

IN HONOR OF THE 70TH ANNIVERSARY OF BENJAMIN BANNEKER ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

HON. BARBARA COMSTOCK

OF VIRGINIA

IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Friday, December 29, 2017

Mrs. COMSTOCK. Mr. Speaker, I rise to recognize Benjamin Banneker Elementary School, as it celebrates 70 years of excellence in the 10th Congressional District of Virginia. Located in the Village of St. Louis in Loudoun County, the parents, teachers and students of Benjamin Banneker School and its predecessor, St. Louis School, have survived the awful conditions of segregation and the political gamesmanship over desegregation, to become a wonderful place of learning for a multi-racial student population in 2017.

The village of St. Louis was established in 1881, when landowner Thomas Glascock sold one-acre lots to formerly enslaved families. Earlier, in 1877, a one-room school had been established to attempt to serve the educational needs of the children of St. Louis and surrounding areas. However, the St. Louis School and other schools for black students of this era were overcrowded, mediocre facilities, usually with only a wood stove for heat and an outhouse. In 1896, the U.S. Supreme Court's decision in *Plessy vs. Ferguson* mandated that segregated public schools in Loudoun County and elsewhere in the nation operate under the doctrine of "Separate but Equal." While African-Americans advocated for equal pay for teachers and equal facilities for students, conditions remained unequal, with upwards of 50 students being placed in some one-room schoolhouses. By 1930, a national movement for "equalization" had been established by the NAACP and the parents of African-American students in Loudoun County began a protest movement known as the County-Wide League. After many years of advocacy for improved conditions, on March 31, 1948, the Parent and Teacher Association of St. Louis was able to convince the county school board to purchase 19 acres in the village and build the six-room Benjamin Banneker School, bringing together black students from several area schools whose buildings had badly deteriorated.

While there were improvements in conditions at all-black consolidated schools such as Benjamin Banneker, the NAACP, represented by future U.S. Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall, argued that such physical improvements did not equalize the learning experience of blacks and whites, and that, in fact, the "separate but equal" doctrine was inherently unequal. Although, in 1954, the Supreme Court agreed with the NAACP in the landmark decision of *Brown vs. Board of Education*, parts of the Commonwealth of Virginia defied the judicial mandate until 1967, when Loudoun schools were finally integrated. In 1968, and as an aspect of the integration process, the Loudoun School Board attempted to change the name of the school to Mercer Elementary. However, the pride of the St. Louis community once again prevailed, as the community was able to convince the school board to reverse itself and keep the Benjamin Banneker name, whose namesake had been such an inspiration for the students and teachers of the school. Born a free man, Banneker

was a self-educated natural philosopher, mathematician and astronomer, who helped to survey the new capital city, the District of Columbia, and challenged future president Thomas Jefferson on the issue of slavery, asserting that it totally contradicted the religious and political principles of our nation as they were laid out in the Declaration of Independence and Bill of Rights.

Mr. Speaker, I recently had the pleasure of visiting Benjamin Banneker Elementary School and meeting three of the school's alumni, Mary and Eugene Howard and Ann Bland, who were students during the years of segregation. I then had the privilege of joining them and the school principal, Robert Carter, and the school's fifth graders, in dedicating a beautiful plaque that they initiated, to memorialize the school's important history. Mr. Speaker, I ask you and our colleagues to join me in honoring the determination of those who worked to ensure a quality education for the students of Benjamin Banneker School during those difficult years of segregation and in celebrating the outstanding teachers, administrators and community leaders who, seventy years from its founding, are continuing the tradition of providing an excellent education to the students of the school.

IN RECOGNITION OF THE 150TH ANNIVERSARY OF ST. PAUL AME CHURCH

HON. BARBARA COMSTOCK

OF VIRGINIA

IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Friday, December 29, 2017

Mrs. COMSTOCK. Mr. Speaker, I rise to recognize and congratulate the St. Paul African Methodist Episcopal Church of Winchester, Virginia, on the celebration of its 150th anniversary. In 1867, only two years after the end of slavery, a small group of devout Christians in Winchester met in the home of Jacob Randolph and Mary Catherine Martin to begin organizing one of the first 50 chartered AME churches in the nation. The initial concept of the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church grew out of the Free African Society that was established in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania in 1787. In response to "unkind treatment" and discriminatory practices at St. George's Methodist Church in Philadelphia, Richard Allen, Absalom Jones and other African Americans withdrew from the church to eventually form the national AME Church in 1816, providing people of African descent, who have the same potential and worth as anyone else, the self-respect, dignity and freedom to worship God that they deserved. The history of St. Paul AME church is the story of a close-knit African-American congregation of Christian disciples located within the Fort Loudoun community of Winchester. Because of its close ties with black and white families in the community, the church has been a spiritual center of the society, regularly ringing its massive 650 pound bell on important days of the Christian calendar and important occurrences, such as weddings and funerals, for the St. Paul congregation, itself. In fact, St. Paul was the first church in Winchester to recognize the end of World War I with the ringing of its bell on Armistice Day.

Despite hardships brought on by the impacts of slavery that had recently ended, and

the destructive impacts of segregation that continued for decades into the 20th Century, St. Paul AME Church has been an important force for good and for justice in the Winchester community. As leaders in the civil rights movement, the congregation hosted the Pastor's Alliance of Winchester as it began the first Winchester chapter of the NAACP in 1915. In collaboration with other churches, the St. Paul congregation has consistently done good works in the northern Shenandoah Valley, such as supporting the "Showers for Souls" program for the homeless at Mt. Carmel Baptist Church and with its emphasis on education, the church has a long tradition of supporting the Freemont Street Nursery and giving scholarships to high school seniors as they embark on higher education and providing financial and spiritual support for these scholars throughout their years in college.

In 2004, a remarkable thing happened in the history of the church. A significant leap of faith, similar to the one that started the church, was taken by the church's pastor, Rev. Kevin Wilson, and the leadership of the congregation. After more than a century of use, the church building was in significant need of repairs. Overcoming their own pride, the congregation let the surrounding community know about their predicament and was surprised by the amazingly generous response of the residents of the northern Shenandoah Valley, both black and white. Through the raising of significant funds, the generous volunteering of time and effort and the excellent leadership of contractor Shockey and Sons, in collaboration with members of the congregation, such as Mr. Bill Buckner, a beautifully renovated church, that is a historic landmark of the City of Winchester, was reopened in 2005. Over the years, the abundant goodwill that had been created by acts of faith and love of hundreds of Christian disciples at St. Paul AME Church, resulted in an incredible outpouring of love and generosity in return.

Mr. Speaker, I ask you and our colleagues to join me in congratulating Reverend Kevin Wilson and the congregation of St. Paul AME Church, and all those pastors and lay members who preceded them, for being the strong, loving body of Christ that God intended them to be. As the next 150 years unfold, may the bell of St. Paul AME Church toll again over the community that it has served so faithfully.

IN RECOGNITION OF THE 100TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE TOP OF VIRGINIA REGIONAL CHAMBER

HON. BARBARA COMSTOCK

OF VIRGINIA

IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Friday, December 29, 2017

Mrs. COMSTOCK. Mr. Speaker, I rise to congratulate the Top of Virginia Regional Chamber on the occasion of its 100th Anniversary and to highlight the extraordinary impact that it has had on the people of the northern Shenandoah Valley. Although it has undergone at least five name changes in the last century—starting out as the Winchester Board of Trade and, since 2006, as the Top of Virginia Regional Chamber—it has always remained true to its stated purpose of promoting the general welfare and prosperity of the northern Shenandoah Valley.