

Installation of Plaque Commemorating Slave Rebellion on St. John  
Oral Statement Before  
National Parks, Forests, and Public Lands Subcommittee  
Committee on Natural Resources  
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Testimony of Dr. Hadiya Sewer  
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Good Day Chairman Joe Negus, Ranking Member Russ Fulcher, and other esteemed members of the subcommittee. I am Dr. Hadiya Sewer, the President and Co-Founder of St. JanCo: the St. John Heritage Collective and a Visiting Scholar in the Center for the Study of Slavery and Justice at Brown University.

I am pleased to have the opportunity to submit an oral statement regarding H.R. 7496, a Bill that aims to install a plaque at the peak of the Ram Head Trail, which is affectionately called the Ram's Head Trail by the ancestral people of St. John, U.S. Virgin Islands (formerly St. Jan, Danish West Indies). The Ram Head trail is situated in the Virgin Islands National Park located in St. John and the legislation aims to commemorate the 1733 rebellion against slavery that took place there.

On November 23, 1733, enslaved African and Afro Caribbean people on St. John made courageous steps towards securing their freedom and altering the political and economic systems of the then Danish West Indies, the wider Caribbean, and the modern world. On that morning, the "rebels" who the people of St. John prefer to refer to as "revolutionaries," concealed knives in bundles of wood, approached Frederiksvaern in Coral Bay, St. John, killed six of the soldiers stationed there, and commenced the rebellion. In this act of organized resistance, the freedom fighters took and maintained control over the island of St. John for approximately eight months before the rebellion was quelled.

We do not know the names of everyone who participated in the 1733 resistance against slavery. Archives are often created and maintained by people in positions of power and do not often center the voices and experiences of the most marginalized people, namely the enslaved and the rebel fighters. Nevertheless, it is important to recognize the ingenuity and the bravery of the people who resisted their enslavement and sought self-determination. Some of their names are Asari, Breffu, Christian, Claes, Coffi, Contompa, Goliath, Jantje, Jeni, Jenk, Mars, Mingo, Phillip, Pierro, Quahi, Printz Van Juff, Samba, Sipio, Thoma, Vantje.

Their ideologies and justice-oriented actions contributed to the decline of the Danish West Indian economy and inspired subsequent acts of resistance in nearby islands. What we know about the 1733 Rebellion Against Slavery is drawn from the scholarship, advocacy, creative works, oral history, and culture-bearing of individuals such as Dr. Gilbert Sprauve, Professor Gene Emanuel, John Anderson, Dr. Holly Norton, and the community groups and everyday people who take an interest in St. John's history and are deeply invested in transmitting knowledge in both formal and informal capacities. The site of the rebellion, Frederiksvaern, is commonly referred to as Fortsberg, and Dr. Gilbert Sprauve alongside local community organizations hold an annual 1733 Fortsberg History Tour in November to educate the public and commemorate Freedom Fighters Day, a Virgin Islands holiday.

The proposed plaque would help to acknowledge and amplify the work that is currently being done to uncover and disseminate knowledge about the territory's history. The plaque also situates the 1733 Rebellion in territorial, national, regional and global discourses on slavery and its aftermaths by highlighting its significance. By resisting their captivity and dehumanization, the enslaved Africans and Afro Caribbean people of the 1733 Rebellion chose their humanization, clearly articulating their profound and unquenched desires for freedom in the face of anti-Black terror. Enslavers created entire social orders, political systems, and systems of knowledge to justify chattel slavery, settler colonial logic, and the extraction of wealth that takes place under racial capitalism. In resisting slavery, the freedom fighters helped to refine the democratic ideals of the modern world's political systems.

In the 1619 Project, Nikole Hannah Jones writes, "it would be historically inaccurate to reduce the contributions of black people to the vast material wealth created by our bondage. Black Americans have also been, and continue to be, foundational to the idea of American freedom."

It is important that we commemorate the 1733 Rebellion because history is not merely about what happened in the past. It is also about the way that narratives are framed and deployed in the interest of power as several scholars remind us. Our public memory reveals a great deal about who we are as a people and who we are becoming. When we learn about the liberation struggles of historically marginalized people, we are doing our part to perfect democracy. The Ram Head Trail is an appropriate location for the plaque because it is both the location where some of the rebels camped during their bid for sovereignty and the location where some opted to commit suicide rather than allowing themselves to be recaptured.

A plaque in the Virgin Islands National Park that commemorates the 1733 Rebellion and the lives, struggles, and spirit of self-determination of the people who participated is an important step towards 1) honoring their legacy, 2) providing public education on slavery and its aftermaths, and 3) improving St. John residents and visitors' experience of the Virgin Islands National Park.

Thank you for your time.