

Statement of Congresswoman Stacey Plaskett (VI)

House Committee on Natural Resources

Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests, and Public Lands

Hearing: “Legislative hearing on H.R. 1548, H.R. 4658, H.R. 6364, H.R. 6442, H.R. 7496, H.R. 7615, H.R. 7693, H.R. 7952”

June 14, 2022, 10:00am, 1324 Longworth and via WebEx

Chairman Neguse, Ranking Member Fulcher, thank you for the opportunity to present my views on H.R. 7496. My bill would direct the Secretary of the Interior to install a plaque at the peak of Ram Head trail in the Virgin Islands National Park on St. John, in my district, the U.S. Virgin Islands, to commemorate the slave rebellion that began on St. John in 1733. The plaque must include important facts about the slave rebellion; the collective suicide that occurred in the vicinity of Ram Head peak during the rebellion in 1734; and the significance of the rebellion to the history of St. John, the U.S. Virgin Islands, and the United States of America. The bill is bipartisan, and I introduced it in partnership with our colleague, Congressman Guy Reschenthaler of Pennsylvania.

The Ram Head trail, which includes Salt Pond Beach, is a part of the Virgin Islands National Park on St. John. It is owned and managed by the National Park Service. In total, the trail is 2.3 miles roundtrip, culminates with a peak, and takes an average of 1 hour to complete.

In 1733, an island-wide slave rebellion began on St. John. Harsh torture of the enslaved people on St. John (even among Caribbean colonies) was likely the major motivation for the uprising, which had been planned out in advance, in addition to other motivating factors such as drought and plague. The Slave Code of 1733

established new rules threatening brutal punishment for runaways. This led to an island-wide slave rebellion that lasted well into 1734. The slave rebellion on St. John was one of the earliest and longest-lasting slave rebellions in the Americas. It was eventually quelled, however, upon the arrival of reinforcements from Denmark and other European nations. When this happened, numerous rebels, including one of the rebel leaders, Breffu, committed suicide rather than return to slavery and punishment. The vicinity of the peak of Ram Head trail on the island is a place of great significance regarding the history of the slave rebellion because, notably, during the rebellion, a group of rebels committed collective suicide at this location to escape slavery.

This is mainly why the peak of Ram Head trail is an appropriate location to commemorate the island-wide slave rebellion on St. John. That is what is being commemorated with this plaque: the island-wide slave rebellion on St. John. It was an important and early part of the abolition movement in the Western Hemisphere, and it is an important event in the history of St. John, the U.S. Virgin Islands, and America. As such, visitors of the Ram Head trail should know this information and learn the historical significance of the location when they hike the Ram Head trail.

Mr. Reschenthaler and I feel strongly that it would be meaningful for visitors of the park, and the trail, to see an appropriate commemoration when they reach the top of the trail, which overlooks the island and the trail that they have just completed. That is why this legislation directs installation of the plaque in the vicinity of the peak of Ram Head, rather than the beginning of the trail or elsewhere on the island, as it is the appropriate location for acknowledgement.

Mr. Reschenthaler and I have observed that, currently, there is not a commemoration of what happened in the 18th century on St. John. Unlike elsewhere on the island, the Ram Head trail contains very little to no signage about the historic significance of the location or St. John generally.

My office has done due diligence in developing this legislation. My staff met with National Park Service staff at the local, regional, and national level, at the request of this Committee, which included a discussion of what the administrative process would be to install this plaque. A legislative solution is appropriate and warranted upon consultation with the Park Service, which informed my office that installation of the plaque would need to be prioritized at the highest levels of the Department of the Interior because it would represent a commemorative work. Therefore, it would be highly unlikely that a suitable plaque would be installed by administrative action. The installation of a plaque is a high level of honor, and as Congress, **we** have the authority to provide this directive, and ensure it is executed in a timely fashion, to be installed within one year of enactment of the bill. There are numerous other examples of legislation to require the Secretary of the Interior to install a plaque on federal land to commemorate an important historical event.

The legislation also would not run afoul of the commemorative rule in the House because it directs the Secretary of the Interior to undertake an action and place a fixture regarding historic preservation on federal land. Furthermore, importantly, the language of the bill intentionally allows the National Park Service the *flexibility* to determine generally what the plaque will look like, its specific contents, and its precise placement in the area of the peak of Ram Head trail. The Park Service would decide what a “*suitable*” plaque would be, and what exact location would be “*appropriate*”, so long as it at least contains important facts about the slave rebellion

(which would also be up to the Park Service to decide); a mention of the notable collective suicide that occurred in the vicinity of Ram Head; and the overall significance of the island-wide rebellion to the history of St. John, the Virgin Islands, and the United States.

This bill would complement local National Park Service initiative to highlight and increase educational resources on the history of the Virgin Islands. I welcome any additional measures by the Park Service to ensure that visitors understand the historical context at all historic sites and locations in the islands. Through this legislation, the Park Service would provide a proper and meaningful acknowledgement of the historic and pioneering rebellion against slavery that occurred on St. John 115 years before abolition in what is now the U.S. Virgin Islands, and 132 years before the Thirteenth Amendment abolished slavery everywhere in the United States. And it would do so in an appropriate location, the peak of Ram Head in the Virgin Islands National Park.

In closing, I would ask to include letters of endorsement for this bill into the hearing record from: the Friends of the Virgin Islands National Park; the Legislature of the Virgin Islands; and Love City Strong, a non-profit organization on St. John. Thank you for your time.