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Virgin Islands History Month Celebrated with Look at Physical Spaces

ST. THOMAS, USVI – The Virgin Islands Department of Education Division of Virgin Islands Cultural Education (DVICE) will celebrate Virgin Islands heritage through an in-depth look at physical spaces during the March 2022 commemoration of Virgin Islands History Month.

The Division, in collaboration with other government and non-profit organizations, is encouraging students and all Virgin Islanders to “Step Into Heritage in Both Space and Mind” and will focus on the contributions of enslaved Africans in local architecture, the local raw materials used to construct many of the historic structures that still exist today, as well as spaces that were historically used for organizing and empowering Virgin Islanders.

“These islands are inextricably linked to the legacies of built heritage,” explained DVICE Director Stephanie Brown. “A large portion of the raw materials used to construct our historic structures came from the surrounding environment. We can learn about our islands’ history through architecture and heritage spaces that incorporate elements from our natural environments and bricks imported from Europe, illustrating the Virgin Islands intertwined African and European creolized heritage.”

Brown further pointed out that it is necessary to tell the full range of stories that make up Virgin Islands history.

“For a long time, the narratives of many estates and historical districts were told exclusively through one narrative, contributing to the erasure of the ingenuity of the Africans brought to these shores as enslaved people,” she said. “Many of the enslaved Africans possessed

exceptional craftsmanship skills and contributed to the architectural vernacular of the then-Danish West Indies, now known as the Virgin Islands of the United States.”

Brown continued, “Our ports, which now enable us to welcome visitors, tell the story of bodies defying systemic subjugation in commerce and trade, as well as our use of early labor organizing to combat inequitable pay and treatment. The sugar mills that tower over our landscapes have the ability to connect us to our forefathers who toiled the land nearby. The large baobab trees remind us of the power of traveling legacies, as the seeds of the trees were brought over in the hair of enslaved Africans, and those same trees provided spaces of empowerment for community action, particularly for leaders like D. Hamilton Jackson.”

Education Commissioner Racquel Berry-Benjamin notes the importance of understanding V.I. history in all its complexities.

“This year’s theme shows that our history is multifaceted and encompasses not only the many important historical figures and events that originated from or that impacted our islands,” she said. “Let us embrace the whole of our history, including the stories of our buildings, ports, and sugar mills, so that we may be enriched by our past and prepared for our future.”

A calendar of month-long programming that focuses on historic structures and spaces will be released.

CAPTION:

Building on Back Street in Charlotte Amalie, St. Thomas, taken Feb. 2022, shows a traditional basket-handle arch. In the late 16th and early 17th centuries, the Flensburg brick was imported from Denmark’s Flensburg Fjord Building to form the architectural vernacular of the Danish West Indies. European architecture and masonry were influenced by enslaved Africans and their building abilities. Large structures were primarily constructed of Flensburg brick. However, because the stone has a precise shape and can readily be converted to decorative elements, it was also used to build the corners, edges, and arches above windows and doorways.

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