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1964 Constitutional Convention followed years of struggle

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The 33 delegates elected to the Virgin Islands' First Constitutional Convention in 1964 were picking up the struggle toward greater self-governance where it had left off.

Just 47 years earlier, the territory had become a part of the United States.

Thirty-seven years earlier, residents of the Virgin Islands had become U.S. citizens.

The territorial government went from military to civilian rule 33 years before, and Congress drafted its first governing document - the Organic Act of 1936 - five years after that.

While the Organic Act granted some self-government, the territory's people continued to urge the federal government to give them more. Local legislative committees worked for the revision of the Organic Act, and a 1953 referendum showed that the people wanted an elected governor, a unified legislature instead of individual island municipal councils, and a resident commissioner in Congress.

In 1954, Congress passed the territory's Revised Organic Act. It brought some changes - like unifying the municipal councils into the V.I. Senate - but left out many of the others recommended by the people.

Ten years later, the people of the territory were agitating for more changes. They wanted to elect their governor and lieutenant governor. They wanted representation in the U.S. House of Representatives. They wanted all say on legislation to come from local authorities, and felt the U.S. president should not have veto power over the Senate. They wanted to be able to reapportion the Legislature themselves.

A decade after the enactment of the Revised Organic Act, they came together to continue the tides of change.

John Maduro recalls that he was full of energy and zeal for Virgin Islands political development in 1964. At the time, he was a senator and became a delegate to the First Constitutional Convention that way. Even though many years have passed, Maduro's

enthusiasm for advancing the governance of the territory is still apparent.

"It's always been a struggle for us out there," Maduro said.

In 1964, Charles Turnbull was a young history teacher. Since Turnbull was a young child, he was fascinated by history - both by events in the distant past and memorable events unfolding before him. When Turnbull heard about the constitutional convention, he decided it was time to stop just studying and teaching history and time to be a part of history.

"I wanted to be a part of the framework of this government," Turnbull said.

The 33 delegates - 22 elected by the people and the 11 members of the 5th Legislature - began their work on Dec. 7, 1964. They opened their session with a prayer and statement of their goals: to have more self-governance but continue under the framework and guidelines of the United States government. Aubrey Anduze, a St. Croix dentist, was elected president of the convention.

Gov. Ralph Paiewonsky told the delegates that the desired outcome of the convention was stronger ties between the territory and the United States, and he dismissed those who said that the convention was an attempt to paint the United States as a colonial power.

"This is not - I repeat, not - a voice asking severance from the U.S.," Paiewonsky said, according to a Daily News article. "It is simply an expression of the people of the Virgin Islands seeking a greater say in the conduct of their affairs."

While the people of the Virgin Islands may have been able to see that clearly, the federal government perceived the convention with a bit warier of a eye. U.S. Senator Frank Moss (D-Utah) was the U.S. Senate's observer at the convention and, according to The Daily News, cautioned delegates against "pressing for change for the sake of change alone."

Delegates to the convention studied a proposal for governance devised by Harvard University professor and internationally renowned political theorist Carl Friedrich. He recommended the territory elect governors and V.I. senators select lieutenant governors - instead of having governors and government secretaries appointed by the United States president. Friedrich also proposed a 13-member Senate, a resident commissioner to serve the Virgin Islands in Congress, and a government comptroller to audit the territory's books and pass the information to the U.S. Comptroller General. Alfred Scanlan, the territory's Washington consultant, also made recommendations to delegates from the convention.

After two public hearings asking people what the document should contain - where answers such as municipal governments and native-born governors were offered - delegates started debating and drafting the constitution. The law enacting the convention

gave them a short window during which to finish the document - until Feb. 1, 1965 - and senators realized that they needed more time. The Senate extended their deadline a month, and delegates continued deliberating.

At 2:37 p.m. Feb. 26, 1965, the 33 delegates unanimously approved the draft constitution and sent it to Congress.

Not even two months later, President Lyndon Johnson sent his own bill to Congress - allowing the people of the Virgin Islands to elect their own governor.

"We believe the people of the Virgin Islands are today entitled through a popular election to select their own chief executive, and further that they are competent to do so," said the letter accompanying President Johnson's bill, from Assistant U.S. Secretary of the Interior John Carver. He went on to write that the Virgin Islands' legislative and judicial branches were under the jurisdiction of the people. The appointed governor, on the other hand, was "the last hurdle in the way of full 'home rule,'" which the federal government sought to eliminate.

As the elected governor bill was debated in Washington, the Virgin Islands Constitution went nowhere. U.S. Rep. Leo O'Brien (D-N.Y.) told The Daily News' Washington Bureau in January 1966 that he would fight hard for the Virgin Islands to get an elected governor, but not the "omnibus bill," which is what he called the territory's draft constitution. Other matters, O'Brien said, would be considered "excess baggage."

The draft from the territory's First Constitutional Convention never did get considered on the floor of Congress. Two years later, however, the elected governor bill - an amendment to the Revised Organic Act - became law.

But the fight for a constitution did not end there.

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