

VIRGINIA FINALLY SHOWS CONTRITION OVER SLAVERY



By DEWAYNE WICKHAM
USA TODAY
February 5, 2007

I think you can say I've got a horse in this race.

On Friday, the Virginia House of Delegates unanimously approved a resolution that expressed a "profound regret for slavery." The vote came a little more than two weeks after Republican Del. Frank Hargrove Sr., objected to a call for the state to apologize for slavery, saying Virginia's "black citizens should get over it." He also said asking Virginia to apologize for slavery would be like asking Jews to say they are sorry for killing Jesus Christ.

Hargrove represents a district in Hanover County, a suburb of the state capital, Richmond. His great-grandfather was a slave owner. My great-great-grandfather, John Wickham, was born into slavery in Hanover Country during the early 1800s.

By the time the House of Delegates voted on the slavery resolution, Hargrove apparently had had a change of mind — if not a change of heart — and joined 90 other members in voting for it. Nine members didn't cast ballots on the matter.

Virginia's Senate is now considering a similar measure. The push for passage of this legislation comes as the state celebrates the 400th anniversary of the founding of Jamestown, Virginia's first permanent settlement. Twelve years later Jamestown became the birthplace of American slavery.

In the nearly 388 years since that great act of inhumanity, Virginia has done a lot to blacks for which it should be sorry.

In 1662, the Virginia House of Burgesses ordered that the race of children born to slave women and "any Englishman" should be determined by the condition of the mother. In other words, children fathered by white men who had their way with black slave women were born slaves.

In the 1830s, Virginia's Legislature passed a law that made it illegal for any blacks — slaves or free — to preach at a religious service. In 1860, it ordered that any free black who was sentenced to prison for a crime could, at the court's discretion, be sold into slavery.

If you think Virginia's treatment of blacks changed quickly after slavery was ended, you're wrong. In 1924, Virginia's Legislature passed a "Racial Integrity Act," which forbade people from marrying across racial lines. In 1959, a state court convicted an interracial couple of violating that law after they married legally in the District of Columbia before moving to Virginia.

This act of state-sponsored racial intolerance came on the heels of an effort by a Virginia U.S. senator to block enforcement of the Supreme Court's 1954 school desegregation order. Called "Massive Resistance," the effort of Sen. Harry Byrd Sr. won the support of the state's Legislature, which tried to close Virginia's public schools in 1958 rather than comply with the high court's school desegregation decision.

Why mention all of this? To make the point that slavery had some pernicious aftereffects — and Virginia's Legislature was on the leading edge of many of them well into the 20th century. Of course, Virginia was also at the forefront of another change. In 1989, Virginians made L. Douglas Wilder this nation's first black elected governor. But as important as that achievement was, it doesn't overshadow the state's long history of enslavement of blacks, or its embrace of Jim Crow laws and attitudes for more than a century. So, an apology for slavery — or a statement of "profound regret" — as Virginia's House of Delegates put it, is a meaningful gesture.



Dewayne Wickham

It won't free my great-great-grandfather from his life of enslavement, but it will go a long way toward convincing me and other descendants of Virginia's slaves that the state's Legislature has finally accepted its long-running complicity in the mistreatment of blacks.

"Virginia had nothing to do with the end of slavery. It had everything to do with the beginning of slavery," Del. A. Donald McEachin, the Richmond Democrat who introduced the House bill, told *The Washington Post*. But by expressing contrition, Virginia can play a leading role in healing the wounds caused by this nation's embrace of slavery and its ugly aftermath.

