

1 A JOINT RESOLUTION designating the John Ayers Merritt Memorial Bridge in
2 Pendleton County.

3 WHEREAS, John Ayers Merritt was born in Falmouth, Kentucky on January 26,
4 1926. He was the son of Bradley and Grace Ayers Merritt; and

5 WHEREAS, the son of a stonemason, John Ayers Merritt grew up in Falmouth and
6 attended the segregated schools in Falmouth for his earliest education. When he reached
7 high school age, he moved to Louisville to live with an aunt and attend Central High
8 School, where he played offensive guard on the football team and graduated in 1943; and

9 WHEREAS, John Ayers Merritt served in the U.S. Navy during World War II,
10 being discharged in 1946; and

11 WHEREAS, after his service, John Ayers Merritt was awarded a scholarship at
12 Kentucky State College in 1947, where he played offensive guard on the school's football
13 team, earning the nickname "Big John"; and

14 WHEREAS, John Ayers Merritt earned a Bachelor of Science degree from
15 Kentucky State in 1950, and in 1952, he earned a Master's degree from the University of
16 Kentucky; and

17 WHEREAS, John Ayers Merritt began his college coaching career in 1953 as the
18 head football coach at Jackson State College in Mississippi. In ten years at the school, his
19 record was 63 wins, 37 losses, and 5 ties; and

20 WHEREAS, John Ayers Merritt's Jackson State Tigers defeated Florida A & M in
21 the 1962 Orange Blossom Classic, giving the Tigers their first Black College National
22 Championship; and

23 WHEREAS, after ten highly successful years coaching at Jackson State, John Ayers
24 Merritt accepted the head coaching position at Tennessee State College in Nashville,
25 Tennessee where he would remain until his retirement in 1983; and

26 WHEREAS, while at Tennessee State, John Ayers Merritt had 21 straight winning
27 seasons including four undefeated seasons, and his Tigers were Black College National

1 Champions seven times during his tenure (1965, 1966, 1970, 1971, 1973, 1979, and
2 1982); and

3 WHEREAS, John Ayers Merritt retired from coaching in 1983 with an overall
4 record of 215-64-9, third best in the nation at that time, behind Paul "Bear" Bryant at
5 Alabama, and Eddie Robinson at Grambling University; and

6 WHEREAS, John Ayers Merritt sent over 200 players to the NFL, including such
7 greats as Ed "Too Tall" Jones, Joe "Jefferson Street Joe" Gilliam, Claude Humphrey,
8 Willie Richardson, and Richard Dent; and

9 WHEREAS, former player Gene Bright referred to Merritt as a "hulking, larger-
10 than life original who smoked big cigars, dominated the room, won football games with
11 great regularity, and watched over his players like a gruff but benevolent dictator" who
12 also cared deeply about his players' education and their lives after football; and

13 WHEREAS, John Ayers Merritt, "Big John," passed away on December 15, 1983,
14 at his home in Nashville at the age of 57, and was inducted into the College Football Hall
15 of Fame in 1994; and

16 WHEREAS, John Ayers Merritt was a humble man, often giving praise to God for
17 his success, all the while highlighting the abilities of his staff and players and minimizing
18 his role in their success. His life was a lesson in patience, tenacity, and overcoming
19 adversity, and it is fitting and proper that his life's work and achievements be recognized;

20 NOW, THEREFORE,

21 ***Be it resolved by the General Assembly of the Commonwealth of Kentucky:***

22 ➔Section 1. The Transportation Cabinet shall designate the bridge on United
23 States Route 27 in Pendleton County over the South Fork of the Licking River (Bridge
24 Number 096B00002N) as the "John Ayers Merritt Memorial Bridge" and shall, within 30
25 days of the effective date of this Resolution, erect appropriate signage denoting this
26 designation.