

SENATE JOINT RESOLUTION NO. 190

Commemorating the 200th anniversary of the birth of Reverend John Jasper.

Agreed to by the Senate, February 23, 2012
Agreed to by the House of Delegates, March 2, 2012

WHEREAS, Reverend John Jasper, the youngest of 24 children of Reverend Philip and Tina Jasper, was born into slavery on July 4, 1812, on the Peachy Plantation in Fluvanna County; and

WHEREAS, Reverend John Jasper was intelligent and clever; during his childhood, members of the Jasper family were continually transferred by Mr. Peachy, as was the custom, among his many real estate holdings in Fluvanna and James City Counties and Williamsburg, and Reverend John Jasper was frequently hired out to work for other people as a cart boy and in the coal pits and the factory; and

WHEREAS, Reverend John Jasper was hired out to Samuel Cosby in 1825 to work in Richmond's factory, which was located at the corner of Sixteenth and Cary Streets, and while working there he began to study the planetary system, using only his natural eye; and

WHEREAS, because it was forbidden for slaves to learn to read and write, Reverend John Jasper's education was extremely limited and consisted of only a seven-month tutorial on how to spell by another slave; and

WHEREAS, Reverend John Jasper, while walking through Capitol Square on July 4, 1839, on his birthday, during the celebration of the Fourth of July, was convicted of his need for salvation; he made a confession of faith in Jesus Christ and joined the African Baptist Church on July 25, 1839; he was persuaded and assured by God that he had been called to the ministry and gave evidence of his regeneration to the church; he began preaching the Gospel in 1840 at funerals of slave and free African Americans and giving occasional sermons at the First African Baptist Church of Richmond; and after preaching as a guest minister at Third African Baptist Church in Petersburg, he was called by the church to preach every Sunday; and

WHEREAS, Reverend John Jasper, one of the great slave preachers and a noted funeral eulogist, taught himself to read and write; his sermons and appearances were publicized, and due to his popularity and sincerity, he was given authority to minister to wounded Civil War soldiers; and

WHEREAS, before the Civil War, slave marriages were never legally recognized; however, the United States Freedman's Bureau authorized Reverend John Jasper and several other African American ministers in Richmond to legalize slave marriages, and Sixth Mount Zion Baptist Church owns an original 1865 document of a slave marriage recorded in Reverend Jasper's handwriting; and

WHEREAS, Reverend John Jasper, one of the most famous African American ministers of the 19th century in Richmond, was immensely popular for his gifted oratory, electrifying preaching style, vivid imagery, and ability to spiritually move both African American and white Baptist congregants; and

WHEREAS, Reverend John Jasper's artful and inspired preaching of the fundamentals of the Christian faith led hundreds of people to experience religious conversion and baptism, and his successful ministry was made even more remarkable during this time because Virginia law prohibited African Americans from preaching; and

WHEREAS, Reverend John Jasper organized the Sixth Mount Zion Baptist Church in Richmond in 1867 in an abandoned Confederate horse stable on Brown's Island and became the first African American to establish a church in post-Civil War Richmond; he ministered to both African American and white Baptists, attracting thousands of eager parishioners, elected officials, distinguished individuals, the media, and curious onlookers to standing-room-only sermons on the powers and mysteries of God; and

WHEREAS, in 1869, Reverend John Jasper led the members of Sixth Mount Zion Baptist Church to settle in a small brick building at St. John and Duval Streets in Jackson Ward in Richmond; however, by 1887, a larger facility was needed to accommodate the burgeoning crowds drawn to hear him preach; and

WHEREAS, although Reverend John Jasper frequently was criticized by educated ministers for speaking in the dialect of the Southern slave, nevertheless, he gained international fame due to his masterful and captivating delivery of sermons; his most famous sermon, "De Sun Do Move," was preached first in 1878 at Sixth Mount Zion Baptist Church and later in nearly every locality and to the Virginia General Assembly, and William Wells Brown wrote in *My Southern Home: or, The South and Its People*, 1880 that "I went to hear the somewhat celebrated negro preacher, Rev. John Jasper. The occasion was one of considerable note, he having preached, and by request, a sermon to prove that the 'Sun do move,' and now he was to give it at the solicitation of forty-five members of the Legislature, who were present as hearers.... By special favor I was permitted to enter before the throng came rushing

in. Members of the Legislature were assigned the best seats, indeed, the entire centre of the house was occupied by whites, who I was informed, were from amongst the F. F .Vs"; and

WHEREAS, Reverend John Jasper preached his controversial sermon many times and was praised by some persons and ridiculed by others because the sermon questioned the "natural order of things"; and

WHEREAS, Reverend John Jasper preached his last sermon, "Ye Must Be Born Again," from the pulpit at Sixth Mount Zion Baptist Church, and on March 28, 1901, after uttering, "I have finished my work. I'm waiting at the river, looking across for further orders," he fell into a deep sleep from which he did not regain consciousness, and at the age of 84, he died on March 30, 1901; and

WHEREAS, Reverend John Jasper's legacy is preserved by his beloved Sixth Mount Zion Baptist Church, which, following his example, remains active in ministering to the needs of people by providing essential services to the poor, elderly, homeless, and the destitute in the Jackson Ward community; and

WHEREAS, on the occasion of the 200th anniversary of his birth on July 4, 2012, Reverend John Jasper is fondly remembered for his faithful adherence to the Holy Scriptures, his commitment to the divine call to ministry for more than 50 years, and his sermons, which he preached with unsurpassed ardor; now, therefore, be it

RESOLVED by the Senate, the House of Delegates concurring, That the 200th anniversary of the birth of Reverend John Jasper be commemorated; and, be it

RESOLVED FURTHER, That the Clerk of the Senate prepare a copy of this resolution for presentation to Reverend Tyrone Nelson, pastor of Sixth Mount Zion Baptist Church, requesting that Reverend Nelson further disseminate copies of this resolution to the members of Sixth Mount Zion Baptist Church so that they may be apprised of the sense of the General Assembly of Virginia in this matter.