

2015-K1171

LEGISLATIVE RESOLUTION commemorating the 225th Anniversary of the Town of Petersburg

WHEREAS, It is the intent of this Legislative Body to honor and commemorate the distinguished histories of the communities which comprise the noble body of this great Empire State; and

WHEREAS, Attendant to such concern, and in full accord with its long-standing traditions, this Legislative Body is justly proud to commemorate the 225th Anniversary of the Town of Petersburg, in Rensselaer County, New York; and

WHEREAS, In 1631, Kiliaen van Rensselaer received title to a vast spread of land which included most of what is today Rensselaer County; for many years this land remained wild and vacant; and

WHEREAS, During the 1730s, the earliest European settlers, who were certainly of Dutch stock, arrived in Petersburg; by 1740, a thriving settlement, commonly known as "Dutch Hoosic", had been established at the juncture of the Hoosick and Little Hoosick Rivers (now North Petersburg); and

WHEREAS, The rich bottomlands that had been created by these two rivers were turned into productive farms; nevertheless, times were hard; continuous wars with the French and the Indians resulted in much destruction and bloodshed; and

WHEREAS, On several occasions the primitive farms along the Hoosick and Little Hoosick were burned out and their inhabitants killed or dragged off as slaves to Canada; in 1747, the entire settlement of Dutch Hoosick was sacked and burned by French troops, and in 1754, the rebuilt settlement was once again burned down by Indians; and

WHEREAS, Finally, with the end of the French and Indian War in 1763, life returned to normal, and by 1767, the area around Dutch Hoosick was

once again filled with farmsteads; some settlers had ventured up the Little Hoosick, including Pietrus Simmon, the farm master of the Patroon van Rensselaer, who established a farm on both sides of the Cleyne Hosick Creek near where the Berlin Cemetery is now located; and WHEREAS, At about this time, a few settlers from New England began to push into the valley; by the time of the American Revolution this area, while still thinly populated, was nevertheless very agitated by the events of the day; many of the original Dutch inhabitants retained their loyalty to the British Crown while the New Englanders seemed more disposed towards the rebellion; and

WHEREAS, As the Revolution was winding down the van Rensselaers decided to make a concerted effort to attract settlers to their lands; since the coastal regions of Rhode Island and Connecticut were overpopulated and teeming with unemployed young men recently discharged from service in the Continental Army, the van Rensselaers sent out glowing advertisements to induce these people to settle in the Little Hoosic Valley; and

WHEREAS, Before long a flood of people with names like Hewitt, Church, Moon, Allen, Weaver, Lewis and Maxon came rushing in; they procured their leases and began to clear and work the land; and

WHEREAS, However, it was not easy going for these young New Englanders; the first few winters were hard and they found themselves relying for help from the already established Dutch settlers; in fact, the van Rensselaers' farm master, Pietrus or Peter Simmon was so helpful that when in 1791, the northern part of Stephentown was broken off to form a new town which was named after him; and

WHEREAS, On March 18, 1791, the New York State Legislature passed an act that as of April 4 of that year "... a distinct and separate town by

the name of Petersburgh..." would be established; the original town boundaries included not only the present Petersburg, but also much of what is today Berlin and Grafton; and

WHEREAS, The early years of the 19th Century saw Petersburg grow into a boom town; agriculture provided the major means of support for the town's growing population, and the Little Hoosick and its many tributaries provided an abundant source of cheap energy; and

WHEREAS, The hamlets of Petersburg Four Corners (North Petersburg), Rensselaer's Mills (South Petersburg) and Stillman Village all developed around the many mills and manufacturies that were established to process the bountiful production of farm and forest; and

WHEREAS, It was at this time that Petersburg had its largest population of almost 3,000 people; nonetheless, parts of the Town were broken off in 1806 and 1807 to form the Towns of Berlin and Grafton; and

WHEREAS, In 1813, a terrible epidemic swept through the Little Hoosick Valley killing hundreds; three years later, it snowed throughout most of May, and on July 4th the Little Hoosic River was frozen over; since no crops could be planted, much less harvested, there was widespread starvation; and

WHEREAS, As early as 1812 Petersburg had a public library and 10 school houses; in 1820, the population of the Town numbered 2,248 residents; among them were 485 farmers, 92 mechanics, three merchants, one foreigner, 12 free blacks and four slaves and taxable property in the Town amounted to \$280,409; and

WHEREAS, Moreover, there were 12,675 acres of improved land, 2,172 cattle, 532 horses, and 5,591 sheep; 42,211 yards of cloth were produced, and there were two grist mills, five saw mills, three fulling mills, three carding machines, one distillery and one ashery; and

WHEREAS, Men from Petersburg served in both the War of 1812 and the Mexican War; perhaps the best known veteran of the former was Aaron Worthington who kept an inn at South Petersburg and was also one of the builders of the Petersburg Baptist Church; and

WHEREAS, During the Civil War many of Petersburg's young men saw service; the majority appear to have served in Company 'A' of the 125th Regiment, New York Volunteers; and

WHEREAS, Like towns all over the North, Petersburg sacrificed its share of men to preserve the Union; over 30 men from the little valley lost their lives; and

WHEREAS, During the 1860s the Harlem Railroad pushed an extension down the valley and with it brought the hope of new prosperity; however, in

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reality the advance of industry and transportation did just the opposite; between 1880 and 1910 the population of Petersburg dropped from 1,781 to 1,238; and

WHEREAS, Nevertheless, a number of businesses continued to thrive in Petersburg, including several shirt factories, a comb manufacturer and even a book publisher; and

WHEREAS, Photographs of the Petersburg area taken between 1880 and 1920 show a truly idyllic setting; the buildings and houses were clean and simple, and the surrounding countryside is clear and well-tended, and the people seemed content; and

WHEREAS, In 1911, a fire destroyed Horace Wells' mill and the Lower Bridge in South Petersburg; the Town fathers decided a modern structure was needed, and after reviewing various designs, accepted a bid from the Cole-Mortman Company for a concrete arch bridge; when completed, this bridge was the longest concrete span in Rensselaer County; and

WHEREAS, The Town was so pleased with it that they had bridges of similar design built to replace the Upper Bridge and the one over Coon Brook; the new Upper Bridge, however, was replaced only a decade later

by the present structure because of the routing of the new Taconic Trail; and

WHEREAS, This project, which was begun in 1926, probably did more to alter the nature and appearance of South Petersburg than anything else during the 20th Century; buildings were torn down and road beds moved; and

WHEREAS, On the other hand, the project provided jobs for local people

and when completed, the Taconic Trail made it easier for Petersburg farmers to sell their produce in Williamstown, where because it was a college town, it was said they could get better prices than down in Troy; and

WHEREAS, By the middle years of the 20th Century the population had dropped below 1,000 citizens, and Petersburg became a quiet, country town; and

WHEREAS, Yet Petersburg has continued to remain unique; at the end of World War II, the Town chose to honor its veterans with something more practical than a statue or stone monument, and so over the next eight years the residents volunteered their efforts to build the Veterans' Memorial Hall; and

WHEREAS, In the late 1950s New York State decided to widen Route 22; as a result, the old Litcher Tavern (a.k.a. the Eldred House) in North Petersburg, which was built in 1766, was slated for demolition, after a desperate fight to save the building, the bulldozers went to work, and one of the last vestiges of Petersburg's colonial history disappeared; and

WHEREAS, On April 1, 1976, the Town Hall (formerly the old District No. 4 School House) burned to the ground, and along with it went the Firehouse and the Library; both buildings were replaced in 1978; and

WHEREAS, Then in 1981, one of the finest architectural landmarks in the County, the Petersburg Baptist Church, also went up in flames; fortunately it too has been rebuilt, albeit on a more modest scale; and

WHEREAS, In 1991, as Petersburg celebrated its two hundredth birthday, the Town faced many challenges, but it also had much to look forward to; while some of its oldest structures had disappeared, and the forest had reclaimed many a pasture and field, the independent, hard-working and neighborly character of Petersburg's citizens remained unchanged; and

WHEREAS, Remaining fruitful over the ebb and flow of decades of growth and change, the Town of Petersburg continues its commitment to enhanc-

ing the quality of life of its citizens, ensuring a positive business, institutional and educational climate, and providing all essential services; now, therefore, be it

RESOLVED, That this Legislative Body pause in its deliberations to commemorate the 225th Anniversary of the Town of Petersburg, recognizing the significance of the role it continues to play in the life of the community of the State of New York; and be it further

RESOLVED, That a copy of this Resolution, suitably engrossed, be transmitted to Peter Schaaphok, Supervisor, Town of Petersburg.