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"Do My People, Do": Plaskett, Roach Inspire Action on Liberty Day

Leaders invoke the spirit of a hero to fuel modern advocacy efforts

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Lt. Gov. Tregenza Roach and Delegate to Congress Stacey Plaskett were guest speakers of Wednesday's Liberty Day, also called Bull & Bread Day, in Grove, St. Croix. By. ERNICE GILBERT, V.I. CONSORTIUM

D. Hamilton Jackson Day, also called Liberty Day or Bull & Bread Day, which honors the life of its namesake, saw messages of resilience, the power of the ancestors, and a call to action by speakers Delegate to Congress Stacey Plaskett and Lieutenant Governor Tregenza Roach on Wednesday.

Their words echoed the profound influence that exceptional leadership wields within a society, alluding to the life of Jackson, which was starkly characterized by the Danish colonial authorities during the waning days of their governance in the Danish West Indies. Nevertheless, within the black community of the Virgin Islands, Jackson is held in high esteem—a revered icon whose legacy continues to resonate.

Born in 1884 on St. Croix, a mere 36 years post-slavery, Jackson navigated a society still marred by harsh inequalities. Initially an educator, his outspoken criticism of the Catholic Church led to his dismissal by Danish authorities. His subsequent career as a clerk was also cut short following a dispute with Danish-appointed Governor Lars Christian Helweg-Larsen, which propelled him to pursue legal studies at the University of Chicago.

With a magnetic presence and a gift for public speaking, Jackson quickly rose to prominence as a union leader, advocating for improved living conditions. His 1915 journey to Copenhagen, the capital of Denmark, saw him plead the cause of the islands' destitute black community, earning him a measure of sympathy in the Danish capital.

Upon his return to St. Croix, he established The Herald newspaper in November 1915. As its sole writer and editor, Jackson's fiery critiques of the Danish colonial administration were unflinching. He implored his fellow citizens to demand the dignity and economic advancement they deserved, branding the director of education a "shameless liar" and the governor a "bloodthirsty tyrant"—accusations met with dismissive retorts from the authorities.

Jackson's activism catalyzed a landmark labor strike in 1915-16. As sugar plantation owners resisted wage increases, Jackson, backed by the unions, led the workers of St. Croix in a demonstration that culminated in the slashing of their grueling work hours and a significant pay raise. This triumph sparked similar successes among dock workers on St. Thomas, who also secured better working conditions and wages.

Following the U.S. acquisition of the West Indies in 1917, Jackson continued to serve as a judge and political figure in Christiansted until his passing in 1946. To this day, he is revered as the "Black Moses" of the Virgin Islands, a man who championed the liberation of his people from the vestiges of enslavement.

On Wednesday, both Plaskett and Roach recalled Jackson's powerful example to encourage Virgin Islanders, reminding St. Croix residents that such devotion to the advancement of the territory required more than just words on social media, but more importantly real-world action.

Ms. Plaskett said Jackson would often ponder what does it mean to be a Virgin Islander, and he answered his own question with a demonstrable journey. "His life was an answer to what does it mean to be a Virgin Islands," she said. "To live with purpose and intentions, with one objective at the forefront of his mind: the self-liberation, self-evaluation, self-empowerment of all Virgin Islanders." Calling for Virgin Islanders to rise up and take action to better the USVI, Ms. Plaskett ended her remarks by stating, "Do my people, do," words she uttered several times during her address.

The remarks of the guest speakers were juxtaposed with those of fiery protesters about 75 yards away, who voiced frustration with the current state of the territory. They raised issues with Governor Albert Bryan Jr., whose demeanor they contend reflects an attitude of apathy. They chastised local leaders for the state of the V.I. Water and Power Authority — from absurdly high utility rates and the recent discovery of high levels of lead in potable water supplied by the authority.

Mr. Roach delivered a stirring call to the audience, urging them to draw inspiration from the lives of their forebears to forge a more prosperous future for the Virgin Islands.

"When I look at the portrait of David Hamilton Jackson into those piercing eyes that appear tunneling into your very soul with the message of our Delegate, 'do my people, do.' I wonder what he would want to impart to those of us who have come behind him. Those of us in the here and now."

He continued, "What is the tea that he would have us drink? What is the remedy he would prescribe to lift us out of this wasteland, malaise, this inertia, the lack of movement, inaction in which so many of us have been wallowing? What has he been saying to us that we have not been hearing?"

Mr. Roach expressed his belief in the enduring wisdom of the ancestors, "I think he might want to remind us that there is power in the ancestors still. That we can call upon them still, and that they will answer, answer in a way that we might hear if we are kin to listening. Because we seem to have left the veneration, the showing of great respect, awe, reverence as in the veneration of Saints. Yes, we seem to have left the veneration of our ancestors for that other cultures, and we have adopted their saints, asked them to intercede on our behalf, all while we have abandoned our own ancestors and their power to lead us home to promise lands and paradises where we will lack for nothing."

In his concluding remarks, Mr. Roach inspired his listeners to embrace their lineage and esteem those who have molded their cultural legacy: "I think he would want us to make our own choices of who are worthy of veneration. Who to regard with reverential respect or with admiring deference, the act of honoring a saint, a person who has just been identified as having a high degree of sanctity and holiness."

He added a profound thought on the influence of the departed, emphasizing the role of the living in manifesting their wisdom: "Contrary to popular belief, the dead too have power, but we must help them speak through our actions. And David Hamilton Jackson has left us that blueprint for action..."