

SENATE RESOLUTION NO. 81

Commemorating the lives and legacies of the eight Black men who served as officers in the Virginia State Navy during the Revolutionary War.

Agreed to by the Senate, March 11, 2022

WHEREAS, prior to the start of the Revolutionary War, service by Black men in the military forces of the Virginia Colony was limited to non-armed support roles; and

WHEREAS, in December 1775, George Washington, then commander in chief of the Continental Army, authorized American generals to allow free Black men to enlist in the military; and

WHEREAS, studies indicate that by the conclusion of the war in 1783, at least 420 free Black men and an undocumented number of slaves served in American military units, including at least 140 in the Virginia State Navy; and

WHEREAS, eight Black men have been identified in the historical record as serving in the Virginia State Navy as officers or otherwise fulfilling the roles and responsibilities of officers without the commissions or formal recognition of their white counterparts; and

WHEREAS, James Thomas, a free Black man of Norfolk County, helped secure the Eastern Shore as a Boatswain's Mate aboard the galley *Safeguard* and the brigantine *Northampton*; he participated in one of the Virginia State Navy's only international operations, a raid on Bermuda; and

WHEREAS, John Laws, a free Black man of Northumberland County, joined the Virginia State Navy prior to 1776 and served as a sailmaker aboard the ship *Liberty*; he was subsequently listed as a Second Master and Boatswain's Mate and served aboard ships patrolling the Eastern Shore and the rivers of Virginia; and

WHEREAS, Timothy Laws, a free Black man of Northumberland County and brother of John Laws, joined the Virginia State Navy prior to 1779, when he was recorded as serving aboard the galley *Tempest* as a Gunner; he also took part in the raid on Bermuda and died in 1782 as a result of small pox contracted during the Siege of Yorktown; and

WHEREAS, James Sorrell, a free Black man of Northumberland County, joined the Virginia State Navy in 1777 as a Gunner's Mate and served aboard a galley that was captured and burned by the British in 1779, then subsequently served aboard the *Dragon*; and

WHEREAS, over the course of the Revolutionary War, many enslaved Black men served the Virginia State Navy as pilots, owing to their familiarity with the navigation of the Chesapeake Bay and other inland waterways; and

WHEREAS, Caesar Tarrant, an enslaved Black man from the Tidewater region, joined the Virginia State Navy as a Pilot early in the war and piloted the ship *Patriot* during multiple engagements with British privateers; he returned to Hampton as a slave, but was later freed by an act of the General Assembly in 1789 in recognition of his wartime service; and

WHEREAS, Cuffee, also known as Cuffy, an enslaved Black man from the Tidewater region, served as a Pilot either aboard the *Patriot* or the *Jefferson* and died as a result of injuries sustained in the line of duty; and

WHEREAS, Minny, an enslaved Black man from the Tidewater region, was one of the early casualties of the war and was killed in action while serving as a Pilot during a skirmish with a privateer on the Rappahannock River; and

WHEREAS, Mark Sterling, also known as Mark Starlins, an enslaved Black man in the Tidewater region, was mentioned as serving as Pilot in the Virginia State Navy by Commodore James Barron, though he appears in no other records and is believed to have died in bondage after the war; and

WHEREAS, while several of these men or their heirs received the land grant of 2,666 acres due to officers after the conclusion of the Revolutionary War, others received lesser grants and some received no recognition at all; and

WHEREAS, the eight Black officers in the Virginia State Navy earned the admiration of their shipmates and senior officers through their personal abilities and valorous actions, and they served the nation with the utmost dedication and distinction; now, therefore, be it

RESOLVED by the Senate of Virginia, That the lives and legacies of James Thomas, John Laws, Timothy Laws, James Sorrell, Caesar Tarrant, Cuffee, Minny, and Mark Sterling, officers in the Virginia State Navy during the Revolutionary War, hereby be commemorated; and, be it

RESOLVED FURTHER, That the Clerk of the Senate prepare a copy of this resolution for presentation to the American Revolution Museum at Yorktown as an expression of the Senate of Virginia's admiration for the service and sacrifices of the eight Black men who served as officers in the Virginia State Navy during the Revolutionary War.