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SENATE RESOLUTION NO. 284

Offered February 18, 2025

Commending First Baptist Church of Petersburg.

Patron—Aird

WHEREAS, First Baptist Church of Petersburg, a distinguished faith institution that is one of the oldest Black churches in the nation, celebrated its 250th anniversary in 2024; and

WHEREAS, the origins of First Baptist Church date to 1756, when a group of Black people known as the New Lights began to gather for worship services led by elders William Murphy, Phillips, and Mackey; as interest in organizing a church grew, the Reverend John Michaels united the group and formed the First African Baptist Church on the estate of Colonel William Byrd III; and

WHEREAS, after its meeting house was destroyed by fire, First Baptist Church, under the leadership of elder John Benn, relocated to Petersburg, becoming a member of the Portsmouth Association in 1829; and

WHEREAS, elder Daniel Jackson served as pastor of First Baptist Church after John Benn's death and guided the church during a time when laws instituted following Nat Turner's insurrection restricted the congregation's ability to meet; and

WHEREAS, in 1842, First Baptist Church held a great revival in which many individuals were baptized and brought into the church's membership; from this year until 1872, the church was led by a succession of dedicated faith leaders, including the Reverend Gwaltney, elder R.N. Lee, the Reverend John Butler, the Reverend Harrison Scott, the Reverend John Gaines, and the Reverend P.T. Smith; and

WHEREAS, since 1873, First Baptist Church has been led by 14 pastors who have offered inspired counsel to the church's members while working tirelessly to foster the congregation's growth and longevity, including its current pastor, the Reverend Dr. Jeremiah Tillman, who has been with the church since 1999; and

WHEREAS, Petersburg established a public school system in 1868, two years before the state's mandate, and Colored Elementary School #1 was conducted in the old church building of the First Baptist Church; the building had been moved to this site in the 1830s from Bolling Hill, where it had served in the 1820s both as a church and as one of the earliest organized schools for African Americans in Petersburg; a second story was constructed on this building to accommodate the opening in January 1870 of a high school that was reputedly the first African American public high school in the Commonwealth and the nation; and

WHEREAS, First Baptist Church has continually expanded and renovated its church structures over the years to better serve its congregation and established new ministries, groups, and other activities to support them on their spiritual journeys; and

WHEREAS, for 250 years, First Baptist Church has provided its members with uplifting spiritual guidance, occasions for joyful worship and fellowship, and opportunities for generous community outreach; now, therefore, be it

RESOLVED by the Senate of Virginia, That First Baptist Church of Petersburg, a pillar of the Petersburg community, hereby be commended on the occasion of its 250th anniversary; and, be it

RESOLVED FURTHER, That the Clerk of the Senate prepare a copy of this resolution for presentation to First Baptist Church of Petersburg as an expression of the Senate of Virginia's deep respect for the church's history and its contributions to the Commonwealth.

INTRODUCED

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