

The Danish West Indies

Treaty Respecting the Purchase by the United States of the Islands -- St. Croix, St. Thomas and St. John -- Expected to be Ratified Shortly by Denmark

It is stated authoritatively that negotiations have practically been completed for the purchase of the Danish West Indies by United States from Denmark for the sum of \$25,000,000. Details of the treaty have not yet been given out, but it is understood that under it the United States would come into complete possession of the islands. Denmark's huge expenses since the beginning of the war are said to be responsible for her willingness to sell the islands.

The three islands of the Danish West Indies — St. Croix, St. Thomas, and St. John — lie due east of Porto Rico, and their value to the United States is strategic from a military point of view. The harbors of St. Thomas and St. Croix are of first importance to the American navy, and St. Thomas itself lies in the lane of shipping from Europe to the Panama Canal. Important German, French and English mail companies have coaling stations there.

The acquisition of the islands by the United States has been the subject of unsuccessful diplomatic negotiation since the Civil War. Secretary Seward began negotiations for their acquisition in 1865, because the naval operations of the war had shown the necessity of a base in the West Indies. A treaty was made and ratified by Denmark, but the United States Senate failed to act on it in proper time, and it lapsed. President Wilson, in his volume on "Congressional Government," written about 1883, referred to the incident as the "treaty-marring power of the Senate."

Ineffectual efforts were made to reopen the negotiations during President Grant's Administration, and in 1902, soon after President Roosevelt came into office, Secretary Hay took up the subject, and Denmark offered the islands for five millions. The United States Senate this time ratified the treaty, but the Danish Senate defeated it. It was said at the time in diplomatic circles that German opposition influential in the Danish Parliament was responsible for the defeat of the plan. Later judgment, however, attributed the opposition to Danish aristocrats. This opposition is said to still exist, and it is said that, if the proposed treaty is ratified by both Governments, the transfer will be submitted to the people of the islands. In the first negotiation in 1865 they approved a change.

The three islands of St. Croix, St. Thomas, and St. John, in the order of their size and population — were discovered by Columbus in 1493. Spanish, British, French, Dutch, and Danish flags have floated over one or all of the islands at various times. St. Croix, lying sixty-five miles southeast of Porto Rico, has an area of eighty-four square miles, and is the most prosperous of the group, with its two towns of Christianstad and Frederikstad. It was held at one time by the Knights of Malta, having been given to that famous order by Louis XIV of France.

St. Thomas, which lies only forty miles east of Porto Rico, and is less than 1,200 miles from the entrance to the Panama Canal, was at one time chief distributing centre of West Indian trade, its importance being directly attributable to the fact that the mother country, Denmark, maintained its neutrality during the numerous European wars of the eighteenth century. The temporary occupation of the island by the British during several periods of the Napoleonic wars added further to the importance of the chief port, Charlotte Amalie. This town, with a population of less than 10,000, mainly negroes, is still an important coaling station for steamers in the West Indian trade. With a depth of from twenty-seven to thirty-six feet of water, the roadstead can accommodate the largest merchant ships which sail these seas.

The export and import trade has become negligible since the rapid decline of the sugar industry, which the Danish Government has tried in vain to revive by granting annual subsidies.

St. John, least important of the islands, lying four miles to the east of St. Thomas, has an area of twenty-one square miles. It is scarcely more than a ten-mile mountain ridge, with but one distinguishing feature, Coral Bay, the best harbor of refuge in the Antilles. Crux Bay, a village of 1,000 inhabitants on the northern shore, is the centre of population.

While Danish is the official language of the islands, English is quite generally spoken.

If Denmark decides to part with the islands, there will remain to her only two colonial possessions, Greenland and Iceland, which have an aggregate area more than five times as large as the mother country,

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but with only one-twenty-seventh the population. The 138 square miles of Denmark's West Indian territory sustain nearly three times as many people as the 46,740 square miles of Greenland. Naval officers regard the Danish West Indies as most valuable for any European Government wishing to quarrel with the United States, and have urged it was essential to the highest degree to keep them from falling into unfriendly hands. They have pointed out that they are very near the naval station at Guantanamo, only a thousand miles from Key West, and a menace to the free navigation of the Windward and Mona Passages, the Caribbean Sea, and the routes to American Atlantic Coast cities.

DOMINIONS' ROYAL COMMISSION.

The Dominions' Royal Commission will resume sittings in Canada on September 21st. The Commission had just begun its work in Canada when the war broke out two years ago, and the arrangements were abruptly terminated. The body consists of Lord D'Abernon, chairman; Sir Alfred Bateman, Sir Rider Haggard, and Messrs. Lorimer, Tatlow and Garnet, of Great Britain; Sir George Foster, representing Canada; the Hon. Mr. Sinclair, New Zealand; Sir Jan Laugerman, South Africa, and Sir Edward Bowring, Newfoundland. F. C. T. O'Hara, Deputy Minister of Trade and Commerce, is local officer of the Commission.

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