

THE
NAMING
OF
'LITTLE
SAINT
JAMES
ISLAND'

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This document contains a conclusive report on the origin and history of the name 'Little Saint James Island' located in the District of Saint Thomas- Saint John, United States Virgin Islands

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MISSION:

To determine the origin and history of the name ‘Little Saint James Island.’

CONCLUSIONS

The earliest record of the island under the U.S. Flag comes from the initial U.S. Census of the Virgin Islands of the United States conducted in 1917. At the time, The English names “Little St. James and Great St. James” were already being used by the Danish owners. The existence of the name, therefore, precedes U.S. documentation.

Documented history shows a patterned trend in the naming of islands in the Virgin Islands and the Caribbean in general. Larger islands tended to be named for a patron or guardian saint. Smaller islands were often named based upon their use or distinctive features to aid as universal language navigational markers and ships aid stations. Some were also named for their discoverer, owner or a significant person, like a lover, nobility or an individual whose favor was curried.

With the nations of Europe constantly at war, there was no formal naming or reporting convention for lands ‘discovered’ in the Caribbean. The Borgia Dynasty patriarch had just ascended to the throne of Rome in the Vatican. Alexander V was a controversial pope embroiled from the start in a Catholic Church that had fractured and divided into national fiefdoms. The allegiance of the Spanish Orthodox Catholic Church to the Vatican was tenuous, but still bowed to a settlement proposed by the Vatican that established the Line of Demarcation between Spain and Portugal. The Caribbean Islands fell on the Spanish side of the line. However, this did not mean that the Spanish planted their flag on the islands of the Lesser Antilles.

Rather, Spain concentrated on the wealth of the South American continent and establishing bases, trading posts and colonies on the larger islands that were capable of self-sustaining settlements. The Spanish also assessed the waters of the Lesser Antilles as too difficult, time consuming and not profitable enough to traverse. Using the channel off of Dominica that had been charted by Christopher Columbus, the Spanish navigated southward through the Greater Antilles, South America and followed the currents upwards to Puerto Rico, Hispaniola, Cuba, Jamaica and Florida. The route’s currents led north up the east coast of North America and then to Europe. By the Spanish concluding that the Leeward Islands were unnavigable remains as one of the most significant tactical errors in human history. The Spanish did not know the terrain, leaving the Lesser Antilles as an open door on their flank.

Records of the time are fraught with errors, exaggerations and intentional omissions. The turmoil in Europe was not just among nations, but within their ruling castes. During the first decades of Western exploration, kings and queens of France, Spain and England rose from within the prison

system. It was an age when nobility could be bought and lured through favors. Titles were handed out based upon long-term friendships and if you were an explorer, fantastic tales of adventure and trophies brought back could earn one a title. It was also the time of the Spanish Armada, the naval super power of the day.

The Spanish had their hands full managing the Caribbean and the Americas. Word of the New World was spreading throughout Europe and nations that had never before taken to the seas were suddenly becoming vested. In Holland, a four decade period of peace allowed the nation to make very specific and long-term plans for the Caribbean. The Spanish were taken totally by surprise when, in a few years, the Dutch appeared on the scene with fully skilled and capable seamen and a generation of superbly trained accountants and bookkeepers. The Dutch created what seems to be the first efficient Atlantic-Caribbean supply line and took full advantage by becoming free traders to the colonies.

Indeed, the Dutch set up well equipped bases ranging from the South America Coast, to Saba Island and New Amsterdam (today known as New York City). They introduced African slavery to the Caribbean and for decades controlled that market. The ring of Dutch bases becomes important to the St. James Islands later in history when war was declared on Holland by the French.

We return to the Spanish dominion of the waters and emerging challenges to their rule. The Spanish were fighting a war in the Caribbean on multiple fronts. Carib Indians continued to harass settlements and European freebooters, buccaneers and filibusters were beginning to harass shipping. The Virgin Wall was conceived and built. It was a range of forts and citadels stretching from the Florida coastline, through Cuba, Hispaniola and Puerto Rico. Here the wall ended, with the Spanish trusting to the mysterious waters of the Virgin Islands to keep them safe from Atlantic Ocean attacks.

Why were the waters of the Virgin Islands mysterious? Up until the time of Francis Drake, The Virgin Islands were sporadically listed on maps and often only as a series of unnamed and uncharted ink blots. Yet there is historic reference to the island of St. Thomas as early as 1493 during Christopher Columbus' Second Great Voyage of Discovery.

The Latin translation of Christopher Columbus' log gives account as to where Columbus went immediately after his forces were attacked by Carib Indians at Salt River, St. Croix (Santa Cruz). He headed towards islands sighted on the horizon due north and reported Indians (Taino/Arawak) walking about on the shore. Only days after his St. Croix Indian encounter, it is not hard to guess why he never set anchor in what was described as a perfect harbor. Historians postulate that the islands Columbus described could have been St. Thomas and Water Island based upon archaeological confirmation of two Indian colonies on the islands and the course plot of his new flag ship, the Santa Maria, nicknamed Marigalante.

What Columbus met was the string of islands he dubbed the Virgin Islands. From his southern approach of Charlotte Amalie harbor, the St. James Islands would have been in easy view, although they probably would have appeared in the distance as part of St. Thomas. We know

that Columbus never ventured into the Archipelago of Eleven Thousand Virgins of the Sea, detouring instead to Puerto Rico.

St. Thomas was originally named La Isla de Santana. It was easily within sight of Spanish settlements of Puerto Rico but not considered worth settling. In the early days of ocean exploration, ships were not built strong enough to withstand weeks of ocean pounding from opposing currents. To leave Puerto Rico for St. Thomas meant a tedious journey of several days tacking against nature. The Spanish were comfortable coasting the current from St. Croix, a mostly self-sufficient colony, until Francis Drake came into the picture. His harassment of Spanish shipping had become more than an irritant. Not content with plundering ships, Drake started raiding settlements. At the height of the years-long feud, Drake decided to take San Juan, Puerto Rico. His strategy would be to use the island passages of the Lesser Antilles, and particularly the Virgin Islands, to hide his fleet during the approach to Puerto Rico.

A spy within Drake's ranks apparently notified the Spanish and an armada was waiting at the exit of what is now called Drake's Channel. The battle must have been spectacular with Drake's ship descending with the wind on a two knot current straight into a Spanish blockade. Drake's fleet was devastated but remained intact enough to effect a retreat.

The Spanish proceeded apace through what should have been to them, uncharted and unfamiliar waters. In giving chase to Drake, the Spanish had to have been tacking and maneuvering blindly. Was Drake worth sending a fleet into an uncharted region or did the Spanish already have secret soundings? Drake, retreating through the same ocean conditions, would have harried the Spanish by sending vessels to "steal" wind from the enemies' sails during tacks or force them onto hidden reefs and rocks. Other ships would have been protecting more valuable naval assets by providing a moving screen for cannonade. It was not an ideal environment for pursuit, and even worse for an uncoordinated retreat. Francis Drake survived the Spanish ambush by knowing the waters intimately. The St. James Islands border these waters.

Navigating the Lesser Antilles was no easy feat. Scattered rocks and coral ridges hid just beneath waves waiting to rip into ship's hulls. In addition, Elk Horn coral, now almost extinct, grew rapidly throughout the area. Elk Horn is an extremely hard and fast growing coral that proves a severe hazard to shipping. An area where ships traveled safely a year before could easily be impassible the next time traversed. It is highly probable that Drake's surveys of the area included the St. James Islands. The Spanish also may have had rudimentary maps of the area. However, knowledge of the seaways was considered proprietary to tradesmen and confidential to the military. Many captains are reported as knowing the sea by memory, preferring not to commit their secrets to paper.

There are early Spanish references to the St. James Islands as Los Dos Santiagos: "The Two Saints". Exactly how early, needs a more thorough scrutiny of obscure historic documents. The earliest of maps that includes the Caribbean and the World date back to 1529 and were designed by the famous map maker Hieronymus. He drew the maps based upon accounts of his brother, a Spanish privateer. Over the next few decades, Italian map makers drew charts of the region, including, excluding, naming or not naming islands without consistency, rhyme or reason.

Eventually, it was Dutch maps that began to more accurately describe the Caribbean region. These maps were still more artistic than precise but were used for decades before the French began stressing navigational accuracy over beauty.

It is in this gray area, between 1529 and the mid-1600's that the St. James Islands were likely christened with their names.

No one knows when the Dutch first arrived in the Virgin Islands. History logs the French, running from attacks on the Crab Island settlement, as the builders of the first permanent settlement on St. Thomas. However, the French met tended fields of crops on St. Thomas indicating that the Dutch were farming the island. St. Thomas and its outlying islands were likely part of the Dutch smugglers hidden supply network and not listed on general navigational charts of the day.

The ability of the Dutch to move freely about the Caribbean came rapidly to an end after news of Drake's exploits in the channel spread. The island waters could be navigated and the nations of Europe took rapid advantage of the opening in the Spanish flank.

As nations like France and England jumped into the Leeward Islands, a need arose for people to work the new settlements. England chose the route of white slavery and indenture, conscripting bums, prisoners, persons of low bearing and 'light women' (generally describing Catholic females). These European laborers proved no match for the Caribbean environment and died in large numbers. England and France turned their attention to a type of labor monopolized by the Dutch: African slavery.

Until that point, the slave trade in the Caribbean was 100% controlled by the Dutch. Holland proved no match for the combined onslaught of European nations and relinquished control of the trade. This period of time saw rapid growth and expansion throughout the islands and the formalization of the triangle trade. It also marks the end of the 'dark age' of Virgin Islands record keeping and all references forward from that point in time to 'Los Dos Santiagos' refer to the Saint James Islands.

This still does not resolve the question of who named the island and why.

We can track with a fair degree of accuracy the historic events that were occurring around the waters of the St. James Islands. However, the islands themselves are ignored in most historic references. Too small to be self-sustaining and surrounded by treacherous waters, history regards the islands of little note.

Public assumption may be that Little St. James Islands is named after Great St. James Island because it is a smaller island extremely close to a larger one. However, evidence would suggest, that Little St. James Island was not named for Great St. James Island.

The various permutations of the name prior to control by Denmark (Spanish, French, Dutch, and Portuguese) are all translations of the same name: Little St. James.

Spanish Catholic lore in various ways tells the tale of, or celebrates, “Los Dos Santiagos,” The Two Saints. The Saint James Islands have also been referenced in Spanish as “Los Dos Santiagos.” The naming seems more than a coincidence given the Spanish proclivity of trying to impress their Catholic queen of their love for her religion by giving claims Catholic titles.

In Vatican archives can be found the records of “Los Dos Santiagos” as described in the New Testament of the Christian Bible and historical records of the First Bishop of Jerusalem. Directly translated to English, the bishop’s Catholic name was Little Saint James. A looser translation, based upon the Vatican’s intent as written in Vatican records, is “St. James the Lesser.”

Great St. James, or St. James the Greater Apostle, was the son of Zebedee the fisherman. James gave up everything on Jesus’ invitation to follow Christ. James was cited personally with Jesus more often throughout the new testament than other apostles, indicating that this James must have been a person and respected friend of Jesus.

St. James the Lesser’s (Little St. James) mother was either a sister or other close relative of the Virgin Mary and he is often referenced as the Brother of Christ. James the Lesser wrote the first Catholic Epistle and thus has prominence in the Catholic faith. The titles “Greater” and “Lesser” were given to the two James’ merely to distinguish them one from the other, not to demean or elevate one over the other. The titles refer to their individual proximity to Christ during significant biblical events or miracles.

The final conclusion of this research is that Little Saint James Islands was named for a patron saint.

RESEARCH MATERIALS

The Charles W. Turnbull Library
Caribbean Genealogical Library
University of the Virgin Islands Ralph M. Paiewonsky Library
The Society for Georgia Archaeology
*Great Universal Geographic Map-World Digital Library, Magellan-Portolan atlas-
Antique World Map 1544*
*Bonhams 1793 GRVA, HIERONYMUS.D.1556. Typo de la carta cosmographica de Gasar
Vopellio Medeburgense. [Milan 1556]*
Hans and Hanni Kraus Sir Francis Drake Collection, Library of Congress
*United States Census Bureau, Census of the Virgin Islands of the United States,
November 1, 1917*
Catholic Online http://www.catholic.org/saints/saint.php?saint_id=356
*The Department of Planning and Natural Resources' Charles W. Turnbull Library's Von
Schulten Collection*

SUBJECT MATTERS FORCUSED UPON:

GEOGRAPHY and OCEANOGRAPHY
CARTOGRAPHY
TAINO, ARAWAK, CARIB and KALINGA INDIGENOUS TRIBES
NATIVE VIRGIN ISLANDER TAINO INDIAN DESCENDANTS
CHRISTOPHER COLUMBUS
ISLA DE SANTA ANNA
SABA ISLAND
BARRIERS TO EARLY COLONIZATION
EUROPE AT WAR
THE DUTCH
THE SPANISH
THE ENGLISH
THE FRENCH
CRAB ISLAND
THE SPANISH MAIN
THE SPANISH ARMADA
SIR FRANCIS DRAKE AND THE SPANISH OF PUERTO RICO
THE VIRGIN WALL
THE SPANISH MAIN