

HOUSE RESOLUTION NO. 82

Celebrating the life of Robert H. Cooley, Jr.

Agreed to by the House of Delegates, February 25, 2011

WHEREAS, Robert H. Cooley, Jr., born on February 28, 1909, in Petersburg, just two generations after the end of slavery, and after living a full and rewarding life, was called to eternal rest on February 19, 2011, at the age of 101; and

WHEREAS, Robert H. Cooley, Jr., spent his formative years under "Jim Crow," an era in which racial discrimination and segregation were legally sanctioned and African Americans were denied the full entitlement and benefits of citizenship; and

WHEREAS, Robert H. Cooley, Jr., graduated from Peabody High School in Petersburg; he experienced the bitter indignity of racial discrimination and vowed to join the struggle for civil rights; with persistence and the assistance of his family, church, and community, he positioned himself to challenge the barriers of racial segregation and discrimination by graduating from Virginia Union University in 1932 and Howard University School of Law in 1937; and

WHEREAS, after graduation from law school, Robert H. Cooley, Jr., returned to Petersburg to practice law and begin his combat against racial inequalities and discrimination through the legal system; and

WHEREAS, Robert H. Cooley, Jr., like other Howard Law School graduates, was very ably trained by the finest legal minds who prepared him for a possibly hostile courtroom environment, and he vigorously sought justice and equality for African American clients in thousands of criminal and civil cases throughout racially segregated Southside Virginia; and

WHEREAS, when Charles Carter, an African American member of the Virginia Bar, protested a policeman's attempt to enforce an order of the Supreme Court of Virginia requiring African American lawyers to conduct legal research in the Virginia State Law Library in an alcove designated specifically for attorneys of color, Robert H. Cooley, Jr., together with Oliver White Hill, Sr., and other African American lawyers, considered organizing the African American Bar in 1941 to intensify and galvanize the fight against racial segregation and discrimination; and

WHEREAS, Robert H. Cooley, Jr., was one of the founders of the Old Dominion Bar Association and served as acting president of the association during World War II; he focused the organization's attention on the war, federalism, labor issues, fair employment practices, the Virginia State Bar, and the National Bar Association; and

WHEREAS, during the visit of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., to Petersburg in 1962, Robert H. Cooley, Jr., met with Dr. King and citizens of Southside Virginia to strategize and help plan civil rights activities; he served as civil rights counsel to the Reverend Wyatt Tee Walker, former pastor of Gillfield Baptist Church in Petersburg and the former chief of staff to Dr. King; later, he served as Dr. King's Operations Director for the Southern Christian Leadership Conference; and

WHEREAS, a brilliant legal mind and skilled attorney, Robert H. Cooley, Jr., was named legal counsel for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) "Freedom Bus Ride" from Chesterfield to North Carolina, and he served as legal counsel for Petersburg and Southside Virginia for the NAACP's efforts to enforce the 1965 Civil Rights Act; and

WHEREAS, Robert H. Cooley, Jr., served as co-counsel in a federal lawsuit resulting in a ward election system to overcome a pattern of racial discrimination in voting; he served as campaign manager for the first African American to be elected to Petersburg City Council, the first African American mayor of Petersburg, and for other elected leaders; and

WHEREAS, the long and distinguished legal career of Robert H. Cooley, Jr., included public service as the Deputy Commonwealth Attorney for the City of Petersburg, where he represented the interests of the Commonwealth by prosecuting offenders; and

WHEREAS, the commitment and devotion to fairness and equality for all citizens in Virginia's criminal and civil justice systems exhibited by Robert H. Cooley, Jr., throughout his legal career have significantly benefited the City of Petersburg and the surrounding Southside Virginia region; and

WHEREAS, Robert H. Cooley, Jr., was a continuous inspiration and a man worthy of emulation who sacrificed personal security to ensure equal protection before the law for all persons, and he devoted himself to public service for more than 50 years; and

WHEREAS, Robert H. Cooley, Jr., native son and centenarian, will be remembered as a sage, distinguished litigator, dedicated public servant, civil rights activist, civic leader, and a faithful steward of and bulwark for racial equality and civil rights; and

WHEREAS, the memory of Robert H. Cooley, Jr., will be forever cherished by his loving family,

devoted colleagues, and many friends; now, therefore, be it

RESOLVED, That the House of Delegates hereby note with great sadness the loss of Robert H. Cooley, Jr.; and, be it

RESOLVED FURTHER, That the Clerk of the House of Delegates prepare a copy of this resolution for presentation to his son, Colonel (Ret.) Howard G. Cooley, as an expression of the House of Delegates' respect for Robert H. Cooley, Jr.'s, legacy and memory.