



THE VIRGIN ISLANDS DEPARTMENT OF
EDUCATION

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**“2025 DAVID HAMILTON JACKSON AND ALL AHWE” EXHIBITION CELEBRATES
STUDENT ARTWORK AND THE LEGACY OF VIRGIN ISLANDS FREEDOM
FIGHTERS**

The Virgin Islands Department of Education (VIDE) Division of Virgin Islands Cultural Education, hosted the 5th Annual David Hamilton Jackson & All Ah We Student Exhibit on Saturday, November 1st, 2025, at Cane Roots Art Gallery. The program celebrated youth creativity, civic pride, and historical consciousness, and connected the territory’s students with the enduring legacies of Virgin Islands freedom fighters David Hamilton Jackson and Rothschild Francis.

The exhibit featured student artworks, performances, and essays inspired by the two early 20th-century visionaries who used the power of the press to challenge injustice and colonial authority.

“It’s not only about honoring Jackson’s voice,” said Stephanie Chalana Brown, Director of the Division of Virgin Islands Cultural Education. “It’s about teaching our students that freedom of expression and civic participation are living traditions. This year we expanded the project to include Rothschild Francis, bridging their stories as part of an ongoing series exploring unsung Virgin Islands heroes.”

A central feature of the exhibit was the recognition of teachers who creatively integrated the project into diverse subject areas. Ms. Luz Rivera Betis, a foreign language teacher at Eulalie R. Rivera Elementary School, described how she introduced Jackson’s legacy into her Spanish classes. “I teach Spanish, but I wanted my students to understand why they are entitled to the rights they have today,” Rivera Betis said. “One of my students wrote a song for David Hamilton Jackson; another wrote a poem. It became a lesson in identity, history, and pride. I now commit to introducing David Hamilton Jackson in every Spanish class I teach.”

Teachers were celebrated from both districts, including Mr. Shem Matthew of Ivanna Eudora Kean High School, whose students produced multiple artworks and a mixed-media collage inspired by The Emancipator, and Ms. Jenna Fuentes of Lew Muckle Elementary School, who engaged over 400 students in classroom projects.

“From Pre-K to high school, from St. Thomas to St. Croix,” Brown added, “our students and teachers showed that culture lives in every subject—from language, science, art, and civic studies. That’s what it means to teach the whole child.”

The keynote presentation was delivered by Kula Francis, historian and faculty member at the University of the Virgin Islands, who illuminated the life of Rothschild Francis, the St. Thomian journalist, editor, and civil rights advocate who founded *The Emancipator* in the 1920s.

“Rothschild Francis was born the grandson of enslaved people and had only a junior high education,” Francis explained. “But through brilliance and determination, he became one of the Virgin Islands’ most fearless advocates. When the U.S. Navy ruled these islands and silenced local voices, Francis demanded fair wages, exposed corruption, and called for the end of military rule.”

In her address, Francis shared excerpts from a 1923 letter from Rothschild Francis to W.E.B. Du Bois, in which he described life under naval governance and appealed for solidarity from the NAACP.

“He wrote, ‘Politically, we are serfs... it is impossible for us to have our day in court when the police judge and the government attorney are one and the same person.’ Those words, written 102 years ago, remind us that freedom of the press is never guaranteed, it is earned through courage,” she said. Francis also revealed that she had recently obtained original letters from Rothschild Francis to both W.E.B. Du Bois and Madam C.J. Walker, offering rare primary evidence of his international advocacy. Her presentation deepened the historical dimension of the student exhibit, linking local heroism to global Black freedom movements.

The event was hosted by Cane Roots Art Gallery, directed by Sonia Deane, who generously offered her gallery space for two full weeks to display the student works.

“This is about collaborative work,” said Deane. “Teachers and volunteers gave their time to mount every piece. We hope that when students walk in, they feel the magic of seeing their work displayed in a real gallery. It’s about sparking that creative fire.”

Dr. Renée Charleswell, Deputy Commissioner of Curriculum and Instruction, commended the program’s growth and impact. “Each student here used creativity to reflect their understanding of community and identity,” she said. “Their art reminds us that the story of All Ah We, all of us, is still being written, and they are the authors.”

This year’s event also included an environmental education partnership with the Division of Sustainability, directed by Ms. Meadows, a sister division to Cultural Education. Guests were given packets of local seeds to encourage home gardening and agricultural literacy throughout the territory.

The day’s programming featured workshops led by Maria Aurora Stiles, the Virgin Islands Good Food Coalition, and Act Out Ensemble led by Sayeeda Carter, culminating in a historic walking tour through downtown Christiansted, led by historian Elizabeth Rezende, visiting Company Street, where Jackson once lived, and King Street, where *The Herald* was printed.

The Cane Roots Art Gallery in downtown Christiansted will host the *David Hamilton Jackson & All Ah We Student Exhibit* through November 15, 2025. The gallery is open Tuesday–Friday, 12:00 p.m.– 5:00 p.m., and Saturday, 1:00 p.m.– 4:00 p.m., and is now welcoming school field trips and community visits.

The Division of Virgin Islands Cultural Education extends its gratitude to Mr. Ernice Gilbert, founder and editor of *The Virgin Islands Consortium*, for his stewardship and support in helping make this year’s student and teacher awards possible.

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