

Historian offers different perspective on local legend Casper Holstein

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ST. CROIX — When Casper Holstein was a young man growing up in the Free Gut neighborhood in Christiansted during the 1880s he would have quickly been made aware of the grim reality that even the most skilled of black labors in the territory could barely hope to eke out a living bound by the strict social hierarchy of the Danish West Indies that sought to keep them at the bottom of the totem pole.

During Saturday's annual meeting of the Society of Virgin Islands Historians (SVIH) Ronald Hewitt presented from behind the podium at the University of the Virgin Islands' great hall a brief excerpt of the fruits of his years of historical research into the early life and philanthropic works of one of St. Croix's most famous folk heroes.

Hewitt told the gathered crowd that he based his account on the back of primary sources, evidence from Holstein's era, and was driven by a desire to change the narrative that has been created that paints Holstein as a simple gangster.

"Native Virgin Islanders never saw him as a gangster," Hewitt said.

Holstein enjoys great popularity in the territory and accounts of his legendary generosity still

abound. In popular media, like the HBO series *Boardwalk Empire*, Holstein is shown in a thuggish light.

Born the year before the historic Fireburn to Albert Joseph and Emily Holstein, the young man could trace his roots on St. Croix back to an enslaved African woman on his mother's side. Holstein's father was a butcher by trade and had made a name for himself as a bit of a rake, and was known to have fathered many sons out of wedlock.

Hewitt said that growing up Holstein would have had every chance to have been exposed to the labor struggles that had impacted his ancestors. His father was born before the abolition of slavery and both of his parents would have been exposed to the upheaval and aftermath of the labor movements of the late 1870s and beyond.

Seeing that opportunities for the advancement of black people were few and far between in the Danish West Indies, Emily made the decision to travel to New York City in July of 1889 to secure lodging for herself and her son. By August of the same year the two were busily in the midst of making a new life for themselves.

Holstein enrolled in Boys' High School in Brooklyn and earned his diploma from that institution. By 1900 Holstein was a young

man of 22 and was married to his wife Mable. A short 10 years later Holstein would find himself a single man living in Manhattan and records show that he was listed as working on a racetrack as a gambler, experience that would serve him well as he went on to invent the numbers racket, a form of lotto.

By 1918 Hewitt reports that Holstein made his first trip back to St. Croix and was struck to his core to see that even under the American flag, the conditions of blacks on the island had not improved. A year after the transference of the territory to the US, the Navy was firmly in charge, governing the islands in concert with an appointed governor.

Hewitt said that under Navy rule the laws of colonial Danish governance were still being enforced and blacks on the island still had little access to upward mobility. The residents of the territory would not even become American citizens for the first decade of US rule.

Holstein would go on to gain great wealth and influence amongst the most influential blacks in Harlem, becoming a close confidant of Marcus Garvey and maintaining a cordial relationship with William Du Bois, two leaders of the Harlem Renaissance.

"Harlem is on fire," during this

period, according to Hewitt, a place where new ideas were being explored and black power is congregating. Holstein was in the thick of things and was sought after because he was a known champion of black causes, willing to support them financially when others could not.

Holstein is known to have funded an all-girls school in Liberia, bankrolled Garvey and poured thousands of dollars into the many moving parts of the Harlem Renaissance. He was no less generous with the Virgin Islands than New York, paying school fees for bright young college bound students and providing life saving supplies in the aftermath of two catastrophic storms in 1924 and 1928.

The gathered crowd of approximately 100 attendees took time after the presentation to ask questions and provide their own insights into the life of Holstein. Several people claiming relation to the great man were in attendance and shared their oral history.

During the meeting, the SVIH took time to memorialize one of their own and to recognize the contributions that he had made to the history of the Virgin Islands. Arnold Highfield was the founder of SVIH and passed away in September of 2019 after having devoted the majority of his adult life to researching and preserv-



Casper Holstein

ing the history of his adopted home.

"Without Arnold there would be no conference, no society," Aletha Baumann, associate professor of psychology, said. "Arnie was a renaissance person, something like a polymath."

Baumann fought back the tears as she recounted the impact that Highfield had made on the community as an educator and his- torian.

"He was a good friend and a gentleman and this I think is very important," Baumann said.