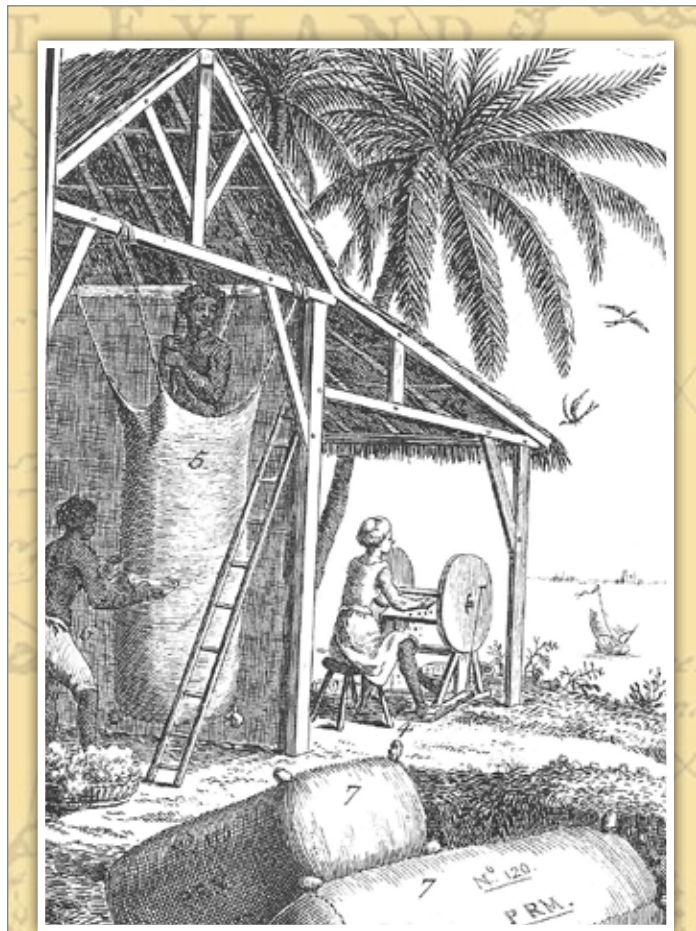


The Establishment of Estate Bellevue: Jewel In The Crown Of The St. John Plantocracy, 1721-1728

By David W. Knight Sr.

The ruins of the Bellevue estate house and plantation compound sit prominently atop a wooded knoll in the Gift Hill area of St. John's Cruz Bay Quarter. The estate was originally created by a merging of two early-period Danish-colonial land grants, each with a recorded measurement of 3,000' by 1,500' (Danish feet). Added to these tracts was a smaller, 500' by 3,000' parcel, acquired from an abutting property. [RA/WIGC/SJLL, 1728].



The ginning house on an 18th-century cotton plantation
(*Diderot Pictorial Encyclopedia...* [France, 1751])

The two 3,000' by 1,500' parcels were formally deeded to Christopher William Gotchalt and Ursilla Bock in 1724. The Bock parcel had originally been taken up on May 24, 1721; the Gotchalt parcel had been taken up two years later on April 11, 1723. At an unspecified date the additional 500' by 3,000' parcel was acquired from Johannes Ronnels, whose plantation bounded the length of one of these properties. Sometime in or about 1727, all three parcels came under common ownership, after which they were subdivided into two plots of equal area, each being recorded for taxation purposes as having a measurement of 1,750' by 3,000'. One of these parcels would later be named "Bellevue"; the other, "The Gift" (aka Gift Hill). In 1728 these newly-established plantations were given over as dowry or wedding gifts to Anna Maria and Jacoba vonHolten, the daughters of former

Governor-General and Commandant of St. Thomas and St. John (1706-1708), Jochum M. vonHolten. [RA/WIGC/SJLL, 1728-1739; RA/VLA/STSJM, 1755-1916; DVS, 1981 (E. Kirk, 1982); Ryburg, 1945]

While the merging and re-division of these properties might appear rather unprecedented, insights into how this occurred can be gained through an understanding of the unique circumstances and exclusionary politics at play in this era. Early-period plantation development in the Danish West Indies can be broadly characterized as competition among an elite group of local families (referred to as the "plantocracy") to acquire control over the colony's most desirable planting grounds. Driven by the quest for ever-increasing profits, a close-kept policy of extended-family dealings was key to the success of such ventures; arranged marriages, along with carefully chosen guardianships over widows and under-age heirs, were the most common tools by which the plantocracy amassed wealth and power. While outright cash purchases of land were indeed rare in this era, bartering for advantage amongst extended family groups was a relatively common practice. It is telling that no official survey maps of plantation boundaries on St. John were produced during this period. Property lines appear to have been fluid and left intentionally vague, while recorded measurements seem to simply be mutually agreed-upon estimations; claims of encroachment and disputes over boundaries were ongoing occurrences. [RA/WIGC/SJLL, 1728-1739; RA/VLA/STSJM, 1755-1916; Westergaard, 1915; Oldendorp, 1777 (Highfield, 1987); Carstens, c1740 (Highfield, 1997)]

But the plantocracy also required the clout of governmental authority to effectively consolidate its control. In this regard it is important to point out that prior to 1755 the Danish West Indies — St. Thomas, St. John and, after 1733, St. Croix — was not governed by Denmark, but by a cadre of private investors with Crown sanction, known as the Danish West India and Guinea Company (DWI&GC; the Company). As a mercantile venture the DWI&GC relied heavily, perhaps nearly exclusively, upon its close ties to the Danish West Indies plantocracy. The Company had initially encouraged all comers in its effort to establish a colony and tame the islands' rugged landscape, accepting European nationals of any and all persuasions, regional immigrants of many hews and backgrounds, religious refugees, indentured peasants, condemned prisoners, and even orphans. But as the unsuccessful among this first wave of colonists died or fell by the wayside, the plantocracy hovered like circling vultures, ready to pluck control of the best of the failing properties. As for the more successful plantations, what the plantocrats could not acquire by way of marriage or guardianship they leveraged through legal wrangling or inside dealings, often extending credit on risky ventures in the hopes of a forced foreclosure. [RA/WIGC/ B&D, 1671-1755; RA/WIGC/SJLL, 1728-1739; RA/VLA/STSJM, 1755-1916; Martfelt, c1767; Westergaard, 1915; Oldendorp, 1777 (Highfield, 1987); Carstens, c1740 (Highfield, 1997); Ryburg, 1945; Knight, 2000]

All of these factors come into play when attempting to sort out the complexities of early plantation development at Bellevue. In reports concerning the settlement of St. John sent to Company directors in Copenhagen by Governor Erik Bredal in 1722, it is stated that a St. John settler, “Francois Buk (sic.) is dead” and that his plantation was “... seized until the result of a trial in which the widow is accused of being an accomplice with a pirate who is here in prison.” [RA/WIGC/B&D, 1704-1754]

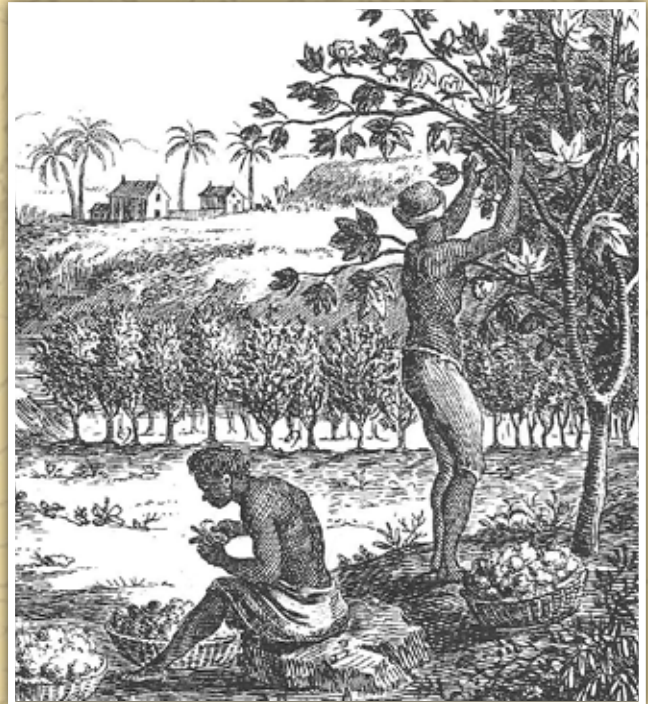
The “widow” mentioned in Bredal’s report is in all likelihood Ursilla Bock, whose land had somehow been acquired along with that of Christopher W. Gotchalt (one account suggests they may have been related) to form the broader property that Bellevue was later created from. Notable in this regard is the fact that Governor Erik Bredal, the individual who confiscated the Bock property on behalf of the DWI&GC, was the brother-in-law of Adrian vBeverhoudt, who, along with his bride, Anna Maria vHolten (herself the daughter of a governor), became the first recorded owners of the Bellevue plantation in 1728. [RA/WIGC/SJLL, 1728; Ryburg, 1945; Carstens/DVS, 1981(E. Kirk, 1982)]

The extended vBeverhoudt and vHolten families stood at the very core of the powerful and influential Danish West Indies plantocracy of this period. Adrian vBeverhoudt’s father, Lucas vBeverhoudt, was a wealthy “Creole” merchant/trader and ship owner, who hailed from a long-established Dutch West Indies family with close ties to the islands of Curacao, Saba, St. Eustatious, and the Virgin Islands (the present British Virgin Islands were formerly a Dutch colony until the eviction of its settlers by the British in 1671, many of whom relocated to St. Thomas). He had also been an early supporter of the DWI&GC’s efforts in the Virgin Islands and was a true founding father of the Danish colony, having been the first individual to construct a sugar works on St. Thomas. [RA/WIGC/B&D, 1704-1754; RA/WIGC/STLL, 1680-1754; RA/WIGC/JH, 1672-1714; Ryburg, 1945]

An account written in the early 1740s by another brother-in-law of Adrian vBeverhoudt, John Lorentz Carstens, relates that the vBeverhoudt family could trace their ancestry in the Virgin Islands as far back as the earliest European settlers, well before the arrival of the Danes (c1665). According to Carstens, these first settlers, who he refers to as “pirates,” had long since comingled with the “...few American black woman whom they found on the island as their mistresses, but they also carried Negro women there from other places, and with them they lived and had offspring.” Further along in Carstens’ ruminations he states, “All of the Creoles, that is, the name given to all those born on the island, must have had their origins in this manner, according to the testimony of many among them. However, the richest, the most respected and refined among them take pride and boast about their noble origins, because several noble personages have married amongst them, such as in the case of the Beyerhoudt (sic.) line.” [Carstens, c1740 (Highfield, 1997)]

Lucas vBeverhoudt was also instrumental in encouraging other resourceful individuals from throughout the West Indies to invest and settle on the now Danish-controlled islands of St. Thomas and St. John. Among these immigrants

were several members of his wife’s family, the Ronnels. In about 1691, Lucas vBeverhoudt was married on St. Thomas to Margaritha Ronnels, the daughter of Adrian Ronnels of St. Eustatious. It will be recalled that a parcel of land that was purchased to form Estate Bellevue had been acquired from a neighboring property owner, Johannes Ronnels, who married Gertrude vBeverhoudt in about 1730. It was Johannes Ronnels’ plantation that would eventually be merged with another neighboring parcel owned by Johannes vBeverhoudt to form the prosperous St. John sugar estate known as Beverhoudtsberg. But this is only a small example of the complex web of relationships that linked the extended vBeverhoudt and Ronnels families. [RA/WIGC/SJLL, 1728-1739; RA/WIGC/JH, 1672-1714; RA/WIGC/GR, 1762-1703; Martfelt, c1767; Carstens, c1740 (Highfield, 1997); Ryburg, 1945; DVS, 1981 (E. Kirk, 1982)]



An 18th-century cotton plantation
(*Diderot Pictorial Encyclopedia... [France, 1751]*)

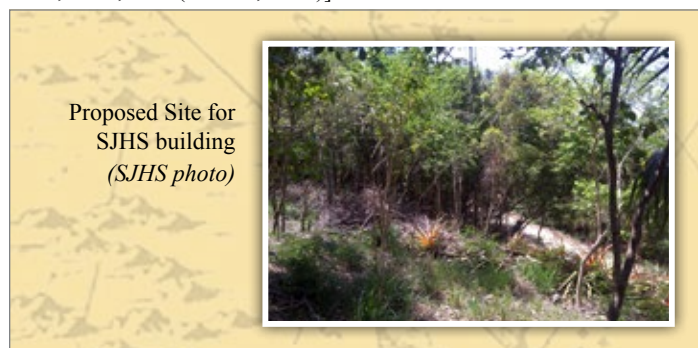
If one could be transported back in time to the early months of 1733, and stand on the site where the Bellevue estate ruins are found today, they would overlook a vast panoramic landscape of emerging agricultural development, controlled nearly exclusively by the vBeverhoudt/Ronnels clan. Immediately to the north you would gaze out over oceans of newly-planted cane fields belonging to Johannes vBeverhoudt and Johannes Ronnels, planting grounds that would later be unified to create the Beverhoudtsberg plantation. Beyond that, stretching all the way to the North Shore, would be the newly-cleared fields and pastures of the sprawling Susannaberg plantation, named by its owner, Isaac Ronnels, to honor his wife, Susanna vBeverhoudt, the daughter of Johannes vBeverhoudt. And, just out of view over St. John’s north-facing slopes, would be the Denis Bay estate, which had been originally established by Abraham Ronnels in 1718. [RA/WIGC/SJLL, 1728-1739; RA/WIGC/ B&D, 1704-1754]

To the northeast of Bellevue, sharing a long and meandering boundary with estates Susannaberg, Denis Bay, and the Beverhoudtsberg properties, would be the large and well-developed sugar plantation known as Estate Adrian and Trunk Bay, composed of two properties taken up by one of St. John's earliest settlers, Adrian Ronnels, but now run by his widow. To the east and southeast of Bellevue, the neighboring South Shore property known as Fish Bay would be visible far into the distance. Estate Fish Bay was acquired in 1731 by Johannes vBeverhoudt, who upon his death passed it on to his daughter, Susanna Ronnels — effectively annexing it to her Susannaberg and Denis Bay estates. Also, over a ridge to the east of Fish Bay, lay the Little Reef Bay estate, purchased by Johannes Ronnels in 1731. [RA/WIGC/SJLL, 1728-1739; RA/WIGC/B&D, 1704-1754]

West of Bellevue, situated in a lush interior valley, would be two estates, later known as Gluksberg and Guinea Gut. These properties were first established by Glaudi Ronnels in 1720. And, to the southwest, where the stream that runs through the valley spills out into the sea, would be the Great Cruz Bay estate, a property taken up by Engel vBeverhoudt in 1724, but now in the possession of his heirs. [RA/WIGC/SJLL, 1728-1739; RA/WIGC/B&D, 1704-1754]

And finally, to the immediate south, one would look out upon Bellevue's sister estate, The Gift, a property belonging to John Lorentz Carstens, who in 1745 was to be ennobled by the Danish Crown. Carstens was the husband of Jacoba vHolten, the sister of Adrian vBeverhoudt's wife, Anna Maria vHolten. Both couples were married in 1728 and had received their neighboring St. John plantations as gifts. [RA/WIGC/SJLL, 1728-1739; Carstens, c1740 (Highfield, 1997)]

As if to even more firmly cement the already solid family associations between the tightknit vBeverhoudt clan, it should be pointed out that Anna Maria and Jacoba vHolten were both daughters of Governor Jochum vHolten by his wife, Maria vBeverhoudt. In fact, Adrian vBeverhoudt and Anna Maria vHolten of Bellevue were cousins, a situation that required them to seek Crown approval before they were allowed to wed. They received that approval on June 17, 1727, and were thereafter married on St. Thomas April 30, 1728. [RA/WIGC/SJLL, 1728-1739; RA/PR/WIC, 1671-1848; Ryburg, 1945; DVS, 1981 (E. Kirk, 1982)]



Proposed Site for
SJHS building
(SJHS photo)

If the powerful and exclusionary Danish West Indies plantocracy ever perceived itself as having attained a semblance of royalty, then Adrian vBeverhoudt and Anna Maria vHolten were surely its prince and princess. And their Bellevue estate on St. John, with its breathtaking

vistas overlooking a vast family domain, would have been a shining jewel in their crown.

However, as Bellevue's history will reveal, this perception would have been only the most fleeting of notions.

To be continued...



Ruins of the
Bellevue estate
house
(SJHS photo)

SOURCES:

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