

GOVERNMENT OF
THE UNITED STATES VIRGIN ISLANDS



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Testimony on the upcoming 175th Emancipation Celebration
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Department of Tourism
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Testimony regarding the 175th Emancipation Anniversary
by the US Virgin Islands Department of Tourism

Good Afternoon to the Honorable Angel Bolques, Jr. Chairman of Culture, Youth, Aging, Sports & Parks and the other esteemed Senators of this committee, legislative staff, fellow testifiers and the listening and viewing audience.

I am Ian Turnbull, the Director of the Division of Festivals and I am here on behalf of the Department of Tourism as a designee of Commissioner Joseph Boschulte for today's hearing. The Department of Tourism was invited to speak to you today about the upcoming 175th Emancipation Celebration of the Territory's independence on July 3, 2023.

The history of the US Virgin Islands represents significant and inspiring moments of achievement and resilience in world, Caribbean and American history. The 175th Celebration gives our people an opportunity to teach our own narrative concerning the trans-Atlantic slave trade and the history from whence we came.

One of the most commemorative days in the history of the USVI is Emancipation Day on July 3rd. Almost 175 years ago, an organized slave revolt on the island of St. Croix led to the abolition of slavery in what was then the Danish West Indies.

When we come together to celebrate the importance of Emancipation Day, we must remind our children, the community and the world, that brave and proud Virgin Islanders liberated themselves from slave owners 15 years BEFORE President Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863 to end slavery in the United States, and 17 years BEFORE the American Civil War ended in 1865.

Additionally, the commemoration of the 175th anniversary is also a way to preserve and honor our culture as we share our story, music and dance, arts and crafts, and our food with each other and travelers. Our current campaign, “Naturally in Rhythm,” is rooted in promoting our history and culture through offerings that are experienced through the five senses. Visitors can immerse themselves in the sound of the waves caressing our shores, observing our monuments and recognizing the smiles of our people, tasting our local treats and culinary delights, feeling the rhythm of our local music and smelling the sweet Caribbean breezes fragranced by the salt, blossoming flowers and fruits in season. The campaign was intentionally designed to focus on cultural travel in the Territory rather than conventional tourism.

We recognize that the USVI’s history and cultural heritage is intertwined with and is vital to our Tourism industry. The Department of Tourism stands ready to support the efforts of Governor Albert Bryan and his planning committee who are overseeing the upcoming events celebrating the 175th Anniversary of Emancipation Day holiday on July 3.

The Division of Festivals will marshal its experience and resources to assist in helping the anniversary planning committee realize their vision of producing and promoting memorable, world-class events.

This very special anniversary offers a unique opportunity to remind the world that the US Virgin Islands is not only a place of great beauty, exciting carnivals and

world-class beaches, but it offers important insights into the past. A walk through our islands is to see forts, monuments, plantations and relics representing such historical moments as the 1733 St. John slave revolt led by Africans stolen from present day Ghana, the 1878 Fireburn rebellion led by the three Queens, Mary, Agnes and Matilda, and the early life in St. Croix of one of the founders of the United States, Alexander Hamilton.

The Tourism Department looks forward to working with Governor Bryan and his staff, the distinguished members of the 175th Emancipation Day Celebration planning committee, the Cultural Affairs Sub-Committee, the 35th Legislature of the US Virgin Islands and other stakeholders in helping to create their vision of this inspirational and historical event. Thank you.

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