

# The Welcoming Arms

THE NEWSLETTER OF THE ST. THOMAS HISTORICAL TRUST



Autum 2020

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Pamela Montegut  
*President*

Dear Trust Members,

Hope this newsletter finds you all well.

What a long strange trip THIS year has been so far! On top of the COVID "plague," your Historical Trust has now endured a flood.

On about September 20, some pipes burst in the unit above the museum - precisely above our office area, inundating our office and ruining our office electronics. Fortunately only one or two original art works were damaged, and thanks to some speedy work by board members, none of the antiques, artifacts or books suffered more than an increase in humidity. However, of our two recently donated laptops, the newest suffered a direct hit. Our professional grade printer had to be thrown away. The office furniture was completely ruined. Our WAPA bills are going to reflect the continual use of air conditioning which we must use to keep the humidity down, so we are going to need to ask for your help in paying those too.

Our landlords were already being very generous about reducing our rent during the COVID crisis, and have fixed a number of the built-ins in the museum. I am not sure we can ask them for much more.

We have received generous contributions of a new office desk, chair and 3 showcases to replace those lost to water damage.

We still need to replace the executive office chair with arms, five 4 drawer file cabinets which are rusting with some inoperable drawers, and the replacement of most of the sheetrock in the storage area which was water soaked and is moldy and deteriorating.

We'd like to ask you for two things:

First, your [donations](#) to help pay for replacing the office equipment and repairing damage.

Second, we need **volunteers** armed with mops, rags, buckets and sponges to come to the museum on Nov 7 at 1 pm to help clean, dust, polish and get ready for our upcoming events! For those who can't help in person, your [donations](#) can be made via paypal.

**BUT WE DO HAVE GOOD NEWS...** Through CFVI, the National Endowment for Humanities, and My Brother's Workshop, we're receiving \$19,000 in grant money to offer a caning class, commencing in latter part November. This funding will pay for materials, a caning instructor, help with our rent and WAPA bills for the next eight months.

In other events, on Oct 30, we supported the opening of Joseph Hewes' new art gallery near Market Square. The opening featured new works by St. Thomas's own globally renowned artist Shansi Miller. It was a great success with many Trust members attending.

Thank you all for your continued support of your 55-year-old Trust during this difficult time. We are resilient and it is because of you and your commitment to the ideals on which we are founded.

Sincerely,

*Pamela Reid Montegut*

Pamela Reid Montegut

President

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## Our Mission Statement...

*To identify, protect and preserve the history, sites and culture of St. Thomas.*



# Hassel Island Update

Vince “Doc” Palancia  
Hassel Island Task Force Chair



Hassel Island’s dock repair at Midden Beach is fully permitted and work will commence shortly, and soon after that we’ll resume tours to Hassel Island.

#### Passenger Ferry Service for Hassel Island Tours

Two local companies have agreed to provide passenger ferry service to Hassel Island once tours recommence currently projected for January, 2021. Both companies provide on the water services, and are both ported in Frenchtown.

Hassel Island tour participants will meet at the Trust Museum at 8:30 AM and then proceed to the waterfront for embarkation. The tour will start

at Midden Beach Dock go to Careening Cove Dock and Creque Marine Docks once opened by VINPS and return to the waterfront.

#### Hassel Island Clean-Up Potential:

Howard Forbes, a UVI professor specializing in the environment, who has worked coordinated cleanups that would happen on Hassel Island. He and his team are putting together a timeline of cleanup efforts that will happen territory wide. He and his team are again interested in a Hassel Clean-up. Explained to him the dock project and gave him a rough idea of January 2021 for cleanups to start on Hassel Island as coordinated by the Historical Trust.



## CANING CLASS

Learning the art of chair caning is a rare opportunity. The Trust is offering chair caning classes thanks to a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities, offered through the Community Foundation of the Virgin Islands and with the very kind assistance of My Brother’s Workshop. The caning workshop is 10 hours of instruction by a professional caner and is open to Trust members and members of the public and will commence in November for \$125. The first class of 10 students is full. A second class is forming. Please email the Trust at [execdirector@sthomashistoricaltrust.org](mailto:execdirector@sthomashistoricaltrust.org) if you are interested.





# De Beltjen Road St. Thomas, V.I.

*by Martin Bottell*

It was raining the first time I visited De Beltjen Road with Pamela Montegut of the St. Thomas Historical Trust. Cars sped by on the heavily trafficked stretch located just below Bluebeard's Castle, oblivious to the place this spot had in the development of the island's harbor and docks.

In 1912, when the West Indies Company was formed, six villa residences housed the Company's Danish President and department heads.

Three of those buildings are still evident today; two of them occupied and one a fire-ravaged ruin. A St. Thomas Source article of April 30th, 2001 reported the fire and called the structure Villa Orient/

The Chapel. The report described a fine, classical West Indies-styled structure dating to the mid-1800s with the chapel preceding it sometime in the late 1700s.

Long before there was a Veterans Drive, what importance did this road — De Beltjen in Danish, meaning the bells — have in the life of east Charlotte Amalie? Was it built at the same time as The Chapel, or much later when the villas were first conceived? Was De Beltjen a major thoroughfare to the newly constructed West Indies docks at Havensight; or a new route to 'the country' that would eventually extend to Red Hook?

On the west side of the entrance road leading up to Bluebeards Castle, a stone retaining wall of unknown age defines the property boundary. Built into it is a small underground shelter, currently being used as someone's home,

Was this the gate keeper's shelter at one time?

A few steps from the shelter, we entered the property through rusted, wrought iron gates onto a broad, grassed path. During a lull in the rain, the sun poked through the clouds, transforming the gardens from a scene of neglect to one of





ruinous beauty. From here the terraced gardens are still evident, with steps of local stone leading up toward the castle grounds. In the opposite direction, the sweeping vista of the harbor can still be seen through the overgrown vegetation. Oleander and bougainvillea bloomed in full color, contrasting against the bushes and trees glistening with the earlier rain.

At the far end of the path are the fire-damaged buildings. One parallels De Beltjen Road. The other, The Chapel, stands high above it; its exposed gable pointing towards the harbor. So distinct from one another, one can only begin to imagine what must have been.

A large fountain at the end of the path draws the eye. Behind it, wide steps lead to an upper terrace with the remains of a portico, creating what would have been an elegant entrance to the chapel.

A lesser run of steps climbs up as if

to the castle grounds. Does it signify some old connection between the chapel and the castle?

More speculation: Did the castle at some point have its own private chapel for the garrison and its officers?

For now we have more questions than answers.

All that is left of the lower building is a long, narrow masonry structure. As noted in the news article, it once had a second floor.

A wrought iron balcony still hangs centered on the wall in a style common in Charlotte Amalie. As tradition tells us, the second floor and roof would have been wood sitting on a masonry base. The fire totally destroyed it, Only the wood lintels above the ground floor doors and windows remaining as a testament to the fury of the blaze.

The masonry exterior and interior walls of the lower floor whisper a suggestion of the building's footprint. The floor tiles of a bathroom and clear delineation of a shower pan are all that remain to show people lived here.

Its location, paralleling De Beltjen Road would have given a fine view out over the harbor. Perhaps a prosperous businessman wanted to move





his family out of town into what was becoming known as The Country; wanting to give his children a garden to play in while overlooking his business interests on the WICO docks.

The building style would have undoubtedly matched the Danish architecture still evident in the historic district of Charlotte Amalie. We can only speculate as to its age.. Was the original owner part of the Asiatic Company; the parent company of WICO? We know that WICO's top executives lived in the six villas.

The chapel is chronicled as dating to the late 1700s. Did it have a bell tower at some point, giving De Beltjen its name, Danish for 'the bells?' Climbing the steps to the upper terrace with its pilloried portico, it certainly gave the impression of a monastery. Even with the sounds of traffic coming from Veterans Drive, one felt a sense of peace.



The surrounding gardens had been carefully designed using local stone to create terraces reaching to the property boundary. A meandering path beckoned one to climb upward toward the castle grounds.

From this vantage point, looking out towards the harbor, you can clearly see that if the second floor and roof of the lower buildings were still there, all would be hidden; the chapel tucked away behind its newer companion, not visible from the harbor or road.

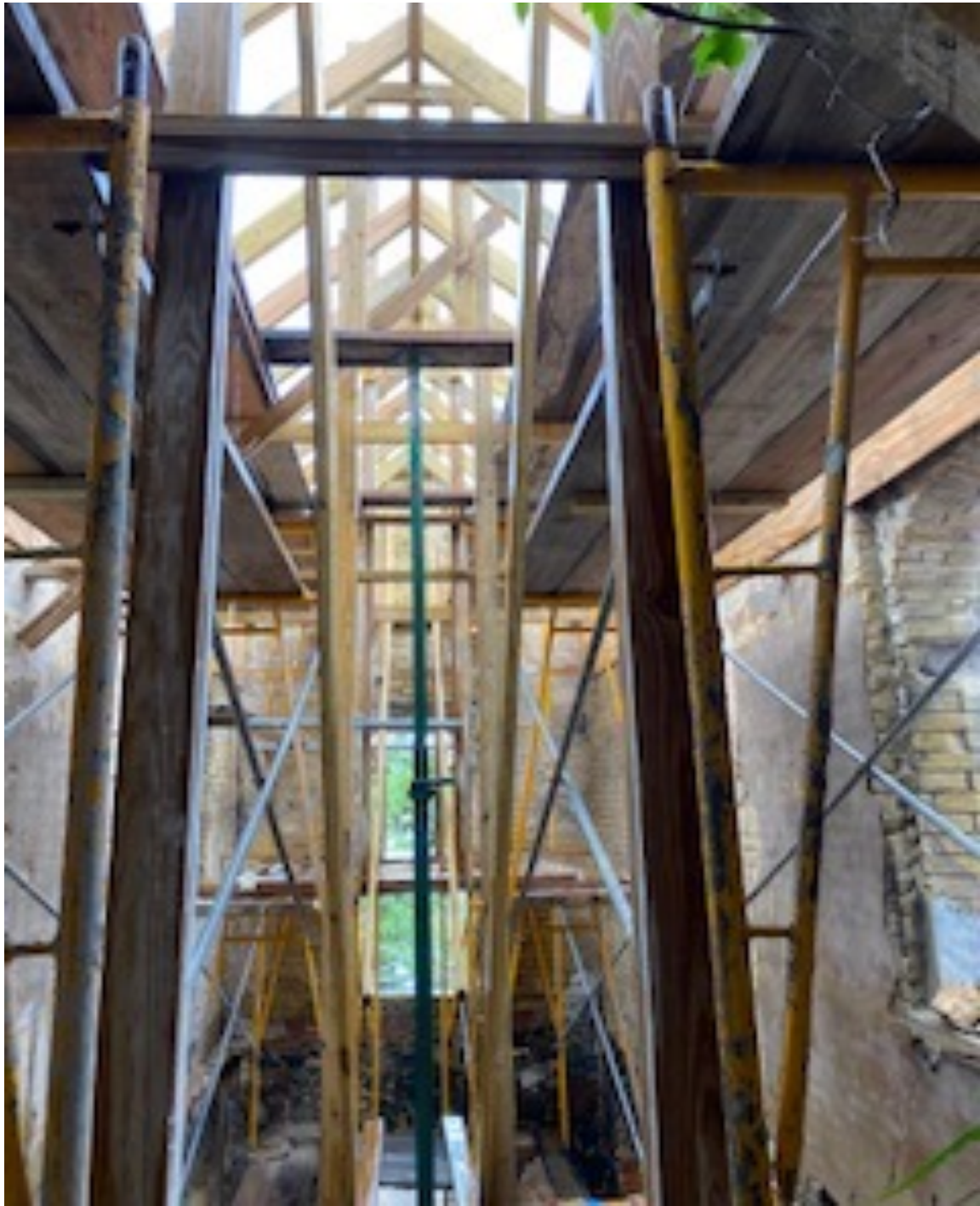


I am almost certain the Villa Orient was built for its location with little concern for this older structure, and that at some point the chapel may have been converted to private quarters. An interior stair had been built linking the two structures, but we couldn't locate it.

From off the remains of the terrace lie three distinct rooms. The first has a large barreled ceiling. Except for some distinctive floor tiles, it's long since lost any decoration. What remains is a dark space with few wall openings. A room straight ahead has the feel of a bathroom but without any tell-tale signs of fixtures — pure conjecture on my part. To the left is another space of questionable use..

The building has the tranquil quality of a House of God, purpose-built with few windows to keep the worshipper intent on prayer, without the distraction of a swaying tree or birdsong.





Some renovation has been ongoing: new floor joists and rafters to the chapel, evidence of a new owners intent, work to the exterior masonry walls showing the inlet for some stone or brick quoin waiting to be installed,; scaffolding left in place, waiting for work to resume.

Looking up at the newly exposed chapel gable wall, I asked myself if the single, small window facing the harbor might have served as a light tower in the 18th Century for





those ships returning to harbor in the early days of trade.

A beacon in the window could have made a good aid to navigation for the helmsman to guide his ship by. Such a light would have been visible at quite a distance until a later building was constructed.

Or was this window an actual bell tower, inspiring the De Beltjen name?



The sound of traffic from Veterans Drive doesn't diminish the sense that you are standing on a rural spot, such as it was when De Beltjen was a country road plied by horse drawn carriages; far from the bustle of Charlotte Amalie and slightly hidden from view by Fredericksberg Point.

With the docks laid out below, you can see the commercial promise this location held for an entrepreneurial company.

In a piece written by Georgiana Richards, titled *A History of WICO On St Thomas*, we read that among the six buildings on De Beltjen with the designation of "Villa," one was referred to as Villa Orient/The Chapel. We know of two others. The fate of the rest, whether demolished or hidden by overgrowth, is uncertain.

Ms. Richards names the six villas as:  
Villa Epilson

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Villa Gama Delta  
Villa Apha Beta  
Villa Orient/The Chapel  
Villa Marion  
Villa Lota.

As time passes, unless a large investment of capital is made, the property will fall into further disrepair and the vegetation will grow back, hiding this piece of history again until a developer ploughs it under.

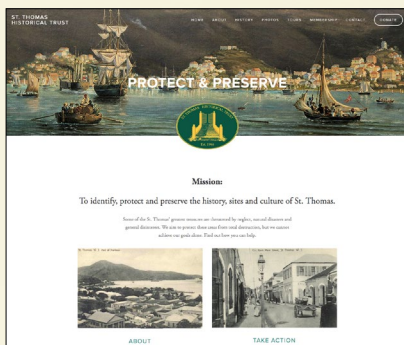
Wouldn't it be grand, though, if the property was cleaned up and explored by an archaeologist, piecing its history back together and opening it to the public as a historical site.

*September 1, 2020*

*Martin Bottell,*

*Photographs by Pamela Montegut*

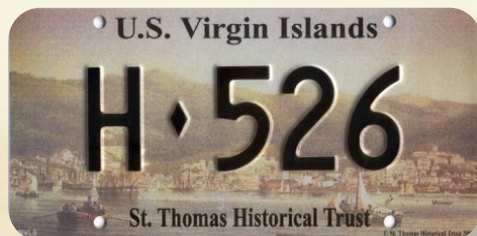
*St. Thomas, V.I.*



**Check Out our New Website**  
[www.StThomasHistoricalTrust.org](http://www.StThomasHistoricalTrust.org)

Still somewhat under construction, we invite you to see our new website. Hopefully this updated Trust site will offer easier navigation along with some interesting historical information. Browse past newsletters, catch up on the Board Members, order license plates & more!

## License Plates: Part of “the Drive” for Historic Preservation!



### Numbered Series License Plates

\$75 – Member Price / \$100 – Non-Member

### Personalized Plate

\$130 – Member price / \$150 – Non-Member

[click here to download the license Plate order form.](#)

## Become a Member / Renew Membership

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- Seasonal Newsletter \$30 – Individual
- VIP Invitations to the Trust's Parties & Events \$75 – Family
- Discounts on Tours, etc. \$125 – Contributor
- Free Museum Access \$250 – Corporate
- Free Museum Access \$5000 – Lifetime

Fill out the form online:

[Membership Application Form](#)