danish West Indians to move to the United States for schooling and job opportunities. Following the U.S. acquisition of the islands in 1917, such relocation became easier. The Virgin Islands economy, though strong for a few years after World War I, quickly declined, leading many Virgin Islanders to move to Panama, Puerto Rico, and the United States in search of work.

One reason for the economic decline was the U.S. prohibition of alcohol, which crippled the once-thriving rum industry of the islands. The Eighteenth Amendment (the National Prohibition Act or Volstead Act) as ratified in January 1919, outlawed the sale of alcohol to the mainland United States. The Willis-Campbell Act of November 1921 extended prohibition to the Virgin Islands and ended the legal manufacture and distribution of rum in the territory. (Willocks, 270). A few bootleggers made profits during Prohibition, but most of the industry's black workers lost their jobs (Watkins-Owens, *Blood Relations*, 70).

The rum industry was further hampered by natural disasters. A serious drought from 1921 to 1924 and then two major hurricanes in 1924 and 1928 destroyed most of the islands' sugar cane. The storms also damaged the commercial port of Charlotte Amalie (Charlotte Amalia) harbor. (Willocks, 268)

Political tensions in the Virgin Islands also contributed to emigration. Upon acquisition in 1917 and the United States' immediate entrance in World War I, the Virgin Islands was placed under a "temporary" naval administration which lasted until a civil government was installed in 1931. During these fourteen years of what Virgin Islander Casper Holstein referred to as the "uninterrupted succession of Southern Caesars" (Boyer, *America's Virgin Islands*, 116), seven white naval officers served as governor. None of them had any previous knowledge of the Caribbean, and many were Southerners and segregationists (Hansen, *From These Shores*, 138). As Hubert Harrison, another Virgin Islander, noted in 1923: "It is a notorious fact . . . that the behavior of our seamen when on shore is more unruly than that of the seamen of any other great nation. Especially is this so when they have to deal with colored inhabitants." (Harrison, *A Hubert Harrison Reader*, 246) Not surprisingly, the military presence and the sometimes ineffectual and racist rule by outsiders caused much discontent.

Following the transfer Virgin Islanders were, as Holstein wrote, U.S. subjects, but not U.S. citizens (Guirty, *Harlem's Danish-American West Indians*, 56). According to the 1917 Treaty

of Acquisition, Virgin Islands residents with Danish citizenship had the option to declare U.S. citizenship. However, according to Harrison, only 424 of the 26,000 residents were permitted to vote (Harrison, 249). Citizenship was not extended to the many Virgin Islands residents who were not Danish citizens, nor to Danish citizens residing in the continental United States at the time of the transfer.

Virgin Islanders, both at home and on the mainland, organized groups such as the Virgin Islands Protective League and the Virgin Islands Congressional Council and actively protested the naval administration and the Virgin Islander's (lack of) political status. A decade after the transfer, the Act Conferring U.S. Citizenship extended citizenship to most Virgin Islands natives (Willocks, 263). In 1932 another act granted citizenship to Virgin Islands natives who had been residing in the United States since before 1917 and lifted the quota on immigration to the U.S. mainland for two years. (Leary, *U.S. V.I. Major Political Documents*, 105–23)

## **Home to Harlem**

Economically, life in Harlem and elsewhere in the United States was an improvement for many relocated Virgin Islanders. However, the conditions in the U.S. were not entirely favorable; on the mainland immigrants met harsher racial prejudice and discrimination than they had experienced in the Caribbean. Virgin Islanders and other newcomers, harboring great expectations of equality in “the land of the free”, were understandably disillusioned. (Kasinitz, 33)

In many ways Afro-Caribbean immigrants assimilated more rapidly than European (white) immigrant groups. Despite their differences, Afro-Caribbeans from diverse nations and classes lived among and were considered by whites to be part of the same group as native-born blacks. Whites frequently identified the immigrants in racial, not national or ethnic, terms;

Afro-Caribbean immigrants were simply black, not Virgin Islanders (or Jamaicans, Bajans, etc.). (Kasinitz, 7–8)

This is not to say that native blacks immediately welcomed their Caribbean brothers. While whites might not distinguish Afro-Caribbeans from native blacks, natives blacks could easily identify themselves from the outsiders, with their foreign accents, clothes, and customs. Afro-Caribbeans met prejudice not only from whites, but from other blacks, who ridiculed the newcomers' clothing and speech and resented the competition for jobs. (Reid, 113)

In the job market, Afro-Caribbeans enjoyed some advantages over native blacks. The immigrants were often more educated, having had greater opportunity for advancement in the Caribbean. Additionally, the immigrants typically had more political involvement and experience dealing with whites. Further, because they were sometimes viewed as immigrants rather than as former slaves, Afro-Caribbeans sometimes received slightly better treatment from whites. In this way their dress and dialect, which worked against them in black Harlem, worked for them outside of Harlem because it distinguished them from native blacks. This led some immigrants to emphasize their non-native status when it was advantageous to do so. (Reid, 113)

Perhaps partly because of these factors, a statistically disproportionate percentage of black professionals (doctors, lawyers, etc., usually serving the black community) were Afro-Caribbean immigrants (Kasinitz, 51–52). Afro-Caribbeans also played a visible role in political and social activism and helped to inaugurate Harlem's literary renaissance. Some of the most prominent figures of the Harlem Renaissance were from the Caribbean. Notable Afro-Caribbean Harlemites included writers Claude McKay (Jamaica), Eric Walrond (Guyana/Barbados), W. A. Domingo (Jamaica), and Cyril Briggs (Nevis), radicals Marcus Garvey (Jamaica) and Richard Moore (Barbados), minister Ethelred Brown (Jamaica), bibliophile Arthur Schomburg (Puerto Rico/St. Thomas), novelist Nella Larsen (of Danish and

West Indian descent), photographer Austin Hansen (St. Thomas), philanthropist Casper Holstein (St. Croix), and labor organizers and political activists Hubert Harrison, Ashley Totten, Frank Crosswaith, and Elizabeth Hendrickson (all of St. Croix).

## **Political Involvement**

There are a number of reasons why foreign-born blacks seem to have taken a more active role in politics than native blacks. Afro-Caribbeans were more accustomed to politics, small governments, black rule, cooperation, and fighting to end colonialism (Reid, 122). Those who left the Caribbean hoped to leave labor unrest and poor political and social conditions behind them, and they were both disappointed when they arrived in the United States and determined to do something to improve the conditions. Afro-Caribbeans were typically both more active in politics and more politically extreme than native blacks. The black socialist, communist, and other “radical” movements in Harlem were largely composed of West Indians (Domingo, 14). Black labor rights activism and Pan-Africanism were also largely fueled by Afro-Caribbeans, who realized that many of their problems were the same problems which faced other blacks.

Afro-Caribbean immigrants shone as orators, particularly as radical and eloquent “street-speakers”. In Harlem street-speakers who stood on street corners and spoke to the masses were a common sight, and they played a significant role in shaping Harlem politics (Watkins-Owens, 22). “[T]he street corner became the most viable location for an alternative politics and the place where new social movements gained a hearing and recruited supporters” (Watkins-Owens, 92). Street-speakers spoke of racism and Pan-Africanism, spread socialism and other alternative economic views, raised awareness of the conditions on their home islands, and, as the authorities often noted, stirred up discontent.

Street-speakers formed an important part of the backdrop of the Harlem Renaissance. Members of the elite “Talented Tenth” and the black working class alike gathered to hear natives A. Philip Randolph and Chandler Owen and Afro-Caribbeans Richard Moore, W. A. Domingo, Marcus Garvey, Grace Campbell, Hubert Harrison, Frank Crosswaith, and Elizabeth Hendrickson (the last three of whom are from St. Croix). These street-speakers, in part, inspired the New Negro movement of the Harlem Renaissance (Watkins-Owens, 94). Though the role of orators and organizers in the Harlem Renaissance is often overlooked in favor of focus on literature and the arts, the street-speakers greatly influenced both the common folk of Harlem and the literary elite. This, perhaps, represents the Afro-Caribbean’s — and in particular the Virgin Islander’s — most significant contribution to Harlem’s rebirth.

## **Four Virgin Islanders in Harlem**

Virgin Islanders who were especially active during the Harlem Renaissance included St. Thomian photographer Austin Hansen, novelist Nella Larsen (born in Chicago of Danish and Crucian decent), and four influential Crucian political and civil rights activists and labor organizers: Casper Holstein, Hubert Harrison, Ashley Totten, and Frank Crosswaith.

### **Casper Holstein (1876–1944)**

Gambler, philanthropist, and Virgin Islands activist Casper A. Holstein was born on St. Croix in 1876. He moved to New York with his mother at age 12 and attended school in New York. In 1898 he enlisted in the Navy and served on the *U.S.S. Saratoga*. After returning to New York, he worked as a bellhop, a porter, and for a Wall Street broker from whom he learned much about banking. (Turnbull, *Casper A. Holstein*, 3–4)

Holstein applied his knowledge of banking to gambling. Shortly before World War I, he

devised a “numbers game” based on the Spanish game *bolito*. Players placed bets on a three-digit number in hopes of a large reward. The odds of winning were 1 in 900, and Holstein paid off at a rate of 600 to 1, which left him a sizeable profit. It has been speculated that he earned over \$2,000,000 from the numbers game and his other illegal gambling interests. (Hansen, 133) For a time, Holstein, known as “The Bolito King”, was the undisputed leading figure of Harlem’s predominantly-Caribbean numbers racket (Watkins-Owens, 145).

Holstein spent his enormous wealth as quickly as he acquired it. As a philanthropist, he was recognized as one of the six major patrons of the Harlem Renaissance (the others being Jessie Fauset, James Weldon Johnson, Charles Johnson, Alain Locke, and Walter White). Many members of respectable Harlem looked down on Holstein because his money and fame came from introducing organized gambling to Harlem, but others overlooked the way in which his fortune was amassed in favor of the charitable ways in which he spent his money. (Lewis, *When Harlem Was in Vogue*, 129)

In addition to investing in several apartment buildings and clubs, Holstein’s monetary contributions included \$1,000 awards for the *Opportunity* writing contests; donations to Howard and Fisk Universities and the Democratic Party; funding for a girls’ dormitory in Liberia and a home for delinquent girls in India; Christmas gifts of five hundred food baskets to the needy; and donations to numerous charities (Turnbull, 5). He also gave money to Marcus Garvey’s UNIA and purchased its Liberty Hall for \$36,000 when it was sold at bankruptcy auction in 1928, founded and contributed thousands to the Monarch Lodge No. 45 of the Independent Benevolent Protective Order of Elks of the World, and wrote a regular column in *The Negro World*. (Watkins-Owens, 143)

Holstein gave freely to his fellow Virgin Islanders. He subsidized the cost of education for a dozen Virgin Islanders. He established a dairy farm on St. Croix to distribute free milk to needy children. After hurricanes in 1924 and 1928, he established relief funds and chartered



a steamship to deliver building materials to the islands. (*The Daily News*, 8 Apr 1944, 1–4) Eric Walrond wrote that “among Virgin Islanders he is looked upon as some sort of messiah” (Watkins-Owens, 143).

Holstein’s contributions to the Virgin Islands were political as well as financial. After visiting the islands in 1917, he saw much need for improvement. In the early 1920s he became involved in Anselmo Jackson’s Virgin Islands Congressional Council (VICC). In addition to funding the VICC, Holstein served as its president for more than a decade. (Turnbull, 9–10).

Through the VICC, the Virgin Islands American League, and other organizations, Holstein and other Virgin Islanders sought to gain citizenship, political rights, civil liberties, and civil government for the people of the Virgin Islands, who had been under naval rule since the U.S. purchase of the islands. Holstein lobbied Washington to end the naval administration, published essays on the conditions in the Virgin Islands in the *Washington Post*, *Negro World*, and *Opportunity*, and paid for a full-page spread in *The New York Times* to advance awareness of the cause. (Hansen, 140–41). Through the efforts of Holstein and others, the Virgin Islands’ naval rule finally ended in 1931.

Though successful in his political endeavors, Holstein’s gambling career ended rather poorly. Harlem’s profit potential attracted white mobsters to compete with Holstein. In September 1928 Holstein was kidnapped and held for ransom (which he paid). The kidnapers were never identified, but they are believed to have been financial or political enemies. By 1931 the Schultz gang had taken over gambling in Harlem, and Holstein’s days in the business were over. Later, in 1937 Holstein was convicted and sentenced for his racketeering activities. (Watkins-Owens, 145–146)

## Hubert H. Harrison (1883–1927)

Hubert H. Harrison was a Socialist orator and writer. Born on St. Croix in 1883, he moved to New York after the death of his father in 1900. There he worked as a hotel bellman, telephone operator, and a clerk in a post office, while he simultaneously attended classes, read voraciously, wrote a column in *The New York Times*, and contributed to other publications. He lost his postal position after upsetting New York Republican Charles W. Anderson by writing a letter which criticized Booker T. Washington. (Hansen, 110–11)

Harrison, who has been recognized as “one of the more prominent ‘radical’ leaders of the first quarter of the twentieth century” (*Dictionary of American Negro Biography*, 292), has been credited with bringing Socialism to black Harlem. Believing color prejudice to be based on economics, he joined the Socialist Party in 1909. In 1912 he became a paid speaker and organizer to recruit blacks to the Party. Harrison also helped to establish the Harlem School of Social Science and the Modern School and participated in leading a strike of silk workers in Paterson, New Jersey in 1912 and 1913. (Watkins-Owens, 95–96)

After three years as a Socialist orator, Harrison left the party over disagreements about black civil rights. Harrison thought more attention needed to be paid to the problems plaguing black workers specifically. (Hansen, 113) After leaving the Socialist Party, he advocated some Socialist beliefs but was primarily a defender of race and the “Negro’s racial heritage”, not Socialism (Kleavan, *The West Indian Americans*, 59).

Harrison was very busy during the summer of 1917. On June 12, 1917, he held the inaugural meeting of his newly-formed Negro American Liberty League. His call for a mass meeting following the St. Louis, Illinois race riots resulted in a gathering of more than 2000 Harlem residents. Harrison’s Liberty League offered Marcus Garvey his first public speaking appearance in New York. (Harrison offered other subsequent support to Garvey and was an

editor for Garvey's *Negro World*.) (Watkins-Owens, 97–100)

On July 4 Harrison founded The Liberty League's short-lived newspaper *The Voice*, which Harrison hailed a "newspaper for the New Negro". "Harrison's *Voice* set the tone and served as the forerunner of subsequent radical Harlem publications after the summer of 1917." (Watkins-Owens, 158). In 1917 Harrison also published *The Negro and the Nation*, a collection of his essays.

Harrison's political interests included the situation in his native Virgin Islands. Like Holstein, he was concerned about the "colonial problem", and he used his literary talents to document the situation in the islands. (Harrison, 241)

Harrison's main medium of influence was speech, not print. He was a recognized street figure, delivering powerful speeches to black and white audiences from the corner of Wall Street and Broad Street and later at West 96th Street off Broadway and on Lenox Avenue (*Dictionary of American Negro Biography*, 292). He was also appointed as a staff lecturer by the Board of Education in 1926 and was a special lecturer for New York University and several other schools. (Hansen, 124)

"If credit is given to one individual for establishing the open-air forums both as political and educational institutions in New York City as well as in Harlem, it would be Hubert Harrison, a brilliant scholar and biting social critic. A man of stocky build, dark complexion, and booming voice, he was known around New York as the 'Black Socrates'" (Watkins-Owens, 95).

Harrison was a Harlem radical who was seldom recognized by the black leaders of the time. (Watkins-Owens, 97). Although his Socialist views placed him squarely outside the "mainstream" Harlem Renaissance, he was in large part responsible for ushering in the "New Negro Movement", and his teachings greatly influenced many intellectuals of the time.

## Ashley L. Totten (1884–1963)

Ashley L. Totten helped to organize the first successful black labor union: the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters. Born on St. Croix in 1884, Totten moved to New York in 1905. After serving in the U.S. Navy, he returned to New York in 1915, where he worked as a Pullman car porter on the New York Central Railroad. “He was a steady, dependable worker, cooperative, and well-respected among his peers. The company wagered that having Totten on their team would be a big plus.” (McKissack, *A Long Hard Journey*, 52).

In 1924 Totten was elected to represent New York porters at a wage conference in Chicago. As a result of the conference, the porters gained a meager wage increase. (Hansen, 247) Disappointed by the outcome, Totten approached black labor activist Asa Philip Randolph for help the following year (Santino, *Miles of Smiles*, 33). After a few meetings, Randolph agreed to lead the new union, the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters. Totten was soon fired from Pullman and devoted all his time to organizing the Brotherhood. “Totten the Terrible”, as he came to be called, was a powerful speaker, who spoke with emotion and reached out to the porters (McKissack, 65). Though Randolph is remembered as the primary figure of the union, Totten’s work was perhaps equally instrumental (Brazeal, *The Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters*, 18).

In addition to working for the Brotherhood to improve conditions in the United States, Totten was involved in Virgin Islands politics during the unpopular naval rule. With fellow Virgin Islander Elizabeth Hendrickson (1884 – 1946), he founded and administered the Virgin Islands Protective League, an organization which aimed at addressing the racial mistreatment of those in their homeland. In 1918 Totten and Hendrickson were selected as delegates to travel to the Virgin Islands to gain firsthand knowledge of the post-transfer conditions. (Hansen, 254)

Totten also served as the president of the American Virgin Islands Civic Association, was appointed by Harry S Truman to the Board of Directors of the Virgin Islands Corporation, was a chairman of the draft board in Harlem, and served as vice president of the Trade Union Division of the Liberal Party of New York City (Moolenaar, *Profiles of Outstanding Virgin Islanders*, 218).

### **Frank Crosswaith (1892–1965)**

Socialist, union organizer, and civil rights crusader Frank Rudolph Crosswaith was born on St. Croix in 1892. At age 13 Crosswaith moved to New York, where he attended high school and the Rand School of Social Science (where he would later lecture). Like many other Virgin Islanders, he served in the U.S. Navy and worked as an elevator operator, porter, and garment worker, where he gained firsthand knowledge of the working conditions of laborers. These experiences led him to organize elevator operators, motion-picture operators, drugstore and grocery clerks, mechanics, and laundry workers. (Moolenaar, 56)

In 1917 Crosswaith began speaking on street corners about labor issues. Nicknamed “the Negro Debs”, Crosswaith was one of the most well-known black speakers for the Socialist Party. He was “one of the most effective organizers of Negro workers in New York City”. (*DoANB*, 142–45) Crosswaith was “one of the most polished orators in any setting. He traveled widely and became the most recognized stepladder speaker outside of Harlem.” (Watkins-Owens, 106)

In 1925 Crosswaith founded the American Federation of Labor Trade Union Committee for Organizing Negro Workers (later the Harlem Labor Committee). He also helped to start the International Ladies’ Garment Workers’ Union (ILGWU) and served on both groups for many years. Around the same time, Crosswaith became a special organizer for Ashley Totten’s

Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters. (NYPL, *Biography of Frank R. Crosswaith*)

Crosswaith planned the Harlem Labor Committee in 1934 and helped organize and spoke at the first Negro Labor Conference in 1935. Both the Negro Labor Committee, of which he was chairman, and the newspaper *Negro Labor News Services*, which he edited, evolved from the conference. Crosswaith ran for office on Socialist and American Labor Party tickets several times in the 1920s and 1930s, and he was appointed to the New York City Housing Authority Board by Mayor LaGuardia in 1943. (NYPL)

## Conclusion

Economic and political hardships in the Virgin Islands in the early twentieth century led many Virgin Islanders to move to the United States, specifically to Harlem. There Virgin Islanders and other Afro-Caribbean immigrants met economic improvement, but also discrimination from both whites and native blacks. In Harlem, the newcomers were disproportionately economically successful when compared with native blacks. Similarly, a significant percentage of Harlem's political reformers and leaders were Afro-Caribbean immigrants. Virgin Islanders, such as Holstein, Harrison, Totten, and Crosswaith, worked to improve the rights of both their compatriots in the Virgin Islands and of a larger black community. Though often overlooked, these Virgin Islanders and their political contributions brought about numerous substantial reforms and, in no small part, inspired the literary movement of the Harlem Renaissance.

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