



NEW YORK STATE SENATOR

Patricia Fahy

## Fahy, Ashby, McDonald, Romero Introduce Legislation Renaming Patroon Island Bridge after Medal of Honor Recipient Sgt. Henry Johnson

PATRICIA FAHY June 17, 2025

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**ALBANY, N.Y.** – Today, Senator Patricia Fahy (D—Albany), Senator Jake Ashby (R, C—Castleton), Assemblymember John T. McDonald, III (D—Cohoes), and Assemblymember Gabriella Romero (D—Albany) announced introduction of state legislation ([S.8440 Fahy/A.8897 McDonald](#)) that will rename the Capital Region’s Patroon Island Bridge in honor of national Medal of Honor Recipient Sergeant Henry Johnson. This follows President

Trump's announcement that the Department of Defense is renaming Fort Johnson back to Fort Polk.

The base was originally named for Leonidas Polk, a Confederate general, and was renamed to Fort Johnson in 2023 as part of a bipartisan commission recommendation to rename bases that honored Confederate generals and the Confederate war effort. While the base is being renamed for Gen. James H. Polk, who was awarded the Silver Star "for his gallantry in action as commanding officer of the 3rd Cavalry Group (Mechanized) during operations across Europe in World War II," the use of the same surname and its proximity to the original is troubling.

Sgt. Henry Johnson, an infantryman from Albany, first enlisted in 1917 with the segregated, all-black 15th New York National Guard Regiment, ultimately becoming the 369th U.S. Infantry Regiment, aka the 'Harlem Hell Fighters'. While on duty in France's Argonne Forest in May 1918, Sgt. Johnson and a fellow soldier came under attack by a German raiding party of at least a dozen men. Despite being outnumbered, Johnson fought until his rifle ran out of ammunition, then using it as a club before resorting to a bolo knife in hand-to-hand combat. During the encounter, Johnson suffered 21 wounds but managed to prevent his wounded comrades from being captured.

For decades, efforts by historians, Black veterans, and New York lawmakers spearheaded by Senator Chuck Schumer sought to ensure that Johnson's extraordinary bravery was properly acknowledged; recognition long denied due to racial discrimination. It wasn't until 1996 that he was posthumously awarded the Purple Heart for the severe injuries he sustained in combat. In 2002, he received the Distinguished Service Cross, and in 2015, after nearly a century of advocacy, Johnson was finally honored with the Medal of Honor, the nation's highest military award.

Patroon Island Bridge is named for the former Patroon Island in the Hudson River, a nod to Dutch patroons; landholders with manorial rights to large tracts of land in the 17th-century Dutch colony of New Netherland. Patroons were entitled to the acquisition of enslaved labor by the Dutch West India Company's Rights and Exemptions Charter. Patroons, often the wealthiest and most influential residents of New Netherland, procured and exploited enslaved people in almost every part of the colony, but a majority of the enslaved population remained near New Amsterdam (New York City), and farther north, centered around Fort Orange (Albany) and Rensselaerswijck (Rensselaer County).

Moreover, patroons were practically the only colonists in New Netherland to engage in the procurement of enslaved people. This legislation seeks to procure a new, more appropriate name, one that honors a part of local history all Capital Region residents can be proud of, hometown hero and Medal of Honor recipient Sgt. Henry Johnson.

“Renaming the Capital Region’s Patroon Island Bridge on I-90 in honor of Sgt. Henry Johnson is long overdue recognition for a true American hero, and one of Albany’s most courageous sons,” **said bill sponsor Senator Patricia Fahy**. “Where the federal government seeks to erase Sgt. Johnson’s extraordinary bravery on the battlefield and the continuing injustice he faced at home, the Capital Region will continue to step up and ensure he receives the recognition he deserves. This legislation and change will ensure his legacy endures; not only as a soldier, but as a symbol of resilience, honor, and in the continuing fight for racial justice not just here in New York State, but across the country.”

**Bill sponsor Assemblymember John T. McDonald III, RPh said,** "I proudly sponsor the legislation to rename the Patroon Island Bridge after our local and national hero Sgt. Henry Johnson. Many in our community have fought for recognition of Sgt. Johnson's bravery and heroism throughout the years, resulting in the posthumous awards of the Medal of Honor, Purple Heart, and Distinguished Service Cross. Theodore Roosevelt once called Sgt. Johnson

'one of the five bravest American soldiers in [WWI].’ Despite that accolade, the significance of Henry Johnson's achievements were overlooked during his lifetime. More recently, even though the Bipartisan Naming Commission recommended a name change from Fort Polk to Fort Johnson in 2023, last week, the federal administration switched the name back to Fort Polk with no justification. While we cannot right the wrong of taking the name of Fort Polk from Sgt. Johnson or the many other wrongs that he endured during his lifetime due simply to the color of his skin, we can come together and rename this Capital Region gateway after a man whose bravery and sacrifice should be a model to us all."

"My work to help secure the Medal of Honor for Sgt. Henry Johnson, remains as one of the proudest of my career," **said Senator Chuck Schumer (D—New York)**. "He was, is, and forever will be a true American hero and an inspiration to us all. Any opportunity to honor his selfless valor, astounding bravery in the face of battle and legacy as an American hero and a symbol of racial struggle and equality is a great idea, and I commend Senators Fahy, Ashby and Assemblymembers McDonald and Romero for this effort to name this Capital Region landmark after Albany's own Henry Johnson."

"Sergeant Henry Johnson is an American hero whose legacy continues to be diminished by the Trump administration," **said U.S. Senator Kirsten Gillibrand (D—New York)**. "During his lifetime he was shunned by the very country he fought for, just for speaking out against injustice. His valor in World War I is indisputable, yet it took years of advocacy for him to receive the Medal of Honor. I was also proud to lead legislation awarding his unit, the Harlem Hellfighters, the Congressional Gold Medal. I am grateful to Senators Fahy and Ashby and Assemblymembers McDonald and Romero for introducing this legislation that would, at long last, ensure that Sergeant Johnson is not erased from our history."

"Henry Johnson is an American hero, and I'm proud to support this effort to preserve his legacy by renaming this important Capital Region landmark in his honor," **said Congressman**

**Paul D. Tonko.** “Ever since the Trump administration’s attempt to denigrate and diminish his courageous service by renaming Fort Johnson after its original Confederate namesake, I’ve been fighting hard in Washington to rectify this heinous error and end this administration’s racially motivated erasure of our history. By dedicating this bridge to Henry Johnson and his brave service, we’re taking an important step to honor Sergeant Johnson, his family, and all those who have worked to tell his story by ensuring his memory endures for years to come in the region he called home.”

“Sgt. Henry Johnson was American courage personified. This would be a lasting, bipartisan, and fitting tribute to his legacy," **said Senator Jake Ashby.**

“Dedicating the Patroon Island Bridge to Sgt. Henry Johnson is a long-overdue tribute to one of Albany’s most distinguished and courageous veterans,” **said Assemblymember Gabriella A. Romero (D,WF—Albany, Guilderland, New Scotland).** “Recent actions taken by the federal government attempt to strip his recognition, including the rescinding of the Fort Johnson name and the ongoing marginalization of Black Americans’ contribution to our military history. Nevertheless, our community stands firm in honoring his memory. Remaining the bridge serves as a lasting testament to Sgt. Henry Johnson, not only as a Medal of Honor recipient, but as a symbol of determination and the ongoing struggle for justice and equality throughout the United States.” “Henry Johnson is a hero for the ages, and his actions rightly earned him the nation's highest award, the Congressional Medal of Honor. His bravery and selflessness helped save the lives of his comrades during a crucial battle in World War I. Henry Johnson should never be forgotten and his courage and heroism should also be recognized as a pillar in the freedom and security we enjoy today," **Rensselaer County Executive Steve McLaughlin.**

“While I am deeply disappointed by the Department of Defense’s decision to return to the Confederate inspired name of Fort Polk, I’m proud to support this proposal to rename

Patroon Island Bridge in honor of Sgt. Henry Johnson. He was a true American hero who gave everything for this country, and was tragically denied the recognition he deserved in his lifetime. This bridge renaming is a meaningful way to ensure that his courage and sacrifice are never forgotten,” said **Albany County Executive Daniel P. McCoy**.

“When I learned last week of the Trump Administrations decision to remove Henry Johnson's name, a World War I hero, from a military installation in Louisiana, I was appalled,” said **Albany Mayor Kathy Sheehan**. “Sgt. Henry Johnson was a Medal of Honor, Purple Heart, and Croix de guerre recipient. He suffered 21 injuries as a result of the intense combat of the war and was referred to as one of the 'five bravest Americans' to have served in World War I by the co-founder of the American Legion. His heroic service to this country should not and cannot be ignored or cast aside. I am grateful for the leadership of our state delegation to recognize this horrendous decision and with urgency, rectify this injustice so that we may honor and remember; the bravery and sacrifices of Sgt. Johnson. Renaming the Patroon Island Bridge will be a forever bright spot for the Capital Region. I look forward to the passage of this legislation and ultimately the Governor signature.”

“Renaming the Patroon Island Bridge after Sgt. Henry Johnson is more than symbolic—it’s a stand for truth,” said **Jackie Jones, Gulf War veteran and Commander of North Albany American Legion Post 1610**. “He was an Albany hero who gave his all on foreign soil, only to be denied recognition at home. This bridge will not just carry cars—it will carry his legacy. We owe him that much. At the very least.”

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RELATED LEGISLATION

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## 2025-S8440

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- Introduced
- - In Committee Assembly
  - In Committee Senate
- - On Floor Calendar Assembly
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- - Passed Assembly
  - Passed Senate
- Delivered to Governor
- Signed By Governor
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Dedicates a portion of the state highway system to Sgt Henry Johnson

June 12, 2025

In Senate Committee [Rules](#)

Sponsored by [Patricia Fahy](#)

Do you support this bill?