

SENATE JOINT RESOLUTION NO. 371

Commending the achievements of Ruth Coles Harris and Curtis C. Duke.

Agreed to by the Senate, February 21, 2023
Agreed to by the House of Delegates, February 22, 2023

WHEREAS, Ruth Coles Harris and Curtis C. Duke were the first female and male Black certified public accountants from the Commonwealth, paving the way for generations of professionals in the accounting field in the Commonwealth; and

WHEREAS, 2021 also marked the 100 year anniversary of the first Black certified public accountant (CPA) in the United States, John W. Cromwell, Jr., from New Hampshire, who was licensed in 1921; and

WHEREAS, a native of Louisa, Curtis Duke graduated from Goochland Central High School and served his country as a member of the United States Army during World War II; and

WHEREAS, after his honorable military service, Curtis Duke graduated from Virginia State College, now Virginia State University, and earned a master's degree from New York University; and

WHEREAS, Curtis Duke pursued a career in education and taught at Kentucky State College and what was then St. Paul's Polytechnic Institute, before joining the faculty of Virginia State University as an assistant professor of accounting; and

WHEREAS, in November 1956, Curtis Duke passed an examination in Richmond to become a CPA, making him the first Black CPA in the Commonwealth and one of fewer than 50 Black CPAs in the United States at the time; and

WHEREAS, Ruth Harris is the great-granddaughter of enslaved persons and grew up in Charlottesville during the Great Depression; she graduated at the top of her class from what is now Virginia State University, but as a Black woman in the South during the Jim Crow era, she was forced to travel out of state to further her education; and

WHEREAS, after receiving a master's degree from New York University in 1949, Ruth Harris returned to the Commonwealth and joined the faculty of Virginia Union University; and

WHEREAS, during her nearly 48-year career, Ruth Harris witnessed the expansion of Virginia Union University's commerce department into the Sydney Lewis School of Business, and as the business school's first director, she oversaw the development of the school's comprehensive curriculum and a significant growth in enrollment; and

WHEREAS, in 1962, hoping to motivate and inspire her students, Ruth Harris passed a two-day certification to become the first Black female CPA in Virginia; at that time, there were still fewer than 100 Black CPAs in the nation and fewer than five in the Commonwealth; and

WHEREAS, over the years, Ruth Harris offered her expertise to several other committees and civic organizations in the Commonwealth and around the country; upon her retirement from Virginia Union University in 1997, she was named distinguished professor emeritus for her exceptional contributions to academia and the business community; and

WHEREAS, the Virginia Society of Certified Public Accountants has developed a scholarship fund to honor the legacy of these two trailblazing professionals by helping racially and ethnically underrepresented college students achieve their fullest potential; now, therefore, be it

RESOLVED by the Senate, the House of Delegates concurring, That the General Assembly hereby commend the achievements of Ruth Coles Harris and Curtis C. Duke, the first female and male Black certified public accountants in Virginia; and, be it

RESOLVED FURTHER, That the Clerk of the Senate prepare a copy of this resolution for presentation to Ruth Coles Harris and the family of Curtis C. Duke as an expression of the General Assembly's admiration for their historic accomplishments.