

History

French Village – The start of a Straw Mart

In the 1930's and 40's, a significant number of St. Barths residents migrated to St. Thomas for economic reasons, and established themselves in French Village, Carenage. These residents were primarily fishermen and their wives worked at home, raising their children, and helping in the support of the household with a craft they brought to St. Thomas from St. Barths—namely, straw goods.

Another group of St. Barths residents who migrated to St. Thomas, established themselves on the Northside, primarily in Mafolie and Dorothea. These residents were primarily farmers, who sold their goods in the local market. Their wives also stayed at home, raising their children and helping the husbands with the farming.

The French migrants from St. Barths are credited with creating the straw business in St. Thomas which was flourishing in the decades of the 50's, 60's, and 70's. Initially, the French people would import the straw and plat (braid) from St. Barths and use this to make hats for men and women, shopping bags, placemats, straw purses, straw fans and silk palm purses. Mrs. Amelia Duzant, a native of St. Barths would travel there by boat to purchase straw and plat (braid) which she would ship to St. Thomas along with dye to make multicolor braid, and sell them to the people of French Village to enable them to make goods to support themselves.

As their children grew, the migrated residents taught them to make the plat (braid) and it became a requirement of their daily routine whereby they had to complete a certain number of fathoms of braid as part of their homework. The braids included “tresse a dents”(small design with points); “tresse a onze” (an eleven straw braid); “tresse a frange” (a twelve straw braid with 3 frills on the outside); and “tresse a jour” (an eight straw braid with a circle in the middle). These various braids were used to make different straw products which the French Village residents sold to the tourists as tour cars passed through Carenage.

When the straw trade started to flourish, government officials saw the promise of this and other native trades, and decided to build a Co-operative of native Arts and Crafts. Individuals involved in this Co-operative, included well known island residents, such as Elaine Proudfoot, Doris Commissiong , Roy Bornn, and Mrs. LaBorde. The Co-operative would then purchase the goods from the French residents and other natives, and they would sell them to the tourists, thereby allowing the tourists to purchase their souvenirs in one location. The Co-operative sold straw hats, straw shopping bags, straw purses, straw placemats, lined straw purses, straw fans, silk palm purses, bongo drums, needle point work, marracas, native embroidered skirts and blouses, gowns, and many native made items.

Today, there are only a handful of French people alive who helped create the straw mart, but many of their descendents remember how important this industry was in helping support the families of French Village.