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Virgin Islanders Commemorate Emancipation Day, Remembering Bravery of Ancestors

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

Today marks 174 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 bondage 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 today.

For the 175th anniversary next year, Governor Bryan plans on posthumously honoring 175 people in keeping with the 175th celebration, and he has [set aside \\$1 million](#) to go toward activities.

"We are going to honor 175 Keepers of the Flame. People who have come before us that have not only laid a path of prosperity for the Virgin Islands and a place where people of color could feel like they can express themselves; lead and be led and be able to participate in commerce and in civic, government activities. A fantastic gift that has been given to us in the most beautiful place in the world, here in the Virgin Islands," Governor Bryan explained during a press briefing Friday.

Also on Friday, Lieutenant Governor Roach issued a message describing the bravery of Virgin Islanders. "On this day, we celebrate the bravery, courage, and strength of our ancestors who rose up out of bondage to demand their freedom. Their legacy remains in our hearts and minds when we reflect on their fearless stance against the oppressive slave trade.

"I often reflect on the acts of enslavement endured by those who came before us. By engaging in this type of reflection, I am encouraged by their sacrifices and treasure their commitment to obtaining their freedom. This journey is not one that can ever be overlooked, forgotten, or diminished. Their quest for freedom required unwavering resilience and formidable perseverance.

"My gratitude is bestowed onto our ancestors, who paved the way for the liberties that we enjoy today, even though we continue to face acts of injustice and issues that impact our well being as a society. We must continue to hold fast to the revolutionaries, heroes, and sheroes whose efforts for liberation offer hope and are a part of our unique history.

"We remember and honor trailblazers of this endeavor such as General Buddhoe and our Fireburn Queens, Mary, Agnes, and Mathilda for their fearless vision," Mr. Roach said.

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.

"Nobody didn't free us," Governor Bryan remarked confidently on Friday.

"We free ourselves here in the Virgin Islands. And, it's that same fire burning and spirit that is in us now," the governor voiced, suggesting that it is "mental slavery" that has trapped Virgin Islanders in what he described as "a region of lack of self-care and self-knowledge and self-acknowledgement."

Mr. Bryan is hoping that next year's celebration will help to change the perspective of the youth who will see themselves represented in local leaders, saying, "We're going to [erect] bust in parks to honor local heroes. To know that they have come from something that is beautiful and that they too can be anything they want to be.

"So that our children could remember that there are those who came before them. That their only look is not only to Martin Luther King but also to Queen Mathilda and to a Ruby Rouss."