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HOUSE JOINT RESOLUTION NO. 728

Offered January 10, 2007

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Atoning for the involuntary servitude of Africans and calling for reconciliation among all Virginians.

Patrons—McEachin, BaCote, Barlow, Brink, Bulova, Caputo, Dance, Ebbin, Eisenberg, Englin, Hall, Howell, A.T., Hull, Iaquinto, Jones, D.C., Marsden, McClellan, Melvin, Moran, Plum, Poisson, Scott, J.M., Shannon, Shuler, Sickles, Toscano, Ward, Watts and Wittman; Senator: Lucas

Referred to Committee on Rules

WHEREAS, slavery has been documented as a worldwide practice since antiquity, dating back to 3500 B.C. in ancient Mesopotamia; and

WHEREAS, during the course of the infamous Atlantic slave trade, millions of Africans became involuntary immigrants to the New World, and the first African slaves in the North American colonies were brought to Jamestown, in 1619; and

WHEREAS, the Atlantic slave trade was a lucrative enterprise, and African slaves, a prized commodity to support the economic base of plantations in the colonies, were traded for tropical products, manufactured goods, sugar, molasses, and other merchandise; and

WHEREAS, some African captives resisted enslavement by fleeing from slave forts on the West African coast and others mutinied aboard slave trading vessels, cast themselves into the Atlantic Ocean, or risked the cruel retaliation of their masters by running away to seek freedom; and

WHEREAS, although the United States outlawed the transatlantic slave trade in 1808, the domestic slave trade in the colonies and illegal importation continued for several decades; and

WHEREAS, slavery, or the "Peculiar Institution," in the United States resembled no other form of involuntary servitude, as Africans were captured and sold at auction as chattel, like inanimate property or animals; and

WHEREAS, to prime Africans for slavery, the ethos of the Africans was shattered, they were brutalized, humiliated, dehumanized, and subjected to the indignity of being stripped of their names and heritage, and families were disassembled as husbands and wives, mothers and daughters, and fathers and sons were sold into slavery apart from one another; and

WHEREAS, a series of complex colonial laws were enacted to relegate the status of Africans and their descendants to slavery, in spite of their loyalty, dedication, and service to the country, including heroic and distinguished service in the Civil War; and

WHEREAS, the system of slavery had become entrenched in American history and the social fabric, and the issue of enslaved Africans had to be addressed as a national issue, contributing to the Civil War from 1861 to 1865 and the passage of the 13th Amendment to the United States Constitution, which abolished slavery and involuntary servitude on December 18, 1865; and

WHEREAS, after emancipation from 246 years of slavery, African Americans soon saw the political, social, and economic gains they made during Reconstruction dissipated by virulent and rabid racism, lynchings, disenfranchisement of African-American voters, Black Codes designed to reimpose the subordination of African Americans, and Jim Crow laws that instituted a rigid system of de jure segregation in virtually all areas of life and that lasted until the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act and the 1965 Voting Rights Act; and

WHEREAS, throughout their existence in America and even in the decades after the Civil Rights Movement, African Americans have found the struggle to overcome the bitter legacy of slavery long and arduous, and for many African Americans the scars left behind are unbearable, haunting their psyches and clouding their vision of the future and of America's many attributes; and

WHEREAS, acknowledgment of the crimes and persecution visited upon other peoples during World War II is embraced lest the world forget, yet the very mention of the broken promise of "40 acres and a mule" to former slaves or of the existence of racism today evokes denial from many quarters of any responsibility for the centuries of legally sanctioned deprivation of African Americans of their endowed rights or for contemporary policies that perpetuate the status quo; and

WHEREAS, in 2003, during a trip to Goree Island, Senegal, a former slave port, President George W. Bush stated, "Slavery is one of the greatest crimes of history, and its legacy still vexes the United States ... Small men took on the powers and airs of tyrants and masters. Years of unpunished brutality and bullying and rape produced a dullness and hardness of conscience. Christian men and women became blind to the clearest commands of their faith and added hypocrisy to injustice. While physical slavery is dead, the legacy is alive. My nation's journey toward justice has not been easy, and it is not

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57 over. For racial bigotry fed by slavery did not end with slavery or with segregation ... and many of the
58 issues that still trouble America have roots in the bitter experience of other times ... But however long
59 the journey, our destiny is set: liberty and justice for all"; and

60 WHEREAS, in the Commonwealth, home to the first African slaves, the vestiges of slavery are ever
61 before African American citizens, from the overt racism of hate groups to the subtle racism encountered
62 when requesting health care, transacting business, buying a home, seeking quality public education and
63 college admission, and enduring pretextual traffic stops and other indignities; and

64 WHEREAS, European and African nations have apologized for their roles in what history calls the
65 worst holocaust of humankind, the Atlantic Slave Trade, and racial reconciliation is impossible without
66 some acknowledgment of the moral and legal injustices perpetrated upon African Americans; and

67 WHEREAS, an apology for centuries of brutal dehumanization and injustices cannot erase the past,
68 but confession of the wrongs can speed racial healing and reconciliation and help African American and
69 white citizens confront the ghosts of their collective pasts together; and

70 WHEREAS, the story of the enslavement of Africans and their descendants, the human carnage, and
71 the dehumanizing atrocities committed during slavery should not be purged from Virginia's history or
72 discounted; moreover, the faith, perseverance, hope, and endless triumphs of African Americans and
73 their significant contributions to the development of this Commonwealth and the nation should be
74 embraced, celebrated, and retold for generations to come; and

75 WHEREAS, the perpetual pain, distrust, and bitterness of many African Americans could be
76 assuaged and the principles espoused by the Founding Fathers would be affirmed, and great strides
77 toward unifying all Virginians and inspiring the nation to acquiesce might be accomplished, if on the
78 eve of the commemoration of the 400th anniversary of the first permanent English settlement in the
79 New World, the Commonwealth acknowledged and atoned for its pivotal role in the slavery of Africans;
80 now, therefore, be it

81 RESOLVED by the House of Delegates, the Senate concurring, That the General Assembly hereby
82 atone for the involuntary servitude of Africans and call for reconciliation among all Virginians; and, be
83 it

84 RESOLVED FURTHER, That the Clerk of the House transmit a copy of this resolution to the
85 Secretary of the Commonwealth, the Secretary of Education, the Superintendent of Public Instruction,
86 the Executive Director of the State Council of Higher Education, the Chancellor of the Virginia
87 Community College System, and the Executive Director of the National Association for the
88 Advancement of Colored People, Virginia State Chapter, requesting that they further disseminate copies
89 of this resolution to their respective constituents so that they may be apprised of the sense of the
90 General Assembly of Virginia in this matter.