



Press Release

July 14th, 2021

Government appoints Statia Heritage Research Commission **STATIA SUSPENDS ARCHEOLOGICAL DIG AT THE AIRPORT**

The Public Entity St. Eustatius fully understands and respects the concerns of a group of residents in Statia and abroad about the recent excavations at the Golden Rock Plantation by SECAR (St. Eustatius Center for Archaeological Research). Therefore, the Government Commissioners have decided to suspend the airport dig and appoint a commission of independent Caribbean regional experts in the areas of history, archaeology and anthropology. The purpose is to look for viable solutions that can be supported by all stakeholders.

The Public Entity has neither the experience nor the expertise to deal with a project with such a significant cultural impact. The Government has therefore decided to appoint the Statia Heritage Research Commission (SHRC) to assist the Government Commissioners Alida Francis and Claudia Toet in the decision making process.

The names of the independent members of SHRC will be announced next week. The intention is take urgent action on this important matter and to include transparent discussion meetings with community members and other stakeholders. SHRC will facilitate and advise the Government Commissioners in regards to the airport archaeological excavations and the human remains recovered. This group of experts will also play a crucial role in the re-evaluation of the current heritage legislation, in community outreach policies and will indicate how to approach future discoveries of burial grounds and other archaeological findings.

One of the first objectives of the SHRC is to implement a community-based discussion on this sensitive heritage issue in an atmosphere of mutual respect for all opinions. SHRC advises will also include opinions based on the community discussions regarding approaches to the re-burial of the human remains, a potential memorial, etc.

The Government Commissioners will also seek the advice of the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science and the Ministry of the Interior and Kingdom Relations on the way forward.

Burial ground revealed

In September 2020, the local government tasked the St. Eustatius Center for Archaeological Research (SECAR) with performing test trenches in a high

archaeological expectancy area. This was necessary because the earth and sand in that area were to be used for various road projects on St. Eustatius.

It was during such a survey, that the enslaved African burial ground was discovered near the airport. Whenever an area which is to be excavated has the potential to contain heritage artifacts, which are of archaeological value, both SECAR and the Public Entity work together to properly document and research that area. This was also the case at the initial research of the airport site. The aim is to ensure that valuable historical evidence is not destroyed but rather preserved and investigated for its contribution to Statian Heritage. Indeed, modern multi-disciplinary archaeological research adds volumes of new information, far beyond written history, to our understanding of life-histories of the Statian people. From the survey evidence a burial ground was identified and burial excavations conducted with the multi-disciplinary research of these remains offering a vast new insight into the details of life for the enslaved African ancestors of Statia.

Human remains

The archaeological excavation at the airport was suspended on June 15, 2021. This means that since a month there have been no more activities by SECAR at the airport site with no restart expected in the near future, pending the discussions with commission and community discussions.

It is the full intention of the Government Commissioners that the human remains excavated at the Golden Rock site will remain in a respectful, safe keeping place on Statia, for specific osteological analyses until subsequent re-burial in a timely manner takes place. And including a precise plan of action with community engagement. Decisions on these matters will be taken in a joint effort with the SHCR.