

TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF BILL NO. 36-0333

An Act Renaming Queen Street in the town of Christiansted, Queen Street in the town of Frederiksted, and Custom House Street in Frederiksted in Honor of the Queens of the Fireburn of 1878

Presented to the Committee on Government Operations, Veterans Affairs and Consumer Protection

Submitted by: Claire L. Brown Roker

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Good Day: Honorable Avery L. Lewis, Chairman, and distinguished members of the Committee on Government Operations, Veterans Affairs and Consumer Protection.

My name is Claire L. Brown Roker, and I submit this testimony in strong support of Bill No. 36-0333, proposed by the Honorable Senator Clifford A. Joseph, Sr. and sponsored by the Honorable Angel L. Bolques, Jr.

Renaming Queen Street in Frederiksted for Mathilda McBean, Custom House Street in Frederiksted for Susanna Abramsen, and Queen Street in Christiansted in honor of Axeline “Agnes” Elizabeth Salomon, three of the four Queens of the Fireburn of 1878, is long-overdue recognition.

The Fireburn of 1878 was one of the most important labor uprisings in Virgin Islands history. In 1849, one year after emancipation, the Labor Act imposed a restrictive system of annual plantation labor contracts on the newly freed population. On October 1, 1878—thirty years after emancipation—estate laborers on St. Croix revolted against low wages, harsh working conditions, and a labor system that continued to restrict their freedom severely.

Over five days, they burned dozens of plantations and much of Frederiksted — a rebellion led largely by determined and passionate women unwilling to accept abusive living and working conditions for their people.

I am a native Virgin Islander, born to Crucian parents Henry David Brown and Wilhelmina Jackson Brown, and I am the niece of Delta Jackson Dorsch, a tradition-bearer and daughter of the soil. To my knowledge, we have never established a direct generational relationship to any of these three women. Still, my sister Juanita Marie Brown, my brother George David Brown, and I grew up hearing the story of these queens' strength told often, and with great pride. Our loved ones always taught us to draw upon the courage, spirit, and strength of these women—qualities that sustain our families to this day and have inspired our own work on behalf of the people of the Virgin Islands.

Several Virgin Islands legislative bodies have already taken meaningful steps to honor this history — establishing Fireburn Day, naming the Queen Mary Highway for Mary Thomas, and mandating a monument to the Queens. Bill No. 36-0333 is a natural and fitting continuation of that legacy. This bill matters because it ensures that Agnes, Mathilda, and Susanna—whose leadership deserves the same lasting recognition that Mary Thomas has rightfully received—are equally and

permanently honored in the very towns where the uprising they led unfolded, making their legacy a visible and enduring part of the places they helped shape.

Street signs and the accompanying biographical plaques required under Section 2 of the bill will teach history through daily life, giving residents, students, and visitors an ongoing, accessible lesson in Virgin Islands history — one that classroom study or a single commemorative day cannot achieve on its own.

The Fireburn was led by women at a time when their leadership was rarely acknowledged, let alone celebrated. This bill honors women's leadership and affirms that their role in Virgin Islands history was central, not incidental.

Conclusion

Queen Axeline "Agnes" Elizabeth Salomon, Queen Mathilda McBean, and Queen Susanna Abramsen risked everything to challenge an unjust system and to demand dignity for Virgin Islands laborers. Renaming these streets in their honor is a small but meaningful way for the 36th Legislature to ensure their sacrifice is neither forgotten nor diminished. I respectfully urge the Committee to vote favorably on Bill No. 36-0333 and to send it forward for passage by the full Legislature.

Just imagine. Every single day, their names will be spoken with pride—etched not only onto the streets of our towns, but into the living memory of our people—affirming for generations to come that these women, their courage, and their sacrifice were worthy of this lasting honor.

Thank you for the opportunity to submit this testimony and for your continued work to preserve and honor the history of the Virgin Islands.

Respectfully submitted,

Claire L. Brown Roker