

Oral testimony to the House Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests, and Public Lands

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Presented by:

Philip E Bradshaw

President New Philadelphia Association (an Illinois not for Profit Corporation with 501(c) 3 IRS status)

29497 410th Street

Griggsville, Illinois 62340

Cell Phone: 217-430-6608

E-Mail: LLbpeb@irtc.net

Chairman Neguse, Ranking Member Fulcher and members of the House Natural Resources Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to present the views of the New Philadelphia Association on H.R. 820, the New Philadelphia, Illinois, National Historical Park Act. This important legislation would include New Philadelphia National Historic Landmark among the elite natural and cultural resources known as units of the National Park Service. **New Philadelphia, Illinois is the first known town in our nation platted and legally registered by an African American.**

New Philadelphia Association wants to thank you for holding this hearing and giving me the opportunity to tell why the historic town of New Philadelphia is one of the crown jewels of our great nation and should be a unit of the National Park Service. Thank you to Congressman LaHood for introducing the legislation.

Think about in 1817 a man, who has been in bondage (slave), accumulates enough money to buy his wife's freedom. In 1819, he was able to purchase his own freedom. He (Free Frank, as he was known), moved his wife and free born children over 600 miles to Hadley Township in Pike County, Illinois, which is only 22 miles east of Hannibal, Missouri, where African Americans were bought and sold on a regular basis. This is a remarkable story worthy of preservation.

Free Frank still had family members in bondage. In order to buy their freedom, he had 42 acres surveyed, platted into streets, alleys and lots. He then had it registered in 1836 with the State of Illinois as the city of Philadelphia. The only town in the nation to be surveyed, platted and registered by a former slave. This was an amazing feat in itself for a black man to have a town surveyed, platted and registered. He then sold lots to people of European and African American descendant. With the highest percentage of people living in New Philadelphia always being white. The fact that European and African Americans purchased lots side by side each other years before the civil war is another reason to preserve the site. Many of those family lived in the town for generations. With no record of racial hostilities.

New Philadelphia proved over 150 years ago that people with differences can enjoy life in reasonable harmony.

To paraphrase Gerald McWorter Fifth generation McWorter descendant and Vice President of the New Philadelphia Association, **If it was possible for black and white skinned people to live in this small community before the Civil War it has to possible for them to live in the same community in 2021.** What a strong example to show people today and in the future of how people of different back grounds and skin color can live in harmony with each other.

New Philadelphia has long been recognized as being a very special place going back to its inception.

1837- Illinois legislation passed a bill giving free Frank a legal surname.

1850's - early 1900's - Letters news articles and records show New Philadelphia was a special town.

1954- Pike county historical Organization placed a sign marking the site.

1983- Dr. Juliet E. K. Walker, fifth generation McWorter descendant wrote the Book "Free Frank: A Black Pioneer on the Antebellum Frontier"

1988- Free Frank McWorter's grave site listed on the National Register of Historic Places

1996 - New Philadelphia Association is incorporated

2002 to 2011- Archeological studies of New Philadelphia were conducted by The University of Maryland, and the University of Illinois and the Illinois state Museum

2005- New Philadelphia listed on National Register of Historic Places

2009 - New Philadelphia designated as a National Historic Landmark

2013- New Philadelphia included in the National Park Services National Underground Railroad Network to Freedom Program

2014- The US House and Senate passed legislation and president Obama signs authorizing a feasibility study of New Philadelphia.

2016- National Park Services conducts feasibility study.

2017 – New Philadelphia and the McWorter family included in the Smithsonian Museum of American History exhibit entitled, "Many Voices, One Nation."

With less than 7% of the national parks directly associated with African American history. It is time to add this very special site to the National Park system.

There are some who say New Philadelphia town site is being well taken care of now so why add it to the National Park System. We appreciate the complement but I just had my 82 birthday last week and a number of board members are not far behind me. The leaders in New Philadelphia are getting older and a volunteer group will never have the capabilities of the National Park Service to protect and preserve this historic site.

Cost of managing the site can be can be mitigated by management with the Lincoln Home National Historic Site, located in nearby Springfield, Illinois. Management sharing is a common practice of the National Park Service.

We have a more detailed written testimony for the committee to learn more about this remarkable town site and the people who lived there.

The New Philadelphia Association members, consultants and supporter's ask the committee to recommend passage of H.R. 820. There is no better example of people of different origins living together than New Philadelphia.

I would welcome any Questions.

Philip E Bradshaw
President New Philadelphia Association

Mobile Phone:

Charlotte King
New Philadelphia Association
Washington DC Area Director

Email: [REDACTED]

Cell Ph: [REDACTED]
Email: [REDACTED]

Marynel Corton
Volunteer Executive Director

[REDACTED]
Cell Ph: [REDACTED]
Email [REDACTED]

NPA Website:
www.newphiladelphiail.org

McWorter Web Site:
www.mcworter.net