

N.J. to debate official regret for slavery

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Trenton, N.J. — New Jersey lawmakers begin considering this week a measure that would make theirs the first Northern U.S. state to offer an expression of regret for slavery.

The resolution, which is to be discussed in a state Assembly committee Thursday, expresses "profound regret" for the state's role in slavery and apologizes for the wrongs inflicted by slavery in the U.S. If approved, it would make New Jersey the fifth U.S. state to offer an apology or expression of regret for the institution that served as a catalyst for the Civil War.

Republican lawmakers spoke out against the bid, with one saying it would be meaningless.

"Who living today is guilty of slave holding and thus capable of apologizing for the offense?" asked Republican Assemblyman Richard Merkt. "And who living today is a former slave and thus capable of accepting the apology? So how is a real apology even remotely possible, much less meaningful, given the long absence of both oppressor and victim?"

Another Republican, Assemblyman Michael Patrick Carroll, said, "if slavery was the price that a modern American's ancestors had to pay in order to make one an American, one should get down on one's knees every single day and thank the Lord that such price was paid," Carroll said.

He said that although his ancestors came from Ireland around the 1850s, fleeing a potato famine he said was worsened by British indifference, he bore the British no ill will.

"Far from holding it against the modern British, I delight in the cruelty of their forebearers. Without same, I might be hanging around in Inisfree," Carroll said, referencing an Irish island.

History "is not something for which anyone can — or should be expected to — atone," said Carroll.

Four Southern states have so far offered varying apologies for slavery: Alabama, Maryland, North Carolina and Virginia. A similar effort in Georgia stalled last year.

New Jersey's measure states that "the vestiges of slavery are ever before African-American citizens, from the overt racism of hate groups to the subtle racism encountered when requesting health care, transacting business, buying a home, seeking quality public education and college admission, and enduring pretextual traffic stops and other indignities."

Democratic Assemblyman William Payne, a sponsor of the resolution, argued that if the states that most supported slavery can proffer apologies, then so too can New Jersey.

"All that is being requested of New Jersey is to say three simple words: We are sorry," Payne said.

He said an apology would comfort blacks who comprise 14.5 percent of the state's 8.7 million residents, and would set an example for other states.

According to the proposal, New Jersey had one of the largest slave populations in the Northern colonies, was the last Northern state to free slaves and was the last Northeast state to abolish slavery, doing so in 1846. It also allowed authorities to return runaway slaves.