

By Senator Thompson

12-00373-15

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Senate Concurrent Resolution

A concurrent resolution acknowledging the grave injustice perpetrated against Charles Greenlee, Walter Irvin, Samuel Shepherd, and Ernest Thomas, who came to be known as the "Groveland Four," exonerating the four men, offering a formal and heartfelt apology to these victims of racial hatred and to their families; and urging the Governor and Cabinet to pardon Walter Irvin and Charles Greenlee.

WHEREAS, on July 16, 1949, a 17-year-old white woman and her estranged husband reported to police that they had been attacked and that she had been raped by four black men after the car in which she and her estranged husband were riding broke down on a rural road outside Groveland, in Lake County, and

WHEREAS, despite the lack of physical evidence in the case and the established alibis of the accused, Charles Greenlee, Walter Irvin, Samuel Shepherd, and Ernest Thomas, the four men were presumed guilty, and

WHEREAS, Walter Irvin and Samuel Shepherd, both World War II veterans, acknowledged that they had stopped by the broken-down vehicle to see if they could assist the couple, but denied any involvement in the alleged rape, and

WHEREAS, Charles Greenlee, who was only 16 years old at the time, and Ernest Thomas denied ever meeting the alleged victim and her estranged husband, and

WHEREAS, after their arrest that evening, Charles Greenlee, Walter Irvin, and Samuel Shepherd were severely beaten in the basement of the county jail, and Mr. Greenlee and Mr. Shepherd

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30 were coerced into confessing to the crime, while Mr. Irvin  
31 refused to admit his guilt, and

32 WHEREAS, Ernest Thomas, who fled the county, was shot to  
33 death several days later in Madison County by members of a  
34 deputized posse of armed men, and

35 WHEREAS, the three surviving men, Charles Greenlee, Walter  
36 Irvin, and Samuel Shepherd, were tried and convicted in the  
37 case, with Mr. Greenlee sentenced to life imprisonment due to  
38 his age and Mr. Irvin and Mr. Shepherd sentenced to death, and

39 WHEREAS, Thurgood Marshall, then executive director of the  
40 NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, appealed the  
41 convictions of Walter Irvin and Samuel Shepherd to the United  
42 States Supreme Court, which unanimously overturned the judgments  
43 on April 9, 1951, and ordered a retrial, and

44 WHEREAS, 7 months later, in November 1951, while  
45 transporting Walter Irvin and Samuel Shepherd from Florida State  
46 Prison in Raiford to Tavares State Prison for a pretrial  
47 hearing, Lake County Sheriff Willis McCall and Deputy Sheriff  
48 James L. Yates shot both men on a dirt road leading into  
49 Umatilla, claiming that they had shot the handcuffed men in  
50 self-defense when the two tried to escape, and

51 WHEREAS, Samuel Shepherd died instantly at the scene as a  
52 result of his wounds, but Walter Irvin, who pretended to be  
53 dead, survived and accused the sheriff and his deputy of  
54 attempted murder, but no charges were ever brought against the  
55 officers, and

56 WHEREAS, Walter Irvin was retried and convicted a second  
57 time of the crime and was sentenced to death, but his sentence  
58 was commuted to life in prison in 1954 by then Governor LeRoy

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59 Collins, who was not convinced of Mr. Irvin's guilt, and  
60       WHEREAS, in 1970, while visiting Lake County, Walter Irvin,  
61 who had been paroled 2 years earlier by then Governor Claude  
62 Kirk, was found dead in his car, officially of natural causes,  
63 although Thurgood Marshall was reported to have doubt about the  
64 circumstances surrounding the death, and  
65       WHEREAS, Charles Greenlee, who was paroled in 1962 after  
66 serving 12 years in prison, died in April 2012 at the age of 78,  
67 and  
68       WHEREAS, the grave injustice perpetrated against the  
69 Groveland Four extended far beyond Lake and Madison Counties and  
70 is believed to have played a role in the deaths of National  
71 Association for the Advancement of Colored People leader Harry  
72 T. Moore and his wife, Harriette, who had advocated on behalf of  
73 the four men and were killed when their home in Mims was bombed  
74 on December 25, 1951, and  
75       WHEREAS, the people of this state recognize that no action  
76 on the part of the Legislature can make right the egregious  
77 wrongs perpetrated against Charles Greenlee, Walter Irvin,  
78 Samuel Shepherd, and Ernest Thomas and their families by the  
79 criminal justice system, law enforcement agencies, and  
80 individuals whose actions were fueled by racial hatred, and  
81       WHEREAS, the families of Charles Greenlee, Walter Irvin,  
82 Samuel Shepherd, and Ernest Thomas have demanded that steps be  
83 taken to clear the men's names, NOW, THEREFORE,  
84  
85 Be It Resolved by the Senate of the State of Florida, the House  
86 of Representatives Concurring:  
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88           That we hereby acknowledge that Charles Greenlee, Walter  
89 Irvin, Samuel Shepherd, and Ernest Thomas were the victims of  
90 gross injustices and that we apologize to the families of the  
91 Groveland Four for all of the aforementioned wrongs and deem the  
92 four men formally exonerated.

93           BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that the Legislature urges the  
94 Governor and Cabinet to review the cases of Walter Irvin and  
95 Charles Greenlee and to grant Mr. Irvin and Mr. Greenlee  
96 pardons.

97           BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that a copy of this resolution be  
98 provided to the Governor, the Attorney General, the Chief  
99 Financial Officer, the Commissioner of Agriculture, and the  
100 families of the Groveland Four as a tangible token of the  
101 sentiments expressed herein.