

# Ohio lawmaker to seek slavery apology, again

WASHINGTON (AP) — Bulging mailbags filled with letters laced with foul language and vitriol arrived at Rep. Tony Hall's office after he suggested three years ago that Congress apologize to black Americans for 200 years of slavery.

Undeterred by the onslaught, the Ohio Democrat is reintroducing Monday his resolution to put a congressional apology on record, expanded to include a national slavery museum and other activities related to the study of the pre-Civil War America practice.

The national climate has improved since 1997, said Hall, whose hate mail came not only from outraged whites but from angry blacks who said words alone would be a hollow gesture. Hall believes even if the resolution fails, the discussion it will produce will move the United States closer to racial understanding.

"Six million people were torn out of a continent; separated from their families; in some cases killed; oftentimes tortured, put into bondage and families split up; described in our Constitution as three-



Slaves believed to have used the Underground Railroad to escape the South.

fifths of a person," Hall, who is white, said in an interview. "That whole thing has never had a reconciliation. The wound is still open."

"You have to do the first thing," he said. "I always felt the first thing was apologize."

Hall did not coordinate with black leaders in 1997, and his effort did nothing but produce significant discussion. President Clinton was asked about it for months, especially during a tour of Africa that included a visit to a house where kidnapped

Africans were processed for the journey to America's plantations.

Clinton appointed a board to look at racial issues. It recommended that no apology be given, writing in its final report: "The apology we must all make cannot be adequately expressed in words but in actions."

Hall is undertaking his latest effort after soliciting ideas from black religious leaders and discussing it with black colleagues in Congress. He also selected a kickoff date

— June 19—that is significant to black Americans. Called "Juneteenth," it marks the anniversary of the day in 1865 when the last American slaves were freed.

Organizers of a Juneteenth commemoration in Washington are incorporating into their march and rally the news conference where Hall will disclose his resolution.

In addition to an apology, the resolution calls for the government to appoint a commission to examine slavery's legacy; issue a public school

Photo special to Sentinel-Voice

curriculum about slavery; and consider setting up a scholarship fund. It also proposes a national slavery museum.

"It doesn't stop at apology," Hall said. "It gives hope that there should be something after apology."

Hall said he's convinced the time is right to renew a national discussion of slavery's legacy.

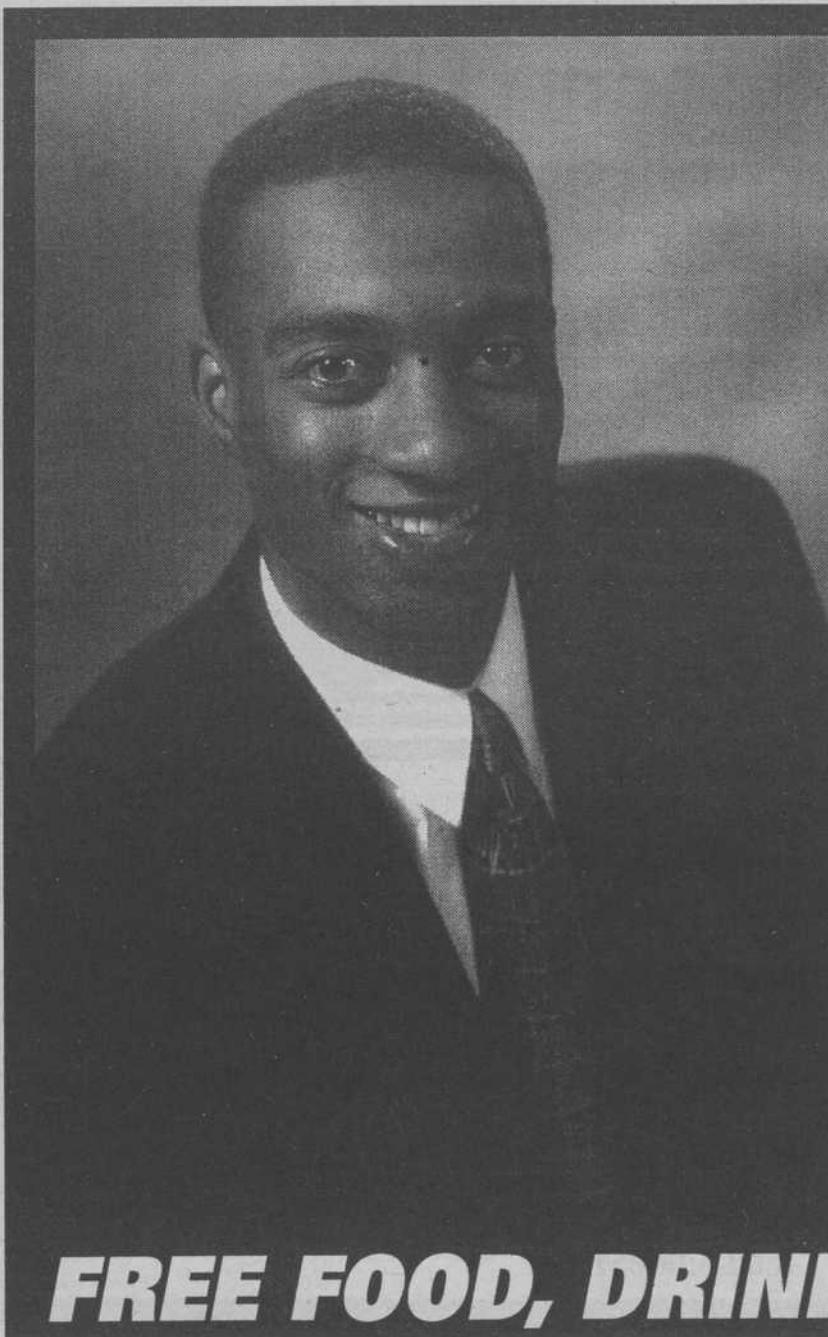
"Lots happened in three years," he said. Examples: the movie "Amistad," about a rebellion aboard a slave ship, a little-known chapter

of American slavery; an Oklahoma commission's recommendation that survivors of a 1921 race riot in Tulsa be compensated; and, in Africa, Benin President Mathieu Kerekou's apologies for his country's participation in the slave trade in the 17th century.

Hall said part of his motivation came from participating in a December reconciliation ceremony in Benin, which included walking the route used by African slave traders.

"That was an eye-opening experience for me to see that," Hall said. "It was very, very moving."

Hall's personal immersion in hate came after he introduced the 1997 resolution. Letter-writers called him a communist, socialist and "as damn stupid as a bunch of rocks." One man calculated \$135 million was due him as the descendent of a Texas slave-holder for loss of property. "I never realized how alive and strong this issue was," Hall said. "I may not still be in Congress to see it, but we'll do this someday. We will apologize and we will start to heal."



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