Virginia Apologizes for Role in Slavery

By THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

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RICHMOND, Va. (AP) -- Meeting on the grounds of the former Confederate Capitol, the Virginia General Assembly voted unanimously Saturday to express "profound regret" for the state's role in slavery.

Sponsors of the resolution say they know of no other state that has apologized for slavery, although Missouri lawmakers are considering such a measure. The resolution does not carry the weight of law but sends an important symbolic message, supporters said.

"This session will be remembered for a lot of things, but 20 years hence I suspect one of those things will be the fact that we came together and passed this resolution," said Delegate A. Donald McEachin, a Democrat who sponsored it in the House of Delegates.

The resolution passed the House 96-0 and cleared the 40-member Senate on a unanimous voice vote. It does not require Gov. Timothy M. Kaine's approval.

The measure also expressed regret for "the exploitation of Native Americans."

The resolution was introduced as Virginia begins its celebration of the 400th anniversary of Jamestown, where the first Africans arrived in 1619. Richmond, home to a popular boulevard lined with statues of Confederate heroes, later became another point of arrival for Africans and a slave-trade hub.

The resolution says government-sanctioned slavery "ranks as the most horrendous of all depredations of human rights and violations of our founding ideals in our nation's history, and the abolition of slavery was followed by systematic discrimination, enforced segregation, and other insidious institutions and practices toward Americans of African descent that were rooted in racism, racial bias, and racial misunderstanding."

In Virginia, black voter turnout was suppressed with a poll tax and literacy tests before those practices were struck down by federal courts, and state leaders responded to federally ordered school desegregation with a "Massive Resistance" movement in the 1950s and early '60s. Some communities created exclusive whites-only schools.

The apology is the latest in a series of strides Virginia has made in overcoming its segregationist past. Virginia was the first state to elect a black governor -- L. Douglas Wilder in 1989 -- and the Legislature took a step toward atoning for Massive Resistance in 2004 by creating a scholarship fund for blacks whose schools were shut down between 1954 and 1964.

Among those voting for the measure was Delegate Frank D. Hargrove, an 80-year-old Republican who infuriated black leaders last month by saying "black citizens should get over" slavery.
After enduring a barrage of criticism, Hargrove successfully co-sponsored a resolution calling on Virginia to celebrate "Juneteenth," a holiday commemorating the end of slavery in the United States.