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Emancipation Day: USVI Celebrates 173 Years of Freedom

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A statue of General Buddhoe at Emancipation Park in Frederiksted By. EVERETT A. RYAN FOR D.E.A.R. PRODUCTIONS

Saturday marked 173 years since the Emancipation Proclamation was declared in Frederiksted on July 3, 1848. It was on that day that the enslaved people on St. Croix collectively rose up against the bonds of the Danish system of slavery. This united front liberated the people of the Danish West Indies, the islands that make up the U.S. Virgin Islands.

Each year, Emancipation Day or Freedom Day is recognized in the U.S. Virgin Islands on July 3 as a local holiday in which residents pay their respects to those who fought for freedom like General Buddhoe. On this day, Virgin Islanders remember that freedom did not come easily, and

their ancestors were still oppressed in other ways thereafter. For example, the four Fyah Bun Queens — Queen Mary, Queen Agnes, Queen Matilda, and Queen Susanna — led the Labor Riot (or 1878 Fire Burn) against stringent labor laws that showed little improvement since emancipation thirty years prior.

Days leading up to this momentous Freedom Day in Virgin Islands history, children at the Caribbean Museum Center for the Arts Youth Summer Theater and Music Arts Camp discussed Emancipation Day on Thursday, their last day of camp. CMCA's camp was facilitated by local educators Sayeeda Carter and Maria 'Irieah' Stiles. The students read from and engaged in deep discussion from references by [Books ?n Bush Tea](#) that answered the following questions: What is V.I. Emancipation Day? Why is Virgin Islands Emancipation Day important? When is V.I. Emancipation Day? How is the St. Croix "Fireburn" of 1878 related?

Emancipation Day is a day of remembrance and reflection of the way in which freedom was demanded by the enslaved people of these islands. Virgin Islanders "pay homage to [their] ancestors," considering their demand for freedom an act of bravery and courage, as Books ?n Bush Tea's reference puts it.

Enslaved vs. Slave

When this reporter visited the CMCA summer camp, the children used the term "enslaved person" when discussing historical facts about slavery in the Danish West Indies. When asked why they used the language "enslaved" person as opposed to "slave", the students responded by stating that the people were not born as slaves. They were forced into slavery. One student said that referring to them as "enslaved" honors them as a people instead of objectifying them.

The language they used to speak of their ancestors denotes respect. Similarly, how Virgin Islanders tell their history—down to the very language that is used—and continue to make history today shows respect for the foundation that was laid for 'all ah we' to follow.

Some residents on St. Croix paid their respects by taking part in the 21st annual Fort to Fort "Walk to Freedom" on Saturday morning from 5:00 am to 10:00 am. Partakers walked from Fort Christiansvaern in Christiansted to Fort Frederik in Freedom City Frederiksted.

For more information on the events leading up to the Emancipation proclamation by Governor Peter von Scholten, the book *The Umbilical Cord* by Harold W. L. Willocks is a great resource.