



St. John, U. S. Virgin Islands

9A-H1120

Part One

Caneel Bay In The Twentieth Century

Eleanor Gibney recalls the story of Caneel Bay

One otherwise unremarkable day in 1983, some startling news reached me in the ramshackle “office” of the Grounds Department at Caneel Bay: Laurance Rockefeller, the owner of the resort since 1952, had just deeded the remaining estimated 150-165 acres of Estate Caneel Bay to the Virgin Islands National Park, retaining 40 years for the hotel to operate before the Park took full possession.

With other staff members, I conjectured about what might happen in 2023, imagining the weed trees taking over the fields and modern ruins joining the older sugar factory remains. But 40 years is a very long time to someone in their mid-twenties, as I was then. I did feel somewhat relieved that this move apparently assured that a place of enormous natural and historical significance would never be further exploited.

Even in 1983, most people working at Caneel Bay seemed to have little idea of the relatively recent history of the property, and now the internet constantly spawns new misconceptions. It seems like a good time to summarize the story of Caneel Bay in the 20th century.

At the beginning of the 1900s, St. John place names were often rather untidy, without standard spelling. Estate names mostly dated back to the 1700s, but had evolved a bit over time, Pieter Durloo had acquired two large estates in the 1700s, naming one Store Caneel Bay (Big Cinnamon Bay) and the other, two miles west, Klein Caneel Bay (Little Cinnamon Bay). While Store Caneel Bay rather quickly began to be called Cinnamon Bay, Klein Caneel turned into K. C. Bay. By the early 20th century it also often appeared in print as Casey Bay, or sometimes Little Kaneel Bay.

KC Bay Estate came into the 20th century under the ownership of Louis Delinois, who owned a significant portion of St. John at the time. A mixed race immigrant from Haiti, Delinois was a St. Thomas resident who exported rum, bay rum, and goat hides. Along with Caneel/KC Bay, he owned the Estates Great Cruz Bay-Chocolate Hole, Guinea Gut, Beverhoutsberg, Susannaberg-Denis Bay, Adrian-Trunk Bay, L'Esperance, Catherineberg and Rustenberg-Adventure, totaling over 2500 acres.

By 1915, KC Bay was owned by Abram Elias Smith, consolidated with neighboring Estate Salomon-Lindholm to form an impressive property that stretched from the Creek in Cruz Bay to take in the western $\frac{2}{3}$ of Hawksnest Bay and the heights of Margaret Hill and Caneel Hill, even crossing Centerline Road in the Margaret Hill area between Grunwald and Susannaberg. Abram Smith was raising cattle (55 head in the 1934 St. John cattle census), coconuts and bananas for many years, but in 1936 the VI Daily News reported: "CASEY BAY SOLD—May Be Site of New Hotel—Casey Bay in St John changed hands yesterday when the West India Company paid Abram Smith \$8,500 for the 800 acre estate....it is said in business circles that the company plans to build a large hotel and develop the natural beauty of the site."

The 800 acres was an over-estimate given in those years surveys were common, but the West India Company was mainly interested in the tourism potential of the 10 sandy beaches and the totally unspoiled setting. The Company (not to be confused with the Danish West India and Guinea Company who ran the colony as a business in the early days of Danish settlement) was a group of investors who had built the largest dock and refueling facility in St. Thomas and been promoting economic diversification in the colony from the early days of the century.

When it opened in late 1937, Caneel was a unique opportunity for guests to enjoy the total serenity and beauty of the island in relative luxury.

The heyday of commercial shipping in St. Thomas harbor was past, but pleasure cruises were starting to expand, and recreational air travel was looking more feasible.

The West India Company constructed seven one and two bedroom cottages, scattered from near what had been Salomon Bay, now called Honeymoon Beach (the Honeymoon Cottage) to the north point of the main Caneel Beach (Cottage Point), converted the old warehouse on the shore into a commissary, and ran a daily motor boat service from the "Shark Wharf" in Red Hook.

When it opened in late 1937, Caneel was a unique opportunity for guests to enjoy the total serenity and beauty of the island in relative luxury, with maid service, cooks, plumbing, and electricity, none of which had been easily available on St. John. Riding horses were available to explore the numerous trails—as far as Coral Bay for the very adventurous—and there were donkeys for jaunts around the property. It sounds very beguiling, but WWII soon put a damper on the beginnings of tourism. The West India Company abandoned their project in the early 1940s.

The next owners (or at least operators, there are conflicting records) were the Trigo brothers of Puerto Rico, who had recently started the first regularly scheduled air service from Puerto Rico to St. Thomas. Caribair went on to fly inter-island routes for many decades but the war years were not a time for investment in the maintenance and modernization of Caneel Bay and the property became rundown and far less appealing. By late 1946, the then estimated 600 acres and small resort were on the market, for \$75,000.

Here is where I begin to be able to draw on my family papers. My parents had somewhat accidentally arrived on St. John in the fall of 1946, and by the spring they were happily inhabiting the big house on the shore at Denis Bay. Earlier incarnations of that building, as a part of a sugar factory, a guesthouse (when owned by John Lindquist, in the pre-Transfer period), and then as a deep-sea fishing club in the 1920s, had given way to its new role as St. John's first "snow bird" residence. Colonel Julius Wadsworth and his textile-designer wife Cleome, had been among Caneel Bay's first guests in 1938. Julius went out for a walk one afternoon and wandered into Denis Bay. Within an hour he'd written a check to purchase the Estate, and on his return to Caneel he reported that "I just bought a plantation". Every winter for almost 50 years, the Wadsworths returned to Denis Bay, but that spring they were happy to have my parents live there, first for eight months and then the whole year when illness delayed their winter return.

My mother, Nancy Gibney, wrote in her memoirs: "That August (1947), the guessing game we played on St. John was: Who has bought Caneel Bay?" My father, Robert wrote in his journal: "A willowy Englishman named Neville, whom I met the other day, was reported to have bought a \$40,000 interest in Caneel, and was going to take over there on August 8th. Now this deal seems to have fallen through." Later in the month he wrote to his best friend (the poet Robert Lax): "We had a lot of millionaires here last week, all related through some shady practice to Eddie Rickenbacker and other international characters. They wanted to buy Caneel Bay, but now a fat little man from Hawaii named Jordan has bought Caneel Bay..." (Note well that reference to WWI hero ace pilot, Rickenbacker, the founder of Eastern Airlines).

In September, writing to Cleome Wadsworth, my father reported: "We finally met Mr. Griffith, the man behind the awful Mr. Jordan who claimed to have bought Caneel." Then a month later: "Jordan, the first Caneel bay monster, was fired soon after the arrival of Griffith ... According to Griffith, Jordan had spent some \$4,000 of the company funds that he couldn't account for (largely I suspect, on Bromo-Seltzer). His absence is dearly bought at the price of Griffith's presence."

Back to my mother's account: "In mid-February (1948), another new owner of Caneel Bay appeared—this one certainly the man with the money, behind the disgraced Jordan, the big-talking Griffith. He was John Hertz Jr., heir to the Drive-ur-Self fortune. How we met him, I can't recall, but he asked us to dine with him at Caneel Bay. We hiked over, expecting splendors in honor of the big boss, but the dinner was even worse than any Jordan or Griffith had offered."

Caneel Bay Advert, 1950
Photo courtesy of Eleanor Gibney



In Peaceful Setting of Exquisite Beauty

CANEEL BAY PLANTATION

CANEEL BAY
ST. JOHN • VIRGIN ISLANDS

◆

A Modern Cottage Colony

◆

For Information Write to
LIND WEBER, General Manager

<p style="text-align: center;">REPRESENTED BY</p> <p style="text-align: center;">VIRGIN ISLAND TOURS CHARLOTTE AMALIE ST. THOMAS, V. I.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">WM. P. WOLFE ORGANIZATION NEW YORK • PHILADELPHIA CHICAGO • MONTREAL</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">PUERTO RICO TOURS SAN JUAN PUERTO RICO</p>
---	---	---



My parents sadly left Denis Bay in March of 1948 and moved out to Henley Cay, the largest of the Durlloo Cays, directly off Caneel Bay. It's unclear if Hertz ever took full possession of Caneel, but by late 1949, the property was clearly owned by Textron, a Rhode Island-based corporation. Textron was a fiber and textile manufacturer that expanded through parachute production in WWII. Following the war they diversified haphazardly before concentrating in aviation and aerospace technology, where the company continues today as one of the largest of its kind.

However odd the pairing of Textron and Caneel Bay might seem, they had a dramatic effect on the property in a short time. Along with improving the cottages and commissary/restaurant area, they built Caneel's first actual hotel rooms—the 10-room block along the main beach—and bulldozed roads throughout the lower elevations of the property to begin selling off pieces of the outlying areas. At least 12 parcels were quickly sold in the 1950-1951 period.

Five of the subdivided lots were built on in the early 1950s:

- The Morrisette family property at Lindholm above Cruz Bay
- A parcel bought by a couple named Brown from the States, at the crest of the hill adjoining the Morrisettes. The lot and small house eventually repurchased by Caneel and staff housing constructed there in the 1970s, not included in the Rockefeller 1983 Park donation and now surrounded by the chain link fence.
- The point between Salomon and Honeymoon beaches, bought by Priscilla and Harry Lyne, wealthy "continentals" who only used it for vacations and soon one of the island's first short-term rentals in the 1950s to 70s under the name "Little Plantation". This lot was sold to the Park in about 1980.
- A large parcel at Turtle Bay, where a magnificent stone house was constructed by Redfield Vose. An entire book could be written about Vose, who had a fortune from an insurance business in Ohio. He became an active participant in the development of St. Thomas in the 1950s as the owner of Bluebeard's Castle hotel and co-owner of the then uninhabited Estate Nazareth on St. Thomas's east end. On St. John, he bought the 450-acre Estate Rustenberg-Adventure and was at least part owner of Estates Beverhoutsberg and Sans-Souci-Guinea Gut. After Vose's death in the late 1950s (while flying his own plane in Alaska) Caneel repurchased the property and made the house the center of the Turtle Bay expansion of the hotel (in recent years, Caneel took to calling the 1950 house "a 17th Century Estate House" demonstrating their ignorance of both Danish-colonial and modern history).
- On the ridge between Caneel and Hawksnest Bay, a wall and a small flight of stone steps near the road still mark the former site of the home of Gus and Charlotte Stark. Coming and going from St. John through the 1940s, Gus Stark worked as an engineer and builder for Caneel in both the Textron and Rockefeller eras. Eventually the former Stark house was bought by Laurarce Rockeller personally, around 1978. It was empty when severely damaged by Hurricane Hugo in 1989, then demolished in 1992. The Park acquired the land from the Rockefeller estate after Laurance's death.

While the popular story has Laurance Spelman Rockefeller (LSR) sailing the Caribbean and happening upon Caneel Bay, suddenly deciding to become a hotelier on the spot, this seems highly unlikely as the whole story. I recall that back in 1947, my father noted that millionaires connected to Eddie Rickenbacker were appearing on St. John. When WWI flying ace Rickenbacker bought Eastern Airlines in 1938 and quickly turned it into one of the world's leading air carriers, his financial backing came from his friend LSR, who remained the largest single shareholder in the company until its demise in 1991. The Textron connections are a bit less visible, but it's no secret that LSR had a life-long interest in aviation and aerospace technology. Without going overboard with connecting the dots, it's easy to assume that LSR might have known something about Caneel Bay beforehand.

While LSR is rightly credited with creating the first prominent eco-tourism model in the Caribbean, long before the term was coined, it could be argued that he just took the existing scenario and carefully expanded it. Describing Caneel Bay in the Textron era of 1950, St. Thomas resident, Jeanne Harman wrote: "Nestled in the bay nearest to St. Thomas is Caneel Bay Plantation, probably the most fashionable resort in the islands... an exclusive refuge for wealthy, harassed Americans....A commissary, bar, outdoor dining terrace.....are combined in one long, low building. Here the guests gather if they want company...play tennis, or hire horses. There are no other entertainment facilities, and the atmosphere is of elaborate, somewhat self-conscious simplicity."

What immediate changes occurred after LSR took over in 1952, besides the immediate end of property sales? One of the most obvious was the rerouting of over a mile of North Shore Road to take it out of the heart

Laurance Rockefeller visiting Caneel Bay in 1961. Photo courtesy of the Rockefeller Archive Center.



of the resort. Leaving Cruz Bay, the old road went up steeply by switchbacks from behind the present visitor center to the present overlook wall, crested the hill, dropped to Honeymoon Beach, on what is now the NPS trail from the top of the hill. It ran along the shore to the central Caneel ruins, then straight east up to near the Caneel pumphouse and base of the Margaret Hill road, now called the Catchment trail.

In addition, fifty new rooms were constructed near the main beach and in two-unit buildings around Cottage Point, although the original cottages there were renovated and left in place for several more years. A large wetland behind the main beach had already been drained by culverts and canals to the beach, but now that infrastructure became invisible. The signature pale olive green color that blends into the landscape was adopted and used on all painted surfaces. Scores of coconut palms and ornamental trees were planted near the central hotel areas and quantities of trees and ornamental shrubs were added to the landscape that had remained largely open to cattle farming through the early hotel years.



Caneel commissary 1948.
Photo courtesy Eleanor
Gibney

Ensuring an adequate supply of water for the people and plants became a priority. Dams were constructed at the bases of the two large guts, and a large section of the hillside (out of sight to the east) was constructed as a rainwater catchment, with a supposedly 1,000,000 gallon cistern. LSR began financing research in desalinization technology, soon to become the primary water source for the property. Staff housing was constructed on the low hill behind the ruins and more dormitory-style housing in the “village” between North Shore Road and the front desk/dock section. A long entrance road connected the rerouted North Shore Road to the southeast. There was never any sort of sign on the road, but there was a gate that was ritualistically closed for 24 hours every New Year’s day to maintain it as a legally private road.

Fairly early in the remaking of Caneel Bay, the proposal to create a National Park came into the picture. Whatever LSR may have considered for the hundreds of acres of Estate Caneel Bay lying outside the hotel area, he quickly committed the majority of the land to be part of the Park, retaining only a small section of the Creek shoreline for the shipyard facility, as well as the catchment and water tank system on the hill and one of the dams across North Shore Road from the new main gate.

Part two of Eleanor’s telling of the Caneel story will appear in the next issue of the Member Magazine.

Horiculturalist **Eleanor Gibney** is an expert on plants found in the Virgin Islands and the author of “A Field Guide to the Native Trees and Plants of East End, St. John.” She is a lifelong resident of St John’s north shore and worked at Caneel Bay from 1979 to 1995.