

George F. Tyson Statement to the Virgin Islands Legislature regarding Bill No. 28-0100 to commemorate October 1st as an official government holiday submitted and read into the record May 2009.

Good Morning Senators:

Thank you for inviting me to make a statement concerning Bill No. 28-0010, a very important and long overdue piece of legislation.

As a long-time historian, and former teacher of Virgin Islands and Caribbean History, I can state unequivocally that Fireburn was one of the most important events in Virgin Islands and Caribbean history, and that I wholeheartedly support the intent of this legislation to commemorate it on an annual basis every October 1st.

Why was this event so significant? First and foremost because it was a successful popular protest, a collective blow for Freedom delivered by thousands of disenfranchised Crucians, that brought to an end, once and for all, the vicious, violent, oppressive system of slavery imposed on the African-Crucian population by Danish colonialism and capitalistic greed. As such it represented a powerful rejection of privilege, racism, economic exploitation, social injustice and colonialism, a rejection heard and heeded, not only in Denmark, but throughout the Atlantic World. The Fireburn was on the front page of newspapers in New York, London, Paris and Copenhagen, and it was the topic of conversation not only among men of power and privilege, but of common people, black and white, who were waging their own struggles against capitalism, colonialism and racism. On this particular day, during this particular event in 1878, several thousand African-Caribbean working people of St. Croix spoke not only for themselves, but for millions of their compatriots throughout the World. It is a day and an event of which every Virgin Islander should be proud, and one can only wonder why it has taken so long to commemorate it.

Fireburn not only destroyed the last vestiges of slavery and feudalism on St. Croix, it broke open the door to the modern forms of labor relations, labor organization and labor legislation that we enjoy today. The offspring of the 1848 Emancipation Rebellion and the great grandchild of the St. John Revolution of 1733-1734, Fireburn was the mother of the successful General Strike organized in 1916 by David Hamilton Jackson and other members of the newly established St. Croix Labor Union. It was the aunt of the Silver Strike organized in St. Thomas in 1892 (an event also deserving of commemoration). And it is the great-grandmother of those among us who organize, advocate, negotiate, protest, and occasionally strike on behalf of the vast majority of our population who are ordinary working people struggling against powerful vested interests. Remembering and celebrating Fireburn is a powerful affirmation that their cause is just and right and will never be suppressed.

Last but not least I believe Fireburn to be significant and worthy of commemoration because, as is more fully discussed in my article that you have received, it was a collaboration of working people born on St. Croix and born on other Caribbean islands. Natives and immigrants joined to protest on behalf of freedom, justice and a better quality of life, a solidarity that repeated itself in the General Strike of 1916 and subsequent labor action and organization in the Virgin Islands.

Finally, although Fireburn has been widely written about, we have only scratched the surface of knowing what happened and why it happened. In order to properly educate ourselves and future

generations about this pivotal event, it is imperative that we locate, translate and make available for research and educational purpose, the vast body of documentation found in Danish, American and British archives. Accordingly, I urge that an appropriation be attached to this bill that allows for the copying, translation and publication of documentation relating to the Fireburn and its causes.