

## LA GRANGE PLANTATION IN THE HISTORIC ERA 1650-2009

by  
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La Grange was first settled during the French occupation of St. Croix 1650-1696. The most reliable map of this period, prepared by the French engineer Blondel in 1667, shows a settlement belonging to "Buissoniere" in the general vicinity of today's La Grange. Another French settlement named "Granderie" is nearby, but appears to be north of today's La Grange. When Friedrich Moth arrived in 1734 to reconnoiter St. Croix's West End, he found the remains of one of these French "habitations", which he named "La Grange" and claimed for the Danish West India & Guinea Company.

La Grange was not taken up and occupied by the Danish West India and Guinea Company until 1746. Prior to that date the area had become a haven for runaway slaves (maroons), who posed a serious menace to the development of sugar production on the West End of the island. Establishing a major sugar plantation at La Grange was part of an overall government strategy to bring marronage under control on St. Croix. Sugar cultivation commenced in 1747, and by 1750 a settlement, including an animal mill for grinding sugar cane, had been built on the same site as the present factory complex. Nonetheless, La Grange and other West End estates continued to experience high levels of marronage until the late 1760s, when the threat was finally brought under control.

The Danish West India & Guinea Company was dissolved in 1754, and its properties were taken over by the Danish Crown. La Grange and the other Company plantations were administered by the Danish Government until 1763, when they were acquired by the Schimmelmann family of Denmark. An inventory of La Grange prepared on that occasion listed the following structures:

- a windmill
- a cattle mill
- a sugar boiling house
- a curing house
- a still house
- a new cistern at the boiling house
- an old boiling house, converted into a store house
- a large dwelling house for the manager
- a dwelling house for the surgeon
- a dwelling house for the overseer
- a new kitchen
- a horse stable
- a small store house at the mill
- a hospital

Peter Oxholm's detailed 1779 map of the Frederiksted area shows the windmill and factory at the same location as today. It also shows a substantial village, housing over 300 enslaved individuals, southwest of the factory complex. The La Grange great house

was located on a hill several hundred yards east of the main settlement. Detailed maps prepared by the British Admiralty in 1851 and the U.S. Coast and Geodetic Survey in 1920 depict the main settlement/factory site, with some internal rearrangements, at the same location. In 1851, a steam engine was acquired and a unique red-brick steam chimney was built adjacent to the old factory. Modernization of the factory at this time enabled the Schimmelmänn's to maintain production levels despite the ending of slavery in 1848.

La Grange played a prominent role in the Emancipation Rebellion of 1848. It was the birthplace and home of John Gutliff (aka Moses Gottlieb or Buddhoe) and several other organizers and leaders of the Rebellion. Summoned by the La Grange plantation bell, now at the Danish Maritime Museum, thousands of enslaved protesters assembled at the La Grange village before marching into Frederiksted to demand their freedom.

The Schimmelmänn family held title to La Grange until 1895, when they sold out to George A. Hagemann, a prominent Danish engineer, who was the foremost promoter of central factories for sugar processing on St. Croix. The enterprising Hagemann established a corporation known as the La Grange Sugar Factory, Inc. and began purchasing several surrounding properties, including Prosperity and William plantations, which he linked to La Grange by a narrow gauge railroad. In 1911, he converted the old La Grange sugar factory into a modern central factory that processed the cane grown on some 22,000 surrounding acres.

In 1922, Hagemann's heirs sold the West Indian Sugar Factory concern to a consortium of local and American business men headed by George Fleming, which continued its operations. In the 1930s the owners instituted a "colono" system of production, similar to that prevailing in Puerto Rico, whereby small plots of sugar land were rented out to estate laborers. By 1932, 31 of these plots had been allotted, 25 of which were being worked. Initially, the colonos did not reside on their leaseholds, but rather commuted to them from Frederiksted or the La Grange village. Starting in the 1940s these landholdings were sold off in small parcels to local residents, most of whom continued to grow sugar, which they sold to the La Grange factory. Thus, La Grange played a central role in redistributing former sugar cane land to the descendants of enslaved workers whose strength, endurance and forced labor had produced colonial wealth for the Crucian plutocracy and the Danish State.

In 1947, the Fleming consortium went bankrupt, and the Government seized the La Grange factory for payment of back taxes. The factory was subsequently leased to the Brugal Rum Corporation which produced bottled rum and bulk molasses into the 1980s. In the late 1990s, a Spanish businessman leased the abandoned factory with the intent of installing a micro-brewery and a pirate museum. This plan came to nothing, and for the last several years the factory and its surrounding buildings has lay abandoned.

In 1979, the Factory complex was placed on the National Register of Historic Places by the National Park Service of the United States.