

"Steeple Building," formerly THE
LUTHERAN CHURCH OF THE
LORD OF ZEBAOOTH
Company Street, between Church and
Hospital Streets
Christiansted National Historic Site
Christiansted
St. Croix
Virgin Islands

HABS No. VI-1

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PHOTOGRAPHS
WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey
National Park Service
Washington Planning and Service Center
1730 North Lynn Street
Arlington, Virginia

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HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

"STEEPLE BUILDING," formerly THE LUTHERAN CHURCH
OF THE LORD OF ZEBAOth

HABS No. VI-1

Address: Company Street between Church and Hospital Streets,
Christiansted National Historic Site, Christiansted,
St. Croix, Virgin Islands.

Present Owner: United States Government.

Present Occupant: United States National Park Service.

Present Use: Historic building and museum within the Christiansted
National Historic Site.

Statement of
Significance: This church was built by the government of the
Danish West Indies and Guinea Company. As the
building that housed the established church of
the colony, it was an integral part of the archi-
tecture of the Danish colonial venture, and it
is an interesting example of Lutheran archi-
tecture in the 18th century.

PHYSICAL HISTORY

A. Original and Subsequent Owners:

Government of the Danish West Indies, 1750-1917:
Lutheran Church, 1750-1831
Military Bakery and Storehouse, 1841-1909
Sunday School and Town Hall, 1909-1916
United States Government, 1917--:
Hospital Ward, 1916, 1925
Town Hall and School, 1925-1954
Historic site and museum, 1964--

B. Date of Erection: 1750-53.

C. The Steeple Building was restored by the National Park
Service 1961-63, Frederik C. Gjessing, National Park
Service architect. The building was restored to its
appearance in 1800, but not with its original church
furnishings. Some of the important original furnishings, in-
cluding the altar, baptismal font, and a chandelier
(now reassembled as the base of a lectern), are in
the present Lutheran Church in Christiansted.

The history of the Steeple Building was intensively
studied for the restoration by the National Park
Service by Frederik C. Gjessing, Architect, and

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Herbert Olsen, Historian. Their findings, based on exhaustive study of both the available documents and of the fabric of the building, are presented in three separate reports:

Gjessing, Frederik C.; National Park Service architect. Preliminary Survey (Architectural Data) Restoration of the Steeple Building. March, 1951;

Olsen, Herbert; NPS Historian. Historic Structures Report, Part I, Administrative Data and Historical Data, Steeple Building. March 1959;

Gjessing, Frederik C.; NPS Architect. Historic Building Report (Architectural Data--Part II) Preliminary to the Restoration of the Steeple Building. January, 1960.

Copies of these reports are at the Virgin Islands National Park Headquarters, St. Thomas, and the Eastern Office, Division of Design and Construction, National Park Service, 143 South Third Street, Philadelphia.

The following general description and summary of the physical history are quoted from the third of these reports by Architect Gjessing, pp. 1-7:

GENERAL DESCRIPTION OF THE STEEPLE BUILDING

"The Steeple Building is an important landmark for its historical association. It contains the remains of the former Lutheran, Church of Our Lord of Zebaoth, the first church to be erected by the Danes after their colonization of St. Croix in 1734. As a building it is a good and unusual representative of Danish colonial architecture.

"It is located in the town of Christiansted, St. Croix, one block from the waterfront within the area defined in 1952 as the Virgin Islands National Historic Site. The steeple, that has given the building its popular name, is a conspicuous landmark and is listed as an identifying feature for Christiansted harbor both on older and contemporary charts.

"The building and its yard occupies half a city block. It is bounded by Hospital and Church Streets to the east and west respectively, and faces Company Street to the north. It is a one story rectangular masonry structure, measuring 28 x 88 feet, with a four tiered steeple built against the approximate center of the Company Street face of the building. The Steeple measures 15 x 18 at ground level and is 77 feet high.

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"The body of the building is of rubble masonry construction with brick lining of doors and windows. The walls are plastered. It is roofed with corrugated iron on wood trusses and has a furred wood ceiling. The two lower tiers of the steeple are stuccoed brick masonry. The third tier is an octagonal drum with exterior walls of wood sheathing and shingles on a heavy timber frame and roofed with copper sheets and wood sheathing. The fourth tier is an open octagonal wood pavilion supporting a shingled wood cupola crowned by a wrought iron spire and weather vane.

"The yard to the south of the building is fenced by a brick and rubble masonry wall from 7 to 10 feet high. The yard is 66 feet deep and 97 feet wide along its south side. A concrete toilet built in 1933 and a one story L shaped wood building constructed in 1917 are located in the south east and south-west corner of the yard respectively.

SUMMARY OF PHYSICAL HISTORY

"The Steeple Building was constructed by the Danish West India and Guinea Company, a royally chartered monopoly. It was built as a Lutheran church. The designer, if any was employed, is unknown.

"Construction was started in the summer of 1750 and by December 29, 1751, we have the earliest and most complete general description of the building.

"The Lutheran church, masonry from the ground up and 75' long by 26' wide, is standing under construction (as previously announced) the masonry work is finished, with the roof, windows and doors, except for the wall cornice and steps and plastering, and interior carpentry and masonry work and decoration. Assessed in the present condition Rdl\$ 3000'.

"By 1753 the structure was sufficiently complete to put it to use and on May 27, 1753, it was consecrated as a Lutheran church by Pastor Rudolph B. Frick of St. Thomas as 'The Church of Our Lord of Zebaoth.' Its location on the site of the present Steeple Building is confirmed by our first pictorial presentation of the church the I. M. Beck map of Christiansted printed in 1754.

"As far as can be determined the church in all essentials retained its appearance as built for the following 40 years. It withstood the hurricanes of August 31, 1772, and of August 25, 1785, without damages. There were numerous repairs and slight alterations particularly during the 1780's which affected its looks without altering its form or general outlines. The most important were

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the addition of an organ loft in 1783 and a wood picket fence later replaced by a brick fence in 1786. In a drawing of this period (approx. 1765) by Von Rohr, it appears as a plain one story structure with a hipped roof. Its modest size and appearance is further testified to by the adverse comments of the colonial government in 1777, describing it as having 'no appearance of a church and cannot stand comparison with the worst village church at home.' A proposal for enlargement was subsequently approved in 1779 and then abandoned due to lack of funds.

"In October 1793 construction was begun on the steeple and in 1796 it was finished. Although we do not have contemporary plans and drawings, the description of its construction clearly imply a steeple in all essentials similar to the existing one. During the same period the roof of the church was repaired, new doors and windows installed, and pillars were constructed for the fence around the church.

"By 1818 the church in its new form was in a poor structural condition and repairs were made both to the steeple and the building proper. They did not, however result in setting the building in proper shape, for by the late 1820's the building was in such poor condition that the congregation deemed it advisable to accept the donation of the Dutch Reformed Church building and by 1931 the congregation ceased to worship in the Steeple Building. In 1834 it was stripped of its furnishings, which were installed in their new church; and by 1838 the title to the building was passed to the Danish state.

"Following the transfer of ownership a proposal was made for the conversion of the church to a military bakery and storehouse. In 1841 and 1842 the proposal was carried out. The roof was removed and the walls towards Hospital Street and the churchyard, respectively, were torn down. The remaining walls were lowered approximately 2 feet and 6 inches. The building was extended 11 feet to the north, and a new south wall was built toward the churchyard, for approximately half the length of the building. The interior was divided by two transverse walls and a new roof was laid over the entire building, window openings were changed, and repairs were made to the steeple: A stable, a carriage house and a woodshed was built in the former churchyard, and at an unknown date a brick oven was added. The yard was divided in two sections by a fence. The documentary sources available to us for the following 60 years are limited in information. A number of repairs are recorded, but judging from internal evidence, they did not alter the general appearance of the building.

"In 1909 the Steeple building was converted into a Sunday school and community hall. The conversion necessitated the reconstruction of the west half of the south wall, and several

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changes to the building in the yard. The existing roof over the north half was extended to cover the entire building, and the present windows, doors and floor and ceiling were installed. The use of the Sunday school ended in 1916. During the subsequent uses of the Steeple building as a hospital (1916-25), Community Hall (1925-33), and finally school (1933-54), a cistern was added, toilets for the hospital (which later were torn down), replacement of wood beams in the Steeple with concrete beams, etc. In the yard the bakery oven and stable were removed and the existing L-shaped building was later constructed in 1917, and later still, while serving as a school, the existing concrete toilet in the North corner of the yard was added.

"It is evident from the documentary material presented in the two earlier reports, that the Steeple Building during its life span has had four main stages of development. Between each stage, there have been transition periods, and details such as windows, churchyard fence, etc. modified the appearance of the building within each stage. In general, however, it can be said that the form and the looks of the building remained the same within each period. The first stage lasted from the time of its completion to 1793, when the Steeple was added. The second stage lasted from 1796, the completion year of the Steeple, to 1834, when the church was stripped of its furnishings. The third stage started in 1842 when the body of the building was extended to the north and the walls and roof were lowered, and lasted until about 1909, when the Steeple building entered its fourth stage and received its present appearance. Except for the last stage, the appearance of the building has to be pieced together from accounts, bills, partial descriptions, and internal evidence. We do not have any detailed and specific description of the building, and the pictorial representations we do have without any exception only show the Steeple Building as part of a general view. Plans of the building, although mentioned in accounts, have not been located.

"It is also evident that the only part of the building that dates back beyond the third stage and the period the Steeple Building served as a church, is the steeple and the southwest and north-west walls, respectively, and possibly part of the masonry fence around the churchyard."

Prepared by Osmund R. Overby, Architect
National Park Service
August 1965.