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**HOUSE JOINT RESOLUTION NO. 175**

Offered January 17, 2014

*Requesting Virginia Commonwealth University to memorialize the contributions of African American cadavers to the training of nineteenth-century physicians in Richmond.*

Patron—McQuinn

Referred to Committee on Rules

WHEREAS, before medical students practiced anatomical dissection on legally obtained cadavers, physicians-in-training during the 1800s in Richmond studied the human body through the remains of cadavers stolen from African American cemeteries under the cover of night; and

WHEREAS, according to well-documented local newspaper accounts of the time, Chris Baker, an African American man employed as a janitor and the keeper of the dissecting room at the Medical College of Virginia in the late 1860s, was also the procurer of dead bodies for medical students; and

WHEREAS, Chris Baker, a "Resurrectionist," as body snatchers or grave robbers were called, lived with his family in the basement of the Egyptian Building on the Medical College of Virginia campus, and records are not available to ascertain whether Chris Baker when first employed was enslaved or a free man; and

WHEREAS, a self-taught man who signed his name with an "X," Chris Baker, "the ghoul of Richmond," became a master of anatomy, knowing and understanding the human body as well as the medical students did; and

WHEREAS, Chris Baker, small, bald, and peculiar in appearance, was a pariah in the Richmond African American community because he eerily scoured announcements of deaths in the community and lurked in African American cemeteries to dig up bodies, forcing families to stand guard for several days until the body decomposed sufficiently to discourage its theft; furthermore, a grisly legend alleges that Chris Baker, known as the "boogeyman" in the African American community, practiced black magic and would dissolve flesh and tissue off bones in a vat of quicklime, which produced a nauseating and permeating odor of putrefaction, in order to provide new bodies for medical students; and

WHEREAS, in December 1882, local newspapers reported that Chris Baker, his assistant, and two white medical students were apprehended in the act of grave robbing at Oakwood Cemetery, an African American cemetery in Richmond; however, Chris Baker was pardoned by Governor William Cameron, and the Virginia General Assembly enacted a law that allowed the bodies of criminals and destitutes to be donated to medical schools; and

WHEREAS, Chris Baker died on June 8, 1919, around the age of 70, and was buried at Evergreen Cemetery, an African American cemetery in Richmond, and his work was hailed by one state newspaper as a "necessary evil" for the advancement of medicine and science; and

WHEREAS, according to research conducted by Dr. Shawn Utsey, Director of the Department of African American Studies at Virginia Commonwealth University, bodies were stolen from Richmond's African American cemeteries and sold to medical schools, including out-of-state institutions such as the University of Pennsylvania; and

WHEREAS, in 1994, during the groundbreaking for new buildings on Virginia Commonwealth University's east campus, a well containing human remains was uncovered, and Dr. Utsey's research reports the conclusion of forensic anthropologists from the Smithsonian Institute that the bones, which had surgical incisions, were those of 26 African Americans and had been simply tossed into the well after anatomical dissection and experimentation were completed; and

WHEREAS, the impact of this episode in Virginia's history continues to resonate among African Americans and is indelibly etched into their psyches, contributing to the fear and distrust of physicians and the medical profession; and

WHEREAS, to confront our collective legacy, a special taskforce has been named by Virginia Commonwealth University to consider an appropriate interment of the bones of the cadavers and a fitting memorial to commemorate the contributions of Richmond's African Americans whose bodies were stolen for anatomical dissection and the furtherance of science and medical research and have now been recovered; and

WHEREAS, a university-led commemorative period acknowledging the sacrifices of Richmond's African Americans whose cadavers contributed to the training of physicians and the advancement of medicine and science must include efforts to study, understand, and publish the complex legacy of Chris Baker and his relationship and contributions to the university and the training of physicians; now, therefore, be it

INTRODUCED

HJ175

59       RESOLVED by the House of Delegates, the Senate concurring, That Virginia Commonwealth  
60 University be requested to memorialize the contributions of African American cadavers to training of  
61 nineteenth-century physicians in Richmond; and, be it  
62       RESOLVED FURTHER, That the Clerk of the House of Delegates transmit a copy of this resolution  
63 to Dr. Michael Rao, president of Virginia Commonwealth University, requesting that he further  
64 disseminate copies of this resolution to his respective constituents, the faculty, and the student body so  
65 that they may be apprised of the sense of the General Assembly of Virginia in this matter.