

Testimony for Bill No. 35-0009
Juneteenth Holiday in the Virgin Islands
Senator Myron D. Jackson
February 28, 2023
St. Thomas Virgin Islands, US

Good morning, Senator Carla Joseph, chairman of the *Committee on Government Operations, Veterans Affairs and Consumer Protection* and Honorable Senators, members of the Committee, and non-Committee members present. I am Myron D. Jackson, former Senate President of the Legislature of the Virgin Islands.

Today, I am pleased to join you in the vetting of Bill 35-0009, an Act amending title 1 Virgin Islands Code, chapter 11, section 171(a) relating to the observance of national holidays and enacting *The Juneteenth National Independence Day Act* to declare June 19th a legal holiday in the Virgin Islands. It has been introduced by Senator Blyden, Vice president of the 35th Legislature.

Juneteenth also known as National Independence Day, Jubilee Day, Emancipation Day, Freedom Day, and Black Independence Day commemorates June 19, 1865, when some 2,000 Union troops arrived in Galveston Bay, Texas and announced that the 250,000 enslaved African Americans in the state were free by executive order. This was two years after President Abraham Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation, declaring freedom for the enslaved of the United States and seventeen years after Emancipation here in our islands, then known as the Danish West Indies.

Juneteenth became the 12th federal holiday in 2021, one hundred and fifty-six years after the delayed announcement of freedom in Galveston, when S. 475 passed the Senate on June 15th, passed the House on June 16th, and was signed into law on June 17th by President Biden.

For hundreds of years, the people of our islands, now known as the Virgin Islands of the United States, have been at the forefront of movements for liberation, emancipation, equality, civil rights, and self-determination across the African Diaspora. This year, we will officially observe and celebrate the significant milestone of the 175th anniversary of the Emancipation of our enslaved African ancestors from bondage and chattel slavery. We will commemorate their unceasing determination to be a people free from the oppression of our former colonial masters. Our emancipation, and that of our brothers and sisters across the Caribbean, South America, North America, and Africa ignited the transformative spirit which built these islands, and which contributed to the advancement and development of not only our insular communities, but through migration and the sharing of philosophies and talents, to the advancement and development of our region, the Americas, and the world.

Our ancestors, such as Denmark Vesey, an enslaved African born on St. Thomas, Danish West Indies in 1767, would migrate with his owner to South Carolina, where he became a master carpenter and obtained his freedom. Denmark Vesey is alleged to have planned an insurrection, to coincide with Bastille Day, in Charleston, South Carolina in 1822, molded after the successful revolution of the enslaved in 1791 in Haiti.

As someone born in the Danish West Indies, he would undoubtedly have known of the 1733 African Revolution, on St. John. Did it also influence his commitment for freedom and emancipation of his enslaved brothers and sisters in South Carolina? In our Virgin Islands narrative of Freedom, Edward Wilmot Blyden, educator, theologian, historian, writer, author, community activist, diplomat, born in 1832 to free African parents on St. Thomas, DWI is recognized as the father of Pan-Africanism. In 1850, he migrated, with the assistance of the Dutch Reform congregation and the St. Thomas community, to New York City for seminary college, but was denied entry because of his race. Blyden then joined the waves of people of

African descent in the 19th century from the United States and the Caribbean who returned to Liberia and Sierra Leone, West Africa. He believed that Africans in the Diaspora could and should return to Africa and help in the rebuilding of the continent. He became an influential pan-Africanist, writing and engaging others on the topic throughout West Africa, the Caribbean, the United States and Europe.

In the 20th century, Vesey and Blyden would be followed by Hubert Henry Harrison, who was born on St. Croix in 1883. He was a writer, orator, race and class conscious activist, educator, and political activist. More than any other political leader of his era, Harrison combined class consciousness and anti-white-supremacy consciousness into a coherent political radicalism. Harrison is credited of introducing Marcus Garvey to the African American community in Harlem. Another influential Freedom fighter from our shores is Ashley Totten born on St. Croix in 1884. Totten was a political and community activist and union leader. He was one of the founders of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, the first African American led organization to receive charter in the American Federation of Labor. There are many other Virgin Islanders, too many to be mentioned here, who would also make significant contributions to the advancement and upliftment of African Americans in their struggle for freedom, equality, and civil rights. These giants of our history link us inextricably to the struggles of people of color on the mainland and around the world. Our shared history of Trans-Atlantic enslavement and resistance and revolution against the same compel us to share in this national commemoration, as their freedom echoes and empowers our own.

The recognition and establishment of our Emancipation Holiday, commemorating the events of July 3rd, 1848, did not go unnoticed over the years by those in the Juneteenth movement and their advocacy for a national holiday. In the 1990s, Reverend Ron Meyers, chairman of the Juneteenth National Committee and I became acquainted and

communicated regarding our Emancipation holiday and its recognition in the Territory. If my memory serves me correct, Rev. Meyers was invited to the Territory on several occasions to partake with us during our observance of Emancipation Day, and it was my hope that he would have been part of our 150th anniversary Emancipation celebration in 1998. Twenty-five years later, on the eve of our 175th Emancipation observance, Bill 35-0009 endorses the achievement of Juneteenth advocates who fought for the recognition of our nation's second Independence Day.

Senators, I encourage you to support the passage and adoption of Bill 35-0009 in our solidarity with the struggles of our brethren, and the advocacy of our African American brothers and sisters for the inclusion and recognition of their significant contributions to the development and advancements of the United States. Thank you for the invitation to testify on this important historic legislation and look forward to your engagement.