

COMMITTEE ON GOVERNMENT OPERATIONS, VETERAN
AFFAIRS AND CONSUMER PROTECTION

BILL NO. 35-0103

Thirty-Fifth Legislature of the Virgin Islands

June 12, 2023

An Act honoring the memory of the enslaved Africans from Akwamu who participated in the 1733 Insurrection on the island of Sankt Jan in the Danish West Indies, directing the Executive Branch to implement and host a Heritage Celebration, and amending title 1 Virgin Islands Code, section 106 to add a gold circular shield to the Governor's Symbol of Office embossed with the flag of the State of Akwamu in the Republic of Ghana

PROPOSED BY: Senator Milton E. Potter

1 **WHEREAS**, November 23, 2023, will mark the 290th Anniversary of the 1733 African
2 slave insurrection on the island of Sankt Jan in the Danish West Indies, now St. John, Virgin
3 Islands; and

4 **WHEREAS**, the African slaves from the Akwamu state of Ghana were great warriors
5 who dominated the African Gold Coast from 1677 to 1730 before they were-attacked by the
6 Accras and other empires they had previously defeated. Once conquered, hundreds of
7 Akwamus, including Akwamu royals, merchants, and powerful warriors, were captured and
8 enslaved by the Danish, crammed into ships headed across the Atlantic to the Danish West
9 Indies, and sold to sugar plantation owners on St. John; and

1 **WHEREAS**, in 1733, the inhumane work conditions, harsh treatment, and abuse the
2 Akwamu slaves suffered at the hands of the Danish slaveholders were further aggravated by
3 drought, hurricanes, and crop failures due to insect infestation, leading to starvation and an
4 increase in attempts to escape; and

5 **WHEREAS**, fearing that many of the enslaved people would go “maroon”, a generic
6 term for runaway slaves, Danish Governor General Philip Gardelin enacted the 1733 Slave
7 Code, which prescribed harsh punishments for enslaved people who ran away or defied Danish
8 authority, including flogging, amputation of limbs, public torture, branding, 150 lashes, and
9 execution; and

10 **WHEREAS**, this law did not deter the Akwamu slaves; it actually intensified their
11 determination to revolt and fight for their freedom; and

12 **WHEREAS**, in 1733, 150 enslaved Akwamu revolted against the owners, managers, and
13 overseers of St. John’s plantations. Led by noble Akwamu leaders of royal lineage, including
14 King Claes, King Juni, Kanta, and Queen Breffu, the Akwamu slaves captured the fort in Coral
15 Bay and took control of most of the island for a period of six months, making the insurrection
16 one of the earliest and longest-lived slave revolts in the Americas lasting several months into
17 August 1734; and

18 **WHEREAS**, fearing the Insurrection would spread to Tortola, the British decided to help
19 the Danes by sending an English Man O’ War from Tortola with a crew of sixty soldiers. When
20 the British soldiers landed on St. John, they were attacked by the Akwamu and were wounded,
21 demoralized, and defeated as they headed back to Tortola; and

22 **WHEREAS**, the St. John plantation owners and slave-holders solicited aid from the
23 English Mercenary Captain John Maddox, and 50 volunteers sailed from St. Kitts to St. John,
24 where three were killed and five wounded after a vicious attack by the Akwamu. Like the
25 English from Tortola, Maddox, demoralized and defeated, left the island of St. John; and

1 **WHEREAS**, in 1734, King Louis of France wanted to make his father-in-law the King
2 of Poland, which would mean war with Poland, so he needed Denmark to remain neutral.
3 France sold St. Croix to Demark for 750,000 livres, and Denmark offered its neutrality. In
4 return, the French sent 200 soldiers from Martinique to St. John, including a free, colored corps
5 whose specialty was hunting maroons; and

6 **WHEREAS**, this overwhelming force was able to retake the island of St. John, causing
7 some of the Akwamu slaves to commit suicide rather than return to slavery or be captured,
8 tortured, and put to death by the Danish; and

9 **WHEREAS** the state of Akwamu exists today as one of the oldest Akan states in the
10 Republic of Ghana, ruled by King Odeneho Kwafo Akoto III; and

11 **WHEREAS**, in 2022 the Attorney General of the Virgin Islands visited Accra, Ghana as
12 a part of a United States delegation for the 2022 AGA-Africa Annual Conference on
13 Cybersecurity and Africa’s Digital Future. The delegation visited the Akwamu Kingdom and
14 met with King Odeneho Kwafo Akoto II. During that meeting, the Attorney General of the
15 Virgin Islands shared some information about the history of the 1733 Insurrection with the King
16 and his court and explained the role that the Akwamu played in that event; and

17 **WHEREAS**, the Akwamu King enthusiastically shared the Akwamu’s rich history of
18 events in the 1700s that led to hundreds of Akwamu being abducted into the Atlantic slave trade
19 by Denmark through Fort Christianborg in Accra, Ghana; and

20 **WHEREAS**, following the successful meeting and learning of the shared cultural and
21 historical similarities between the Akwamu and the people of the Virgin Islands, King Akoto’s
22 official representative proposed an expedition to the Virgin Islands where the King and his
23 court would come and experience the rich culture and heritage of the Virgin Islands. The king
24 proposed that this journey would include a tour of the site of the St. John Insurrection; a
25 traditional durbar ceremony performed by the King to honor the ancestors, rekindle bonds to

1 the people, revive unity, cleanse the society, and pray for the fruitfulness of the land and the
2 welfare of the people; and a business seminar bringing together professionals to explore a
3 working relationship, and to share and leverage pre-existing history for the greater cultural and
4 educational development of the Akwamu and the Virgin Islands people; Now, Therefore,

5 ***Be it enacted by the Legislature of the Virgin Islands:***

6 **SECTION 1.** Title 1 Virgin Islands Code, section 106 is amended by striking the
7 sentence, “There shall be seven gold circular shields and each shield shall be embossed with
8 the flag or standard of each nation that has held sovereignty over the people of the Virgin
9 Islands.” and replace it with “There shall be eight gold circular shields. Seven shields shall be
10 embossed with the flag or standard of each nation that has held sovereignty over the people of
11 the Virgin Islands, and one shield shall be embossed with the flag of the State of Akwamu in
12 the Republic of Ghana.”

13 **SECTION 2.** The Legislature of the Virgin Islands, on behalf of the people of the Virgin
14 Islands, honors the memory of the enslaved Africans from Akwamu who participated in the
15 1733 Insurrection on the island of Sankt Jan in the Danish West Indies, now St. John, Virgin
16 Islands, and recognizes the strength and resilience of the Akwamu Freedom fighters, as they
17 risked their lives, took fate into their own hands, and rose against their oppressors.

18 **SECTION 3.** To foster cultural and economic ties between the Akwamu people, the
19 Nation of Ghana, and the Virgin Islands, the Executive Branch of the Virgin Islands
20 Government shall implement and host a “Heritage Celebration” that will serve as an
21 educational, historical and cultural opportunity to celebrate the significance and impact of the
22 1733 Insurrection.

23 **SECTION 4.** The sum of \$500,000 is appropriated, in the fiscal year ending September
24 30, 2024, from the Tourism Advertising and Revolving Fund to the office of the Governor of

1 the Virgin Islands, to be used exclusively for the cost of the Heritage Celebration activities.
2 This appropriation remains available until expended.

3 **SECTION 5.** The Executive Branch of the Virgin Islands Government may determine
4 the appropriate activities and expenditures for the Heritage Celebration which may include
5 events and costs such as:

6 (a) Commissioning a statue at the Battery on St. John honoring the 1733 Rebellion;

7 (b) Covering the cost of the Akwamu King and his delegation to visit the Virgin
8 Islands;

9 (c) Coordinating with the Akwamu King to plan a traditional durbar ceremony
10 performed by the King;

11 (d) A luncheon highlighting and displaying similarities between Ghanaian and USVI
12 Foods hosted by the Governor;

13 (e) Covering the cost of travel between the islands to expose the Akwamu delegation
14 to all Virgin Islanders;

15 (f) Sponsoring a forum on tourism and economic development hosted by the V.I.
16 Department of Tourism and Economic Development;

17 (g) Hosting a dinner at Government House;

18 (h) Hosting a public meet and greet at Fort Christian and Fort Fredericksburg for the
19 Akwamu King and his delegation;

20 (i) Hosting a visit by the Akwamu King and his delegation with Virgin Islands school
21 children at the University of the Virgin Islands St. Croix and St. Thomas campuses; or

22 (j) Such other activities as the Executive Branch considers appropriate.

23

BILL SUMMARY

24 Section 1 amends title 1, Virgin Islands Code, section 106 to add a gold circular shield to
25 the Governor's Symbol of Office embossed with the flag of the State of Akwamu in the

1 Republic of Ghana. Section 2 honors the memory of the enslaved Africans from Akwamu that
2 participated in the 1733 Insurrection on the island of Sankt Jan in the Danish West Indies, now
3 St. John, Virgin Islands. Section 3 requires that the Executive Branch implement and host a
4 Heritage Celebration. Section 4 appropriates \$500,000 from the Tourism Advertising and
5 Revolving Fund to the Office of the Governor of the Virgin Islands, to be used exclusively for
6 the cost of the Heritage Celebration activities. Section 5 gives the Executive Branch of the
7 Government of the Virgin Islands broad authority to determine the appropriate activities and
8 expenditures for the Heritage Celebration with some suggestions.

9 **BR23-0512/June 1, 2023/HLF**