

THE St. Croix Source US VIRGIN ISLANDS

Manufactured Progress: Harvey Aluminum on St. Croix (Part 3)

By David Bond

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Author's Note: *St. Croix, once more, stands at a crossroads. The present situation appears unworkable, the path forward uncertain. It is not, however, the first time St. Croix has stood at such a precipice. This historical six-part series explores three moments in the past century – VI Corp, Harvey Aluminum, and Hess Oil – where frustration with the given situation boiled over into radical change. Breaking with the past, a better future for St. Croix was declared, a new foundation laid. These decreed Crucian futures sometimes aligned with the people and sometimes overrode the people. Today, Limetree comes into view at just such a crossroads, and once more the future of St. Croix is up for grabs.*



Harvey Aluminum Corp. began developing the first plant on the site in 1962 and several different companies owned the manufacturing plant over the ensuing 40 years, the last being St. Croix Alumina. Over the decades, the plant produced millions of tons of caustic red tailings as a byproduct of making aluminum. (Source file photo)

“St. Croix is primarily an agricultural island,” wrote the head of the Virgin Islands Legislature in 1958, and “its wealth lies in agriculture.” During the 1950s, most people on St. Croix worked in agriculture and homestead farms profitably grew sugar cane for export and an array of vegetables, fruits, and meat for local markets. Twenty years later Crucian farming was nearly extinct. The Governor of the Virgin Islands mourned the rapidly “diminishing agricultural industry” on St. Croix in 1967 as nearly all prime farmland fell out of cultivation.

What happened between 1950 and 1970? The Virgin Islands decided to get “the industrial revolution going right here in our own backyard of St. Croix,” as VI Senator Walter Hodge put it. Inspired by Operation Bootstrap in Puerto Rico, the Government House in Charlotte Amalie set its sights upon a single path of development for St. Croix: heavy industry. With generous tax breaks and sizable subsidies, Harvey Aluminum (1962) and Hess Oil (1965) were enticed to set up shop on the south shore of St. Croix.

The state-sponsored industrialization of the Crucian economy wrote one labor union in St. Thomas, promised to be “the greatest thing that ever happened in the history of the Virgin Islands.” This view of progress presumed agriculture would recede quietly into history as the wages of industry drove St. Croix into modern affluence. When Crucian farming refused to become a relic, proponents of industry took a more repressive turn: the infrastructure of agriculture had to be systematically dismantled so that industrial enterprise could take the helm. Realizing their lives were being placed in the firing line, thousands of farmers took to the streets of Frederiksted and Christiansted in furious protest.

For a few years in the 1960s, the future of the Virgin Islands swung uneasily between the advocates of industry and the defenders of agriculture. It was a debate that quickly came to inhabit and amplify other fault-lines in the territory – local farms versus union wages, St. Croix versus St. Thomas, freedom versus slavery, Black versus white – as each side worked to bend the Virgin Islands towards the future they believed in.

Although rooted in the Virgin Islands, this struggle echoed fights underway across the colonial world in the 1960s. From Cuba to Vietnam, the question of whether peasants or industrialists offered the surest path of development out of colonialism was fiercely debated. Was newfound autonomy best capitalized by distributing land to the people or by building export-oriented manufacturing? Was a good economy found in production sufficient to

nearby need or in the steady increase of GDP? And while the Virgin Islands never gained full independence from the United States, it is striking how the debates in the territory paralleled contemporaneous movements to decolonize parts of Asia, Africa, and the Caribbean.

While the winners and losers of this historical struggle may seem obvious in hindsight, the outcome was far from guaranteed on St. Croix. "We are in a Revolution," declared the *St. Croix Avis* in 1963 as the future of agriculture suddenly grew dim. At the time, roughly one in four Crucians found gainful employment in agriculture, many of them working on their own modest 5-10 acre homestead farms. The island's rich farms delivered a bounty of food, dignity, and self-sufficiency to the Virgin Islands. And when agriculture was threatened, thousands of Crucians from all walks of life poured into the streets to insist that farmers retain a place of privilege in the Virgin Islands.

A few years later and barely a hundred people identified as farmers in the entirety of the Virgin Islands, or less than one-half of 1 percent of all residents. "Agriculture has nearly vanished as an occupation in recent years," one federal report on the Virgin Islands in the 1970s noted. In his later years, Governor Paiewonsky solemnly reflected on "the death of agriculture" on St. Croix. The more apt verdict might be that agriculture was murdered.

The Glint of Aluminum

This reckoning over the future of St. Croix first leaped onto the headlines in early 1962 when Paiewonsky announced a deal to bring Harvey Aluminum to the Virgin Islands. The legacy of colonialism weighed heavy over St. Croix, even after emancipation and territorial enfranchisement. Paiewonsky argued that only the wages of the industry could break with the gravity of the past and launch St. Croix into a more prosperous future. Voicing his enthusiastic support for Harvey, Senator Alexander explained, "We, the natives, want to see the Islands modern and up to date."



Historical photo of the Henry E. Rohlsen Airport on St. Croix (V.I. Port Authority)

Wary of disrupting the flourishing tourist trade on St. Thomas and St. John, the Government House searched for a site that could become a world-class industrial port and remain out-of-view for visitors. Krause Lagoon fit the bill. This mangrove estuary on the south shore of St. Croix was “worthless,” explained Governor Paiewonsky, and the introduction of the industry could only improve its value.

The legislative transcript records Krause Lagoon as “swamp land, useless and marshy.” The estuary’s only real use at the time, one Senator noted, was as an informal trash dump. Harvey could only improve it. The *Home Journal* explained the merits of bringing aluminum plants and oil refineries to Krause Lagoon: “The release of idle land, much of it swampy, and granting of tax exemptions are a small price to pay for an industry which would bring so many benefits to the people of the Virgin Islands.”

Skepticism initially came from environmental quarters. Describing Krause Lagoon as the Everglades of the Virgin Islands, George Seaman drew attention to the native flamingos, bustling mangroves, and prolific fisheries of the estuary to insist on its spectacular “ecological value.” Resident Alfred Hayes wrote a letter to the *Daily News* explaining that Krause Lagoon was a prime resting place for migratory birds and home to the best fishing in the Virgin Islands. Reflecting on the immensity of what might be lost, Hayes wrote, “We get no second chance if we bring large industry here.”

Modern Emancipation

Such voices were met with derision. After listening to environmental concerns at a hearing in February 1962, Judge Herman Moore took the floor. “Most all of the witnesses who are opposed to Harvey Aluminum are the white people of St. Croix [APPLAUSE]. And if you notice, most all of the people who favor it are among the native and colored people of St. Croix [SUSTAINED APPLAUSE].” It was a charged accusation and one that drew attention to the fact that white Senators from St. Croix who were skeptical of Harvey frequented segregated country clubs and beaches. The critique silenced critics.



Portrait of Judge Herman Moore (Historical photo)

Opposition to Harvey, editorialized the *Home Journal*, was evidence of “the determination of some people to keep the colored population in economic slavery.” Aluminum plants and oil refineries promised to “remove the social, economic shackles which have prevented progress on St Croix,” another St. Thomas newspaper opined. The only motor with the horsepower to pull St. Croix out of the racist muck of its plantation past, argued the Governor and his supporters, was heavy industry.

But as the Harvey deal was rushed forward, other concerns surfaced. Alexander Moorhead, the President of the Chamber of Commerce on St. Croix, objected to the secrecy of the Harvey deal. “An intelligent opinion could not be given without knowing the full details of the contract,” Moorhead explained in the *Daily News*.

Refusing the accusation of racism by listing opposition from native Crucian families and reminding folks how race was wielded to sabotage VI Corp a generation earlier, another letter to the *Daily News* asked how it came to pass that “sensible colored people applauded the fact that they were deprived of seeing the contract.”

Senator Fritz Laewtz described the most “unusual procedure” surrounding the Harvey deal. While Paiewonsky negotiated with Harvey for months, legislators from St. Croix were refused any chance to review the contract until the day it was voted on.

Lawaewtz protested that the Legislature was being forced to assent to a contract they had been denied any meaningful role in shaping. And real concerns about preventing “pollution of air and water,” Lawaewtz complained, remained unaddressed. In rebuttal, Senator Gomez reminded the Legislature that Lawaewtz was a member of a segregated country club that refused entry to Blacks to its beach. “I suppose that is the only kind of water pollution that these people are afraid of,” Gomez said.

Overlooking concerns over process and pollution, the Legislature rushed the Harvey deal through and released the details afterward. Most Senators from St. Croix voted for it, including Lawaewtz. The Virgin Islands would give Harvey 700 acres in Krause Lagoon, exempt Harvey from all taxes for 16 years, and pay Harvey half a million dollars annually to dredge the industrial port. In return, Harvey would build a world-class bauxite processing plant and promised to employ Crucians if it could find “residents with the ability to perform the services required.”



A covered conveyor belt mechanism transports bauxite ore, which is refined into aluminum, from an outside storage area to a bulk carrier. (Shutterstock)

State-Sponsored Industry

“No wonder it has been kept from public gaze,” fumed a letter to the *St. Croix Avis* soon after. Neglecting the acute need for educational investments and year-round employment on St. Croix while saying “nothing about anti-pollution measures,” the contract bankrolled Harvey while expecting painfully little in return. Showing a “manifest disregard” for Crucians, another letter objected, “the Harvey Company is being virtually subsidized by the US and Virgin Islands governments.”

While met with “mild indifference” on St. Thomas, the details of the Harvey deal sparked “indignant protest” across St. Croix, especially among farmers. Paiewonsky, who had initially championed the balancing of industry and agriculture on St. Croix, quickly moved to crush the opposition. If Crucian farmers refused to consent to the ascendancy of industry then they would be conscripted by force.

Rufus Martin, a columnist of the *Home Journal* on St. Thomas, wondered if it was the prominence of agriculture on St. Croix that actually led Crucians to “fail to see the true value” of industry. As Harvey Aluminum backfilled Krause Lagoon, Paiewonsky launched plans to uproot what he saw as the last anchor holding St. Croix to its agricultural past: public investments in farming. The way to ensure the industrial revolution on St. Croix was to bulldoze Crucians off farms and into factories.

This “March to Progress,” as one newspaper described it, came to form a unified project of subsidizing heavy industry and shuttering VI Corp on St. Croix. A publicly owned and operated company, VI Corp managed thousands of acres of prime agricultural land on St. Croix, ran the last remaining sugar factory in the Virgin Islands, and supported a robust community of homestead farming on St. Croix. It also channeled all revenue back into social programs across the Virgin Islands.

When rumors of Paiewonsky’s plan to sell VI Corp land to a mainland corporation leaked, St. Croix erupted in outrage. Some 2,000 Crucians marched to Christiansted in September 1963 to beg the Governor to reconsider auctioning off the agricultural soul of St. Croix. Refusing to acknowledge the protest, Paiewonsky directed his deputies to lock the doors of the Government House on King Street and ignore the rally. Flipping the Governor’s refusal of talk into its own form of protest, marchers nailed their demands to the door in silence. “There was no noise on the streets of Christiansted” during this solemn event, wrote the *St. Croix Avis*.

Part four of this six-part series will further discuss the impact of Harvey Aluminum on the island of St. Croix.

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Sanitas Partners started producing compost for the remediation of the St. Croix Renaissance Group's red mud site in the fall of 2014. The compost cover material was created with the island's diverted green waste. (Photo courtesy of Sanitas Partners)

Tipping the Scales

Although VI Corp recorded a record profit in 1963 with bonuses for local farmers and increased spending on public housing, between 1957 and 1962 it averaged an annual loss of \$378,000. As its charter stipulated, VI Corp was required to pay local taxes, to make its equipment available for plowing and harvesting at hundreds of homesteads and to maintain agricultural infrastructure for all farmers on St. Croix. VI Corp also was required to invest its revenue in education, healthcare and housing programs in the Virgin Islands. Governed by public need more than private gain, these mandated costs led some to argue that fiscal deficits on the VI Corp balance sheet were often due to “a very unrealistic and largely misleading picture.” Yet such losses, Governor Paiewonsky insisted, made the continued public ownership of VI Corp both irresponsible and impossible. “The local Government cannot justify remaining in this industry,” he said.

Harvey Aluminum, critics on St. Croix quickly pointed out, was exempted from all local taxes and was subsidized handsomely from the Virgin Islands treasury to the tune of \$500,000 a year. Beyond platitudes, Harvey had no fixed agreement to hire locally or to increase wages. While Harvey touted how the St. Croix plant would bolster the wealth of shareholders in NYC and LA, the company had no fixed plans to invest revenue in the welfare of St. Croix. In early 1964, Senators from St. Croix showed their counterparts in the Department of Interior how lucrative VI Corp’s budget would be if granted all the tax breaks and subsidies of the Harvey deal. Such an argument fell on deaf ears.

Was this socialism for wealthy corporations while the social welfare of small farmers was ruthlessly privatized? Senator Hodge refused the premise. “We are hearing cries of creeping socialism; what we want to get rid of is galloping feudalism.” Equating any defense of agriculture with approval of slavery, Governor Paeiwonsky proclaimed his intention to stomp out VI Corp as the last vestige of colonialism in the Virgin Islands. “Governor Pledges to Wipe Out St. Croix Feudal System,” ran one headline.

Postcolonial Prosperity?

Many Crucians were not convinced. “All over the world people are freeing themselves from colonial powers and corporations, and land reform is the basic ingredient of that freedom,” wrote Ralph Clifford in the *St. Croix Avis* in 1963. It was a point that resonated across the Caribbean. Land reform catapulted Castro’s revolution in Cuba in 1959, and Jamaica, Trinidad, and other Caribbean nations seized independence in the 1960s with promises of returning the land to local control. Charting a different course, Paiewonsky was trying to give away “the most fertile land in St. Croix” to distant corporations, Clifford argued, “The single most precious and scarcest resource – LAND – is being stolen from the people.”

As Crucians mobilized around the land as the basis of their freedom and dignity, many labor unions joined with the Government House in St. Thomas to insist only heavy industry could bring the Virgin Islands the economic clout it needed to assert its rightful place in the modern world. This debate between whether farms or factories offered a better metric of prosperity and progress resonated with decolonial struggles worldwide.



Valero Oil Refinery in Aruba (Wikimedia Commons)

Paiewonsky's commitment to aluminum plants and oil refineries was not distinctive to the Virgin Islands but followed in the footsteps of many Caribbean nations that saw export-oriented bauxite and petroleum processing as the economic foundation that could best match their growing political ambitions in the wake of WWII. But as places like Guyana, Jamaica, Trinidad, and Puerto Rico worked to add heavy industry without subtracting peasant agriculture, the Virgin Islands took a more either/or approach. And by 1963, the Governor made it clear that the promise of industrial enterprise exceeded any commitment to land as a public good. The agrarian jewel of St. Croix had to be dismantled, the choicest farmland sold.

The *St. Croix Avis* threw up its hands in an editorial. "There is simply no justification for it, for once the land is disposed of it will certainly never be regained." But perhaps that was the point.

Agrarian Dissent, Paramilitary Measures

Crucians soon hatched a plan for the Legislature of the Virgin Islands to purchase all VI Corp land. Island farmers, backed by a growing coalition of hoteliers, environmentalists, retired expats, Puerto Rican farmhands, and Crucian senators, insisted VI Corp farmland remain a

resource for St. Croix. Proponents of industry were having none of it. Adding paramilitary violence to draconian policy, a campaign of terror was launched against farmers and their defenders.

An arson spree torched farms and cane fields across St. Croix in 1963 as Crucian Senators supporting agriculture received death threats in their homes. In November, the sole office providing farmers with access to federal resources on St. Croix was abruptly closed, slamming the door on an annual flow of over \$1 million in aid for agriculture on the island. “I doubt seriously whether any other branch of the Federal or local government as invested as much in ‘self-help’ for the people of St. Croix,” Arthur Golden complained to the *St. Croix Avis*.

As “one of the largest sugar crops in the history of the VI Corp” was recorded in May 1964, Governor Paiewonsky formally announced that all VI Corp assets along with 2,400 acres of farmland on St. Croix would be auctioned off to the highest bidder in a few days time. The rushed auction, the Governor explained, lumped all the farmland together to encourage bidding by highly capitalized industries. Individual farmers, by design, were priced out of bidding. The auction also expressly prohibited the Legislature from bidding (or even matching the winning bid). Crucian Senators noted the announcement came days after the end of the legislative session, preventing any discussion or oversight of the sale. And ten days later, a subsidiary of Harvey Aluminum placed the winning bid on the still beating agricultural heart of St. Croix.

Thousands of Crucians flooded streets of Frederiksted and Christiansted demanding justice for agriculture. “Why should a corporation like Harvey own half of St. Croix?” asked Senator Augustin Doward. Decrying the “20th century Judases” in St. Thomas who were allowing Crucian farmland to be sold to Harvey, Senator Randall James was resolute: “VI Corp land must be had for the people.” “Crucians” wrote the *West End News*, “cannot sit back idly and watch the spring of life being sapped. So fight we will!”

Any defense of public investments in agriculture was, Paiewonsky responded, “the rankest form of colonialism.” Describing VI Corp as a “feudal lord” intent on holding back progress, Paiewonsky was delighted to hand over VI Corp land to the engine of private business. Industry offered a proven route of modern development, and as Paiewonsky pointed out, proceeds from the sale helped establish and endow the University of the Virgin Islands.

It was an outlook soon broadcast across St. Croix as Harvey Aluminum commissioned its own newspaper and radio station on Recovery Hill. Disguising its corporate owners, this media conglomerate routinely celebrated the destruction of agriculture as evidence of progress in the Virgin Islands. “It is good that the VI Corp property has been put up for sale,” one story began, “St. Croix has had a sugar economy for long enough.” Reporting explained how Caribbean nations that encourage farming can remain stuck in feudalism. One story compared those rallying support for agriculture to Hitler and Stalin.

Although VI Senators were uniformly opposed to the land sale and unanimously petitioned the Department of Interior to block the sale, a month later Senators from St. Thomas and St. John were coming around to the sale. Brushing aside accusations of kickbacks and ongoing protests in St. Croix, in June 1964 the Legislature endorsed the sale of VI Corp assets and land to Harvey Aluminum. Support came almost entirely from St. Thomas and St. John.

A year later and in the midst of another record-breaking sugar harvest, Harvey announced plans to phase out agriculture on St. Croix. The modern sugar factory was dismantled and shipped to Venezuela (where it is said to still operate). Purchased by Harvey for exactly ten dollars, the collectively owned farming equipment that helped homestead farmers plow their fields and harvest crops each season, was driven into the sea. Today their rusted-out remains are a marginal diving attraction on St. Croix.



A Puerto Rican farmer on St. Croix tends her land where she planted sweet potatoes between rows of sugar cane in Dec. 1941. (Photo by Jack Delano from the Library of Congress archive)

Before the sale, several villages of cane-cutters and farmhands from Vieques were promised that they could remain in their homes and retain access to the gardens they farmed (many were in the process of becoming homestead farmers). After the sale, they were told to leave.

Some chose to stay. “They ripped the roofs off the houses and left everything to rot,” one farmer recalled to me in an interview.

Want amidst Wealth

The revolution from agriculture to industry on St. Croix was far from a natural transition. Decried rather than democratically decided, the eradication of small farms and enticement of big factories to St. Croix unfolded over the protests of residents. And even as Harvey and Hess transformed the Virgin Islands into one of the wealthiest Caribbean economies on paper, many Virgin Islanders felt newly alienated from the manufactured might of export-oriented chemical processing.

You cannot cook a meal or nor build a home from bauxite or petroleum products alone. Yet the refinement of these commodities on St. Croix proved immensely lucrative for Harvey and Hess, and generous wages soon lifted a class of workers into the comforts of the middle class. Salaries at the factories were double the going rate for labor in agriculture or hospitality. For many, jobs at the plant became an accessible ladder into modest affluence.

Yet these factory jobs were never plentiful enough to employ everyone displaced by the managed decline of agriculture. Many working-class Black and Puerto Rican farmers found themselves stranded between a collapsing public food system and the rising cost of everything they now needed to buy. Even as the territory achieved the highest per capita GDP in the Eastern Caribbean in the 1970s, this industrial boom did not exactly free the Virgin Islands from dependency so much as deepen the islands reliance on costly imports and external assistance. Federal aid to the VI actually tripled in the decade after industry set up shop in St. Croix.

This paradox of want among wealth proliferated as industry monopolized the economy of St. Croix. GDP of the Virgin Islands skyrocketed from \$25 million in 1960 to \$500 million in 1975, driven almost entirely by the output of Harvey Aluminum and Hess Oil. That same period witnessed unemployment among Crucians shift from almost non-existent into “a serious problem” that crested 10% of the working population. Nor was employment at the factories without strife. After the first batch of Crucians went on strike at Harvey and Hess for the wages promised, both firms came to rely on workers imported from elsewhere.

It cannot be denied: industry brought profound wealth to the Virgin Islands. But it was a wealth that often came to feel just out of reach for most Crucians. It also came at a tremendous ecological cost.



Demolition of the former Alcoa Alumina Facility on St. Croix in 2010 (File photo)

An Aluminum Nail in the Coffin of Agriculture

After Harvey took control of VI Corp, much of the usurped farmland was simply fenced off. Occasionally Hess Oil, which purchased the land from Harvey, would sell a section back to the local government or to private developers. A government report in 1965 warned that the “indiscriminate urbanization” of former VI Corp farmland would soon render agriculture on St. Croix impossible to reboot. “This land should be able to provide for most of the food needs of the islands,” the report concluded, but urgent action was required to zone fertile fields as exclusively agricultural.

Instead, much of the prized farmland of St. Croix became real estate. As food prices predictably soared, one large section of farmland was paved over to welcome the island’s first big box grocery store and shopping mall. The residential developments and commercial strips that now crowd Centerline Road distract the imagination from the prolific fields and proud farmers that claimed this ground just 50 years ago.



Sunny Isle Shopping Center on St. Croix in April 2020. (Source photo by Linda Morland)

Along the gentle slopes of St. Croix, the architectural record seems to jump directly from plantation ruins to suburban clutter, a leap that quietly extinguishes the monumental accomplishments of VI Corp and homesteader farmers. And today on St. Croix it is hard to find any celebration of the homesteads that rescued the island from the Great Depression, rebuilt the Virgin Islands on a more equitable foundation, and resisted the imposition of industry. So much has already been forgotten.

Industrial pollution has only added environmental injury to this historical insult. Absent effective oversight, Harvey Aluminum and Hess Oil both salted the landscape of St. Croix with toxic waste, an environmental fact that further removes cultivation from the possibilities of the present. Today, a mindboggling array of petrochemicals have saturated St. Croix's sole aquifer and mismanaged slagheaps from bauxite refining contaminate soils all around Krause Lagoon. While the Harvey and Hess plants were only designed to be in operation for a few decades, the contamination of soil and groundwater will endure for generations.

In the 1960s, the territorial government rebuffed the populist claims of agriculture and installed bauxite and crude oil on the throne of the St. Croix economy. And within the decade the breadbasket of the Lesser Antilles found itself rather abruptly divorced from the land. The rippling effects of the rapid industrialization of St. Croix, namely suburbanization and pollution, now conspire against any easy restoration of that agrarian crown. To reimagine Crucian farms capable of feeding the island requires herculean investment and ingenuity.

The immensity of the challenge has not dissuaded a new generation of farmers on St. Croix. Finding ever more creative ways to cultivate land on the margins of development, today many Crucian farmers aspire to meet that vast social need. There is still so much to be done to rebuild a robust local food system for the people of St. Croix. And yet just one lifetime ago, that is exactly what VI Corp and modest homestead farms provided.

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