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Res. No. 824

Resolution expressing profound regret for slavery and historic wrongs rooted in racial and cultural bias.

By Council Members Liu, Seabrook, Jackson, Comrie, Dickens, Fidler, Foster, Gonzalez, James, Mealy, Nelson, Sanders Jr., Stewart, Vann, Weprin, White Jr., Gerson and de Blasio

Whereas, The founders of the United States of America, proclaiming the nation’s sovereignty in 1776, declared, “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness;” and

Whereas, Racial and cultural bias, afflictions of human civilization since its very genesis, were already deeply rooted in America’s and New York’s cultures at the time of the country’s independence, for example, in the instance of the Dutch West India Company’s first cargo delivery of eleven African slaves to New Netherland in 1626; and

Whereas, Perhaps the rawest and most egregious example of racial bias is the institution of human slavery, in which a fundamental denial of equality and human rights permits the assignment of the status of

‘commodity’ and ‘chattel’ to entire groups of people based, among many possible and equivalently illegitimate considerations, on the color of their skin, the tenets of their religion, or the contempt of their sex; and

Whereas, Slave labor in New Netherland played a crucial role in building the infrastructure for a New World civilization, clearing forests, laying roads, raising homes and public buildings, and growing food; indeed, in reference to New Netherland’s struggle to establish agricultural self-sufficiency, Edgar McManus notes in “A History of Negro Slavery in New York,” “Slavery helped to prepare the way for this transition by providing the labor which made farming attractive and profitable to settlers. Slave labor was especially important in the agricultural development of the Hudson Valley, where an acute scarcity of free workers prevailed;” and

Whereas, During the colonial period, slaves considered to be dependable and to have demonstrated reliable service might be offered a perverse half-freedom in exchange for regular tribute to the Dutch West India Company and compulsion to labor on specific company projects, a fiscally-driven part-time forced labor practice utilized even by Governor Peter Stuyvesant; and

Whereas, In “Slavery in the North,” historian Douglas Harper writes that the Duke of York’s institution of British rule of New York “brought a crucial shift in policy. Whereas the Dutch had used slavery as part of their colonial policy [i.e. for use in specific agricultural and construction purposes], the British used the colony as a market for slaves,” and, quoting Edgar J. McManus’s “A History of Negro Slavery in New York,” Harper elaborates, “The Duke's representatives in New York -- governors, councilors, and customs officials -- were instructed to promote the importation of slaves by every possible means;” and

Whereas, Those slaves who might seek escape and freedom from bondage, through organized revolt or individual flight, were subjected to the cruelest tortures imaginable: burned alive, lynched, dismembered - living beings deemed less than human and subjected to most unnatural and inhuman treatments by a society anesthetized to its own humanity by the scourge of slavery; and

Whereas, New York’s abolition of slavery was a gradual, slow process, described by Northwestern University Professor David Gellman as “political give and take, though it seems appalling that real human

beings should be subject to this give and take,” and in the face of the specter of eventual abolition, slave owners hurried to sell their slaves - and any other blacks they might be able to capture - in Southern markets; scholar Edgar McManus notes in “A History of Negro Slavery in New York” that after 1800, New York’s black population growth rate stagnated as “the exodus was largely the work of kidnappers and illegal traders who dealt in human misery;” and

Whereas, Gradual abolition created categories and subcategories of slavery; for example, a 1799 state act freed all children born to New York slaves after July 4, 1799, but nevertheless required these children to serve their mothers’ masters until males reached the age of 28 and females reached the age of 25; indeed, these carefully distinguished gradations of slavery and servitude amount to little more than semantics of degradation; and

Whereas, According to historian Leslie Harris’s “In the Shadow of Slavery: African Americans in New York City, 1626-1863,” following the January 1863 enactment of the Emancipation Proclamation, “Democratic Party leaders raised the specter of a New York deluged with southern blacks,” a flood which would supposedly create overwhelming labor competition that would completely upset and ruin the antediluvian City’s economy; and

Whereas, An outgrowth of such rumor mongering as well as simmering racial, political, and financial tensions, the New York City Draft Riots of 1863 revealed a City torn apart by bias and hatred, during which eleven black men were lynched, countless blacks were beaten, hundreds of blacks were forced out of New York City, and property, including homes, stores, and orphanages, and public buildings, was burned and destroyed; and

Whereas, Calling attention to Wall Street’s profiteering from the Atlantic slave trade and subsequent underwriting of the expansion of slavery in the South, acting with complicity to structure the trade of Southern goods such as cotton in exchange for manufactured goods from northern states and Europe, Reverend Jesse Jackson wrote in 1998, “Let’s not forget how African-Americans have subsidized this economy with their

unpaid labor. For 250 years enslaved African-Americans were literally commodities upon which the high finance of the stock exchange was built;” and

Whereas, Slavery is not the only stain on New York’s past, and denial of fundamental rights and oppression have extended to groups other than African-Americans; and

Whereas, Racial and cultural bias may be said to characterize the American nation’s relationship with North American indigenous peoples including the New York Iroquois tribes - St. Regis Mohawk, Oneida, Onondaga, Cayuga, Seneca Nation, Tonawanda Band of Seneca, and Tuscorora; the Shinnecock tribe; and the Poospatuck tribe - once-independent nations subjected without due process to dispossession of their land and consigned to reservations with little comprehension of or regard to ties to land or family; and

Whereas, In not establishing universal suffrage to women until ratification of the 19<sup>th</sup> Amendment to the Constitution in 1920, America lagged behind nations like New Zealand, Finland, Norway, and Denmark, and within the United States itself, states like Wyoming, Colorado, Utah, and Illinois preceded New York in granting suffrage; in this regard, cultural biases delayed the political equality of women due to now-incomprehensible assumptions about the roles and abilities of the female sex; and

Whereas, Women in New York were extended the right to vote in 1917, an accomplishment due in great part to decades of both local and national organizing led by renowned New York activists like Elizabeth Cady Stanton, an organizer of the landmark 1848 Seneca Falls Convention, and suffragist and temperance advocate Susan B. Anthony; and

Whereas, More than three centuries after the year 1776 and nearing the 150 year anniversary of the Civil War, the estimable promise of the words of the Declaration of Independence remains unfulfilled, and the inaccessibility of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness which many of our fellow New Yorkers experience is manifest in the myriad forms of oppression and inequity still borne of racial and cultural bias; and

Whereas, African American, Hispanic-American, Asian American and Native American communities continue to suffer from financial and social inequities, patterns of housing segregation, deficiencies in

educational resources, and de facto remnants of formerly codified racism; and

Whereas, Subjection to bias is the unlucky legacy of any group that may differ from the status quo, and, today, immigrant communities, persons with disabilities, and the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender community are just a few examples of additional groups facing constant threat of bias from other citizens in addition to legal requirements and exclusions often decried as unfair, inequitable, and inconsiderate of these groups' civil and human rights; and

Whereas, In considering the value and necessity of an expression of regret and, in essence, an apology, the Council of the City of New York recognizes that reconciliation and healing of historical wounds inflicted by racial and cultural bias is possible only with the extension of a formal recognition of injurious actions and formal repentance for both those actions and their persistent repercussions; and

Whereas, As one of the world's most diverse cities, truly representative in makeup of the professed American ideal of a social melting pot, New York City acknowledges with great pride the strides it has taken, legislatively, socially, and otherwise, in promoting a more just, more humane, more equal society, driven not by racial and cultural bias but by a firm commitment to a belief that there is strength in diversity, power in understanding, and that, without qualification, all people are created equal, now, therefore, be it

Resolved, That the Council of the City of New York expresses profound regret for slavery and historic wrongs rooted in racial and cultural bias.

BRS  
4.13.07  
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