



HR0223

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HOUSE RESOLUTION

2 WHEREAS, The members of the Illinois House of
3 Representatives wish to recognize the life of John William
4 Edinburgh Thomas, the first African-American member of the
5 Illinois General Assembly; and

6 WHEREAS, John W.E. Thomas was elected, as a State
7 Representative, to the 30th Illinois General Assembly in
8 November of 1876, a time when many Illinoisans living still had
9 memories of when the Prairie State was a frontier and they
10 themselves were facing the challenges of settling it and using
11 it as land for crops and railroads; and

12 WHEREAS, John W.E. Thomas was also a pioneer; he was born a
13 slave on May 1, 1847 in Montgomery, Alabama; he learned early
14 how to read and write, a craft which many of his peers were
15 also eager to learn; as a teenager during the American Civil
16 War, he engaged in the dangerous work of teaching literacy to
17 more than 3 dozen African-Americans, a crime under the laws of
18 the Confederacy; and

19 WHEREAS, During the Civil War, the Confederacy imposed
20 martial law and military justice upon African-Americans who
21 violated its laws within their borders; facing these dangers,
22 John W.E. Thomas was supported by his wife and companion, Maria

1 Reynolds, whom he married in 1864; and

2 WHEREAS, After the war, John W.E. Thomas, Maria, and their
3 daughter Hester Thomas moved to Chicago in late 1869 or early
4 1870; the Thomas family found a fast-growing pioneer city
5 filled with wooden buildings, small factories, and small shops;
6 John opened a live-in grocery store on Federal Street near the
7 railroad tracks; he and his family became worshippers at Olivet
8 Baptist Church, a fast-growing, African-American-oriented
9 place of worship in their now-vanished South Loop neighborhood;
10 and

11 WHEREAS, As well as his grocery store, John W.E. Thomas
12 continued his activities as a school teacher; with a special
13 emphasis on adult and African-American education, his work
14 helped people left out of the early public schools of the time;
15 a major Chicago newspaper, the Chicago "InterOcean", paid
16 tribute to him after he "established the first school for
17 colored [sic] people in Chicago, being himself a teacher. The
18 child and the gray-haired freedman, side by side, learned their
19 letters in his home."; and

20 WHEREAS, During the years that followed the Chicago Fire of
21 1871, semi-skilled and skilled craft labor was in tremendous
22 demand in Chicago construction and manufacturing; trends
23 encouraged white and black Chicagoans to work together for

1 economic growth; this economic cooperation led, in turn, to
2 political cooperation; and

3 WHEREAS, Olivet Baptist Church and its members, many of
4 them small business people, were treated as a part of the
5 Chicago Republican Party; church leaders, including John W.E.
6 Thomas, were chosen to represent the Third Ward at the Cook
7 County GOP convention of 1874; and

8 WHEREAS, In 1876, party leaders chose John W.E. Thomas as
9 one of the South Side's candidates to run in November for the
10 Illinois House; the young teacher and grocer had to face
11 substantial opposition, including opposition on racial
12 grounds, to win election; press clippings from the race show
13 that some of the opposition came from his own Republican Party;
14 making personal speaking appearances throughout his district,
15 he courageously overcame these criticisms and was elected with
16 11,532 votes to represent what was then the Second District in
17 Springfield; he served in 1877 and 1878, years that saw hard
18 work in Springfield as the new State Capitol was being built;
19 in 1878, he suffered the tragic loss of his wife Maria; he
20 would remarry twice and father 7 additional children, 4 of whom
21 would join Hester in living to-adulthood; and

22 WHEREAS, John W.E. Thomas left the Illinois House in 1879
23 to study law and win admission to the Illinois bar; in 1882 and

1 1884, he was elected to serve 2 additional terms in
2 Springfield, this time from the Third District in Chicago; as a
3 lawyer, he was appointed to the House Judiciary Committee; he
4 sponsored and persuaded his committee colleagues to support
5 Illinois's first Civil Rights law to ban racial discrimination
6 in public places; even as "Jim Crow" laws were becoming the
7 norm in states like his native Alabama, Illinois was enacting
8 this pioneer law to try to reduce this conduct within the
9 State; and

10 WHEREAS, John W.E. Thomas lived the rest of his life in
11 Chicago, practicing law and working successfully in real
12 estate; as a lifelong Republican, he ran for the Illinois
13 electoral college of 1892-93 as a supporter of President
14 Benjamin Harrison; he died in Chicago on December 18, 1899;
15 upon his death, local newspapers credited him with being one of
16 the wealthiest men on Chicago's South Side, with an estate
17 valued at more than \$100,000 in gold; and

18 WHEREAS, While John W.E. Thomas did not present himself to
19 the Chicago press as a practitioner of racial identity
20 politics, he was aware of his standing as the first
21 African-American member of the Illinois General Assembly; the
22 way he described his feelings was with these words: "Without
23 egotism, I may be permitted to say that it was a proud day for
24 me and for the colored people of the great Republican State of

1 Illinois when, for the first time, and that in the Centennial
2 year, a colored man took his seat in the Legislature of that
3 state which gave to the world the emancipator of my race, the
4 martyred Lincoln."; and

5 WHEREAS, John W.E. Thomas' reference to the Centennial year
6 of the United States of America, 1876, shows where he stands in
7 the history of Illinois and the history of our Nation;
8 therefore, be it

9 RESOLVED, BY THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES OF THE
10 NINETY-NINTH GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF THE STATE OF ILLINOIS, that we
11 commend the work, success, and memory of John William Edinburgh
12 Thomas, the first African-American member of the Illinois House
13 and the Illinois General Assembly; and be it further

14 RESOLVED, That we commend the work of David A. Joens,
15 Archivist of the State of Illinois, for his work in researching
16 the life of John W.E. Thomas, published in his 2012 book "From
17 Slave to State Legislator: John W.E. Thomas, Illinois First
18 African American Lawmaker", published by the Southern Illinois
19 University Press; and be it further

20 RESOLVED, That suitable copies this resolution should be
21 presented to the Black Caucus of the Illinois General Assembly
22 and to David A. Joens of the Illinois State Archives.