

House Committee on Natural Resources Subcommittee
on Federal Lands

Legislative Hearing for

H.R. 823, the “*Colorado Outdoor Recreation and Economy Act*”,

H.R. 1708, the “*Rim of the Valley Corridor Preservation Act*”,

H.R. 434, “*Emancipation National Historic Trail Act*”, and

H.R. 306, “*Kettle Creek Battlefield Park Study Act*”

Testimony of

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Conservancy

Tuesday, April 2, 2019, 2:00pm, 1324 Longworth

Thank you Chairwoman Haaland and Ranking Member Young, and Subcommittee members. It is my privilege to testify in support of H. R. 434, the *Emancipation National Historical Trail Act* introduced by my Congresswoman Sheila Jackson Lee of Texas. The *Emancipation National Historical Trail Act* when enacted designates as a national historic trail the 51 miles from the historic Osterman Building and Reedy Chapel in Galveston, Texas, along Highway 3 and Interstate 45, north to Freedmen’s Town

and Emancipation Park in Houston, Texas. In doing so, the *Emancipation National Historical Trail Act* will preserve for generations to come the rich history of the newly freed slaves who journeyed to Houston in search of economic and political opportunity and greater religious and cultural freedom. It is a remarkable story and one that all Americans can be proud to share with the world.

I serve as president of Houston Freedmen's Town Conservancy; whose mission is to protect and preserve the history of Freedmen's Town for the benefit of future generations. After emancipation, Freedmen's Town, became one of the only developments for freed men in Houston, Texas.

Most recently, Freedmen's Town Preservation Coalition won a significant legal battle to preserve a unique hallmark of the area's early 20th Century history—a brick street constructed by the descendants of the formerly enslaved—that would have been lost without the swift and decisive intervention by local historians, residents and

elected officials. This is but one example of the dedication, passion, and love Houstonians have for Freedmen's Town--a jewel of African American history located in the city of Houston. For generations African American residents of Freedmen's Town have waged and won significant battles to preserve the unique history of Freedmen's Town. Because of this ongoing work countless treasures linking our present to the first residents of the area have been saved through restoration projects or efforts to prevent development in ways that erased our shared history.

One such successful effort was the restoration and preservation of the Gregory School, the first **public** school for freed slaves and their children.

The Houston Freedmen's Town Conservancy enthusiastically endorses H.R. 434, and strongly supports the designation of the Emancipation National Historic Trail for the benefit of the local community, the region, and the nation.

Being declared free by the Emancipation Proclamation and later by the 13th Amendment did not always translate into freedom of movement. Travel of slaves and newly-freed slaves following Reconstruction came with unique and dangerous challenges. For this reason, the routes used by freed slaves have attracted the interest of international historic preservation Societies.

In September 1994, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) launched the Slave Route Project to identify and memorialize sites of memory around the world associated with the subject of slavery and human trafficking from Africa, and its abolition in various regions of the world.

Dr. Jane Landers, a scholar of Africans in the Atlantic World, is the Gertrude Conaway Vanderbilt professor of history at Vanderbilt University in Nashville, Tennessee, where she also directs a digital archive of sources for

slave societies. She also serves on the UNESCO Committee for the Scientific Investigation of the Slave Route. Following are her thoughts upon visiting Houston in October 2017. (George, 2017)

Dr. Landers stated she was impressed by the documentation of Freedmen's Town and the archaeology and Texas Historical Commission markers. She noted the case for its historic significance has been made through decades of preservation work. According to Dr. Landers:

"There is certainly enough research and history here that it should have a tremendous reception." "If it were just a place where you knew there once were slaves who became free, there are those all over the South. You have to have all the research and the investment and the community that this has to make it a viable project."

I am delighted to announce that as of March 2019, the following sites listed in the Emancipation National

Historic Trail Act have been recognized by UNESCO as a *Site of Memory* Associated with the UNESCO Slave Route Project. Port of Galveston, Emancipation Park, and Freedmen’s Town: African American Library at the Gregory School, Antioch Missionary Baptist Church, and Olivewood Cemetery.

These designations were made in response to global interest in the 18th, 19th, and early 20th century history of people of African descent in the Americas. With there being a shortage of documented authentic structures representing sites from these timeframes, Houston and Galveston are well positioned to meet the demands of cultural interest and tourism of memory. The state of Texas generates \$7.3 billion in heritage tourism and the industry accounts for 10.5% of travel to all Texas.

The Emancipation National Historic Trail’s narrative represents the descendants and survivors of the global transatlantic slave trade between Europe, Africa and the Americas – the greatest forced human migration in history.

The Emancipation National Historic Trail also answers the question: - *What happened to the people who were taken from the shores of Africa's West, South and East coasts?*

Museums are being erected around the world in remembrance of the plight of the formerly enslaved. The International Slavery Museum of Liverpool, England has imported the African American story and has planned programming that educates visitors from around the world on the African's experience in the Americas. The historic Dock Traffic Office, located next to the museum has been converted and renamed the Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Building, and will be an education and exhibit center.

Those guests visiting the Emancipation National Historic Trail will see the arrival site of the formerly enslaved at the Port of Galveston, Texas, and a place of worship at Reedy Chapel along with other historically significant places of worship and education.

The 51-mile migration trail will take you to the 40-block area of Freedmen's Town, the only post-civil war settlement on the National Register of Historic Places that was included by the U.S. Department of the Interior in 1985. It is a rare and uncommon settlement where descendants of the original settlers continue to live today. Historians have stated it is potentially the "largest linear architectural footprint still preserved in America" of black urban life during the post-slavery Reconstruction era.

The African American Library is housed in the Edgar M. Gregory School, the first public school for African Americans in Houston. The library is one of the few African American libraries in the country. It serves as a resource to preserve, promote and celebrate the rich history and culture of African Americans in Houston, the surrounding region and the African diaspora. (About Us-Gregory School, n.d.)

The Fourth Ward Redevelopment Authority has and continues to provide extensive support to the preservation

efforts in the community. In partnership with the City, the organization has restored the African American Library at the Gregory School and the Bethel Church Historic Site.

The Freedmen's Town Preservation Coalition, Freedmen's Town Preservation Committee, Coalition of Pastoral Leaders, and The Rutherford B. H. Yates Museum, Inc. (RBHY) have played crucial roles and consistently lead the efforts to protect the historic footprint. The RBHY Scholar's Committee has documented decades of preservation work through archaeological research of significant structures at their original sites.

This historic research was used by the RBHY Scholar's Committee to lead the charge in completing the successful applications for endorsement and recognition by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) for sites in Houston, Texas to be included in the UNESCO Slave Route Project in 2019.

An important organization, Preserving Communities of Color is involved in the interpretation, protection and development of heritage and hosts annual workshops to discuss cultural tourism and historic preservation.

For more than 150 years, Emancipation Park has commemorated the anniversary of freedom, which was announced in the state of Texas, on June 19, 1865, and has since been known and celebrated as “Juneteenth.” Sparked by the desire to have a place to memorialize the anniversary of their emancipation, formerly enslaved African community members led by Reverend Jack Yates, Richard Allen, Richard Brock, and Reverend Elias Dibble united to raise \$1,000 in 1872 to purchase 10 acres of park land to host Juneteenth Celebrations. This is significant, not only as a ritual of remembrance and celebration, but also as an early act of exercising the new right of property ownership. (Emancipation Park - A Historical Timeline, 2019)

And now the rest of the world has joined us by celebrating Juneteenth in their communities from Texas to – Alaska, Ghana, South Korea, and many others.

The Emancipation National Historic Trail will be a geographical passage identifying the beginning of the influence and significant contributions made by African children, women, and men, and their descendants to the creation of this region and nation. This designation will enable members of the public, residents, and visitors to know the connection and relevance of this location to national and world history.

To see this history acknowledged and be a part of the effort is indeed an honor. Thank you for considering this legislation which helps document and reflect the national significance of the role that Texas has played in America's global narrative.

I look forward to the Subcommittee's questions.

Thank you.