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Questions Over Freedom Fighters' Hopes Highlighted in 175th Emancipation Day's Call for Unity and Change

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Performances who many at the July 3, 2023 Emancipation ceremony at Budhoe Park, Frederiksted marking the historic event's 175th anniversary. By. MEDIA ONE

Acknowledgement of the magnitude of the effort that led to self-liberation and a focus on expanding freedom in current and future generations — these were two of the themes threading through Emancipation Day celebrations and ceremonies in the U.S. Virgin Islands on Monday.

Of the comprehensive program of activities organized by the 175th Emancipation Celebration Committee to mark a milestone anniversary of the defining moment in history, when thousands of enslaved Danish West Indians gathered in Frederiksted to demand their freedom. The two themes were echoed most prominently by speakers at ceremonies on St. Croix and St. John.

“Our emancipation story is an unquenchable determination for freedom, and a burning desire for justice that will not be denied,” said Emancipation Committee Chair Carole Burke, as she spoke during the St. Croix gathering at the Budhoe Park in Frederiksted. Keynote speaker Roslyn Brock, chairman emeritus of the NAACP Image Board of Directors put it plainly: “Today is a day of celebration, as we recognize that we stand on the shoulders of giants who were self liberators who literally took their freedom.”

Emancipation represents the hard-fought freedom of Africans brought to the Caribbean as slaves to work in plantations. Among the most revered was the enslaved laborer John Gottlieb, called General Buddhoe, who was a leading rebel during the July 1848 Slave Rebellion in Frederiksted, St. Croix. It was during that time that Danish-led slavery on St. Croix — called the Danish West Indies at the time — was abolished by Governor-General Peter von Scholten, who is believed to have signed a prior agreement with General Buddhoe to abolish slavery.

“Yes, we see the paper was signed, why was it signed? Not because they gave it to us. But because our African ancestors demanded it; we would not leave that day until freedom had come,” said a performer on St. John following a dramatic presentation on the life of Anna Heygaard and her influence on Governor General Peter Van Holten to first petition the Danish King for social reform, and then to appease the demands of the multitudes that gathered on July 3, 1848 to insist on their immediate emancipation.

Intertwined with the historical re-enactments and performances of music, dance, chanting and song, the day’s speakers told stories of the incredible spirit of those who dared to imagine and demand freedom, knowing the risks and dangers of resistance.

“Their strength and courage reminds us that we too can rise above adversity and reclaim our birthright as a people who are unafraid to stand flat footed and speak truth to power,” said Ms. Brock, speaking on St. Croix, while at the same event, Lieutenant Governor Tregenza Roach placed some of those risks into sharp focus, arguing that those of us long removed from the days of slavery cannot understand the level of oppression that era entailed. “And if you want to know how serious it is, you can look at Haiti. You can look at Haiti, Haiti who said, we will not be slaves in 1802, somewhere in there and was punished by a planet that said people like us could not be equal to the people who wanted to dominate the world. And to this day, the oppression of Haiti continues,” Mr. Roach noted.

He also underscored the discriminatory treatment meted out to Virgin Islanders even today by their own institutions. “We are a part of a country whose jurisprudence still refers to us as alien races, savages. Those are words in the cases that our Supreme Court still upholds today, as good law,” he said bluntly, as he reflected on the meaning of the day’s celebration.

Governor Albert Bryan reminded listeners that the struggle for freedom by those brave ancestors did not just benefit themselves but enslaved people across the waters. “That is something that we should hold on to as a people dearly; that not only we were a free people that freed themselves, but we provided safe haven for other places...people used to swim from Tortola over to St. Thomas to be freed because they were still enslaved,” the governor noted.

He went on to admonish current Virgin Islanders not to rest on the accomplishments of their forebears, but to pick up the mantle in the ongoing fight for greater and greater levels of freedom. “Let us remember when we sit down here and we talk about freedom and suffering and the struggle, that the struggle is not over. But the struggle is positioned in a different way ... We cannot get weary, we have to be vigilant and diligent upon our quest in order to emancipate our

people from mental slavery,” Governor Bryan exhorted, channeling Bob Marley's ["Redemption Song"](#).

Keynote Speaker Burke had earlier delivered a similar message. “Our commitment for this Emancipation Day should not end with remembrance alone. It's essential that we actively build upon the foundations that our forebears have laid. We must strive to create a more just and equitable society, one that upholds the values of equality, freedom and justice, not just for some, but for all,” she declared.

Pamela Richards, co-host for the Emancipation celebration on St. John, also reiterated the message that the struggle was not over; that the second part of the struggle was internal. She said, "175 years of freedom, we haven't gotten all the gains that we need to get. We're still working on some of them. Some of them have to come from within.”

During her remarks on St. Croix, Delegate to Congress Stacey Plaskett listed the legacy left by the ancestors, who gave their blood, sweat and toil to build the territory. Strength, resilience, laughter, courage, beauty, intellect, she named, along with baobab trees, cariso, callaloo and fish and funghi. “But most of all, they have given us love. What will we do with those things that they have given us?” she asked.

Meanwhile John Brewer, director of the Department of Interior’s Office of Insular Affairs, who also spoke at the St. Croix activity, challenged Virgin Islanders to contemplate whether the ancestors who stood and demanded their freedom would be satisfied with the current level of progress made by their descendants living today. “The celebration demands we evaluate if our present day circumstances level up to the dreams and expectations of the men and women responsible for the emancipation we celebrate today,” he declared. “The celebration also challenges us to look to the future and to accept the responsibility to do what is right for those not yet born who inherit what we leave.”

Even as Virgin Islanders turn to face what lies ahead, they must re-invigorate themselves for future struggle by imbuing their souls with the spirit of those who risked everything in order to be free. Moved by the enormity of that indomitable energy, Lt. Governor Roach, as he ended his remarks on St. Croix, recited a poem he had written for the occasion - his imagining of the thoughts of one of those 9,000 brave ancestors as they awoke on that fateful morning.

“The Morning Covenants, July 3 1848

Today is a day of warning.

So I claim first, my will for my own.

I will sing my morning prayer to the gods who brought me to life, to them who forged me from iron and those who made up fire

and I will conceive a flame in their honor and hold it at the ready.

And I will wash in pure water, head to toe a sacrament

and I will choose an armor to clad myself against any enemy who refuses to honor the name I choose for myself

and I will call to the four corners for those like me to lead and to follow a phalanx capable of great miracles.

This is my body.

This is my body.

This is my work.

Today, I will transform this slaving ground back to paradise, where singing and dancing will live for themselves once again.

When there will be no need to conceal warring messages in the sacred drum, or in my song, or in my dance.

Instead, I will dignify this earth, in purest joy and with rejoicing in my belly.

As I have reclaimed my station, I will come again in the company of the kings and queens.

The reins will reside in my hands.”

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