

# United States Virgin Islands

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VALERIE KNOWLES COMBIE

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## Background Information

The United States Virgin Islands are a group of islands and cays in the Caribbean approximately 1,100 miles (1,770 kilometers) southeast of Florida, 600 miles (966 kilometers) north of Venezuela, 40 miles (64 kilometers) east of Puerto Rico, and immediately west and south of the British Virgin Islands (BVI).<sup>1</sup> Among the group of islands and cays, there are four inhabited islands: St. Croix (84 square miles), St. Thomas (31 square miles), St. John (20 square miles), and Water Island (0.768 square miles) with an estimated population of 107,000. At the time the Adventist message was introduced in these islands, they were owned by Denmark, and were known as the Danish West Indies (DWI). In 1917, through a purchase by the United States, they became the United States Virgin Islands (USVI).

## History of the Adventist Work in the Territory

Though separated by the waters of the Caribbean Sea, these islands comprise the territory of the United States in the Caribbean. The waterways became the primary path through which the Adventist message arrived in the region. The first tracts arrived in British Guiana (now Guyana) from the International Tract Society in New York in the late nineteenth century, and that marked the origin of Adventism in South America. The message soon spread to Barbados, and through conversions, congregations emerged. The message then spread to Antigua, and by 1892 Dexter A. Ball, an Adventist minister in the Caribbean, visited the islands and brought the message to St. Thomas.<sup>2</sup> In 1900, the first group was organized in Charlotte Amalie, the capital city of St. Thomas. That same year, Andrew A. Palmquist arrived in the territory from Barbados with his wife. Born in Sweden, but having accepted the message in Denmark, Palmquist fitted in very well in the Danish West Indies. His knowledge of Danish was an asset in his work.

Additionally, Palmquist had studied preventive medicine at the Battle Creek Sanitarium in Battle Creek, Michigan, under the tutelage of Dr. John Kellogg. He literally hit the ground running by starting a Sabbath School in the home of Sarah Jane Richardson, in Hospital Ground, St. Thomas.<sup>3</sup> More Sabbath Schools were held in other homes simultaneously. Because of his diligent work, Palmquist may be credited with the establishment of the Seventh-day Adventist church in the Virgin Islands. He worked on the three populated islands—St. Thomas, St. John, and St. Croix—first visiting St. Croix in 1902. The work followed a similar pattern in all the islands with

Sabbath Schools meeting in members' homes until churches could be constructed.<sup>4</sup>

With such active developments in the Caribbean region, the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists organized the West Indian Union of Seventh-day Adventists, headquartered in Jamaica. Albert Haysmer, the union president, visited St. Thomas where he "engaged in house-to-house visitations, followed by evangelism under a tent."<sup>5</sup> Subsequently, Palmquist was replaced by Lee E. Wellman, who was transferred from Tortola in the BVI to St. Thomas. He was instrumental in leading members in erecting the first church in 1905. The first primary school was erected in 1908 by the City Seventh-day Adventist church. As the work grew, members from St. Thomas supported the development of the Adventist message on St. John.

The succeeding pastors who contributed to the growth of the work in the USVI were H. C. J. Walleker (1910), C. E. Widgery (1918), O. M. Hall (1919), J. G. Knight (1920), and D. C. Babcock (1921). Clifton G. Van Putten was assigned to the area in 1929 and worked in the USVI and the BVI until his transfer to Suriname in 1945. Upon his departure, Frederick A. Sebro assumed responsibility for shepherding and evangelizing the flock until 1949. Lionel D. Brathwaite followed and continued the projects of his predecessors.

By the 1950s, the Church in the USVI had grown exponentially, requiring that the islands be divided into two districts: St. Thomas and St. John comprised one district, and St. Croix the other. C. G. Van Putten returned to pastor the St. Thomas-St. John district. He was followed by George W. McMillan and, subsequently, K. G. Samuel. The work continued to grow and land was purchased in Anna's Retreat for the construction of the Shiloh Tabernacle. The St. Thomas-St. John Seventh-day Adventist School was also constructed on that site.

At that time, the USVI was administered by the Puerto Rico Mission until 1925 when the Leeward Islands Conference was created. It became the Leeward Islands Mission in 1945, and the East Caribbean Conference in 1960. By 1976, the rapid growth of the message led to the organization of the North Caribbean Conference of Seventh-day Adventists (NCC), headquartered on St. Croix, which oversaw the work in the Eastern Caribbean. In 1976, the total membership of St. Croix was 1,501. Ten years later, in 1986, there were approximately 2,820 members.<sup>6</sup>

J. C. Shillingford took on the mantle of responsibility for the growing congregations on St. Thomas until he was transferred to work on St. Croix. Samuel Joseph led a team of pastors who, under the Holy Spirit's guidance, kept the work moving. To boost the work on St. Thomas, in 1973, evangelist K. S. Wiggins of the Caribbean Union conducted evangelistic series under a tent that resulted in 294 baptisms. Other evangelistic series and baptisms created new congregations, which led to the erection of the Philadelphia Church on Raphune Hill, the Maranatha Church in Lindberg Bay, and the Agape Church in Bolongo Bay. With an increasingly cosmopolitan population, other churches were erected to cater to the community. These included a Haitian Church and New Horizon, a Spanish church.

While the work was growing on St. Thomas, a similar spirit was reflected on St. Croix. The first Adventist church was organized in Christiansted, the capital city, in 1908 led by pastors H. C. Walleker and James A. Matthews,

who continued the work begun by Palmquist. In 1918, Frank Hall succeeded them. The Adventist message received a boost when D. D. Fitch travelled from Puerto Rico to conduct evangelistic meetings. Approximately 1,500 people attended the meetings, which exposed the community to Adventism. C. G. Van Putten conducted an evangelistic series that led to the construction of the second church on St. Croix, the Frederiksted Seventh-day Adventist church.

By 1930, through the efforts of laymen from Puerto Rico working among the Spanish residents, the seed was sown and it materialized in the construction of a temporary building to house the Diamond Ruby Spanish church in 1938. The church relocated to another area in Diamond Ruby and Strawberry until it moved to its present location in Sunny Acres.

Even though the Adventist message was introduced in St. John in 1929 by two colporteurs, Monti and Alice Williams, Palmquist had reported in the *Adventist Review and Sabbath Herald* that there were at least two or three people already keeping the Sabbath there in 1903.<sup>7</sup> As had occurred on St. Thomas, the members worshipped in a small house on the waterfront in Cruz Bay. By 1964, they were organized into a company shepherded by members from the St. Thomas City church under the leadership of Wilfred Fleming. L. D. Brathwaite led the church in the construction of the Cruz Bay church, which was dedicated in 1975. It remains the only church on St. John as of 2021.

Following his success in the St. Thomas-St. John district, K. S. Wiggins pitched his tent on St. Croix in 1973. The conversion of 250 members led to the establishment of the Central Seventh-day Adventist church in Grove Place.<sup>8</sup> S. Reginald Michael, who became the first pastor of that congregation, led the members in the construction of their church. Subsequent evangelistic series and conversions led to the erection of the Peter's Rest Seventh-day Adventist church in Peter's Rest, the Bethel Seventh-day Adventist church in William's Delight, and the Hope Seventh-day Adventist church in Mon Bijou. Additionally, another Spanish church was erected in Campo Rico.

The residents of the USVI were hungry for God's word.<sup>9</sup> They bought books from the colporteurs, which they read as soon as they received them. They also attended the evangelistic series. Supported by the medical work, the early pastors paved the way for their successors.<sup>10</sup>

## More Recent Developments

During 2019, Seventh-day Adventists were among the most active Protestants faiths in the USVI. They freely practiced their faith in fifteen churches—eight on St. Croix, six on St. Thomas, and one on St. John—with a membership of 9,243 and shepherded by eight pastors.<sup>11</sup> The congregations were identified as English, French, and Spanish. There were two schools: one on St. Croix and one in the St. Thomas-St. John district. Rogers reported that the St. Thomas City Adventist Church has positively influenced the community “socially, spiritually, and educationally,”<sup>12</sup> which may be said of the work in the territory.

The residents of the territory have benefited from the presence of the Seventh-day Adventists, whose evangelism, coupled with quality education and the health message, have ministered indiscriminately to all. The Adventist message continues to grow in the USVI, impacting lives for God's kingdom.

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## NOTES

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