TO ALL TO WHOM THESE PRESENTS COME – GREETINGS:

WHEREAS: Founded in 1923, the Arkansas Negro Boys Industrial School (NBIS) was a residential work farm, first located near Pine Bluff, Arkansas and shortly moved to the rural city of Wrightsville, Arkansas. The facility housed African American boys between 13 and 17 years old who were considered orphans or had allegedly committed crimes; and

WHEREAS: As a result of segregationist policies of the time, the conditions at NBIS were horrendous, with deteriorating facilities, faulty equipment, and short staffing. Many of the boys frequently went weeks without bathing or washing their already threadbare clothing; and

WHEREAS: On March 5, 1959, in the early hours of the morning, a fire erupted in the boys’ dormitory at NBIS, which was locked from the outside. As the fire consumed the building, many of the boys were able to escape by breaking through the windows. Of the 69 boys who were in the facility on that tragic day, 48 survived and 21 perished in the fire. Fourteen of the bodies recovered from the site were unable to be identified and were buried in a mass grave in Haven of Rest Cemetery; and

WHEREAS: Following this disastrous event, many Arkansans and people across the country were once again forced to confront the terrible reality of segregation and injustice that led to the loss of 21 young black men; and

WHEREAS: On April 25, 2019, a monument dedicated to the memory of the 21 lives lost was placed at the Arkansas Department of Correction Wrightsville Unit; and

WHEREAS: This year marks 62 years since the fire at NBIS, and on this occasion we acknowledge the survivors and their families who continue to feel the effects of this traumatic experience, and we seek to learn from this regrettable chapter in our state’s history;

NOW, THEREFORE, I, ASA HUTCHINSON, Governor of the State of Arkansas, by virtue of the authority vested in me by the laws of the State of Arkansas, do hereby proclaim March 5th, 2021, as

WRIGHTSVILLE FIRE REMEMBRANCE DAY

across the state, and I urge all citizens to remember the victims and survivors of this tragic event.

IN TESTIMONY WHEREOF, I have hereunto set my hand and caused the Great Seal of the State of Arkansas to be affixed this 3rd day of March, in the year of our Lord 2021.

Asa Hutchinson, Governor

Attest:

John Thurston, Secretary of State