



1 HOUSE RESOLUTION

2 WHEREAS, The members of the Illinois House of
3 Representatives were saddened to learn of the death of Etta
4 Moten Barnett of Chicago on January 2, 2004; and

5 WHEREAS, Ms. Barnett was a trailblazing singer and actress
6 who conquered Hollywood and Broadway before becoming a graceful
7 leader in Chicago's African-American community for decades;
8 and

9 WHEREAS, She was born November 5, 1901, in Weimer, Texas,
10 she was the only child of the Rev. Freeman F. Moten and Ida Mae
11 Norman, both college graduates; she was 5 when, while singing
12 with a cousin, she realized she had a beautiful voice; her
13 mother decorated a pink-and-white box for her to stand on, and
14 she joined the church choir; and

15 WHEREAS, The daughter of a Methodist minister in Texas, she
16 had plans for college that were derailed when she married one
17 of her high school teachers; when the marriage fell apart, her
18 parent's took care of her three young daughters so she could
19 attend the University of Kansas; after graduating at age 30
20 with a degree in voice and drama, she moved to New York City,
21 where she landed a spot singing with the Eva Jessye Choir; and

22 WHEREAS, In 1934, she married Claude Barnett, head of the
23 Associated Negro Press; he preceded her in death in 1967; and

24 WHEREAS, Ms. Barnett rose to prominence in the 1930s with
25 the film "Gold Diggers of 1933" in which Ms. Barnett sang the
26 Depression-era tune "My Forgotten Man"; she later sang the song
27 for President Franklin D. Roosevelt, making her the first
28 African-American artist to perform at the White House; and

29 WHEREAS, Although her role in "Gold Diggers of 1933" as a

1 widowed housewife was ordinary on its face, it was
2 extraordinary at the time because black actors had been
3 relegated to roles as domestic servants; and

4 WHEREAS, She was hailed by the press as "The New Negro
5 Woman"; theaters in black communities gave her top billing on
6 marquees, even though her name didn't even appear in the
7 movie's credits; and

8 WHEREAS, She went on to star on Broadway, travel the world,
9 and play key roles in civic groups; and

10 WHEREAS, The first film where her name appeared in the
11 credits was 1933's "Flying Down to Rio," which also marked the
12 first pairing of Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers on the silver
13 screen; she played a Brazilian entertainer and sang "The
14 Carioca," which received an Oscar nomination for best song; and

15 WHEREAS, The role that made Ms. Barnett a bona fide star,
16 however, didn't come until 1942, when she played "Bess" in the
17 Broadway revival of George Gershwin's "Porgy and Bess"; it was
18 a role Mr. Gershwin had long envisioned for Ms. Barnett, though
19 it didn't fit her she was a contralto, Bess a soprano; but she
20 trained her voice for the role and played the part for a
21 multiyear run; the change to the higher range took its toll,
22 though, and her voice was never the same; and

23 WHEREAS, Her stature as a civic leader rose after she
24 retired; she held prominent roles with groups including the
25 National Council of Negro Women, the Chicago Lyric Opera, the
26 Field Museum, and the DuSable Museum; and

27 WHEREAS, The passing of Etta Moten Barnett will be deeply
28 felt by many, especially her daughter, Sue Ish; her five
29 grandchildren; and her three great-granchildren; therefore, be
30 it

1 RESOLVED, BY THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES OF THE
2 NINETY-THIRD GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF THE STATE OF ILLINOIS, that we
3 mourn the death of Etta Moten Barnett along with all who knew
4 and loved her and extend our sincere condolences to her family
5 and friends; and be it further

6 RESOLVED, That a suitable copy of this resolution be
7 presented to the family of Etta Moten Barnett as an expression
8 of our deepest sympathy.