



National Women's History Museum  
Committee on House Administration  
U. S House of Representatives  
December 11, 2013

Thank you, Chairwoman Miller and Ranking Member Brady for scheduling this hearing and for allowing the National Women's History Museum (NWHM) an opportunity to appear in support of establishing a commission to investigate the feasibility and need for a museum to honor the contributions of women to our nation's history. My name is Joan Wages and I am President and CEO of the National Women's History Museum. I ask that my entire statement be entered into the record, and I will provide a 5 minute summary of my written statement.

Currently, legislation is pending in the House (H.R 863) and Senate (S.398) that would create a congressional commission to study the potential creation of a federally authorized museum to recognize and honor women: Specifically, it would authorize a commission to determine the feasibility and need for such a museum in the nation's capital. The commission would be tasked with producing a report that would address: The impact of the Museum on regional women history-related museums, potential locations for the Museum in Washington, DC and its environs, whether the Museum should be part of the Smithsonian Institution, governance and organization structure for such a museum, best practices for engaging women in the development and design of the Museum, and cost of constructing, operating and maintaining the Museum. The legislation calls for the commission to be solely responsible for acceptance of contributions for and payments of the expenses of the Commission.

History is empowering. It shapes who we are and provides role models to guide us. Yet, women stand on historical quicksand. With each step we take forward, the step behind us disappears. As one of our historians describes it, “Women have to re-create the wheel with every generation.” By all evidence, at least half of our population has lived a life – only to become — in large part — invisible.

Women have helped forge our nation and have risen to its defense throughout our history. Every day our lives are touched by the cultural, societal, and financial achievements of women in our nation’s development, with advances in industry, medicine, and the arts. Legislation for a Commission to create a museum to honor our nation’s women would be an important step to recognize these achievements.

The mission of the NWHM is to bring women’s history into our mainstream culture so that the general public is aware of the notable accomplishments of such historic figures as Sybil Ludington, who, like Paul Revere, rode all night on horseback during the Revolutionary War to alert the militia that the British were coming, or Deborah Sampson who felt so fiercely and passionately patriotic that she dressed like a man so she could carry a rifle and fight in the Revolutionary War or Catherine Littlefield Greene who had the idea for the cotton gin and helped Eli Whitney develop it, and paid the patent fee.

That said, women’s history is not focused strictly on the accomplishments and contributions of individuals. Rather, it includes recognition of the collective efforts of women to enrich society. It was women who lobbied for the pasteurization of milk, vaccinations for our children, and sewage systems for our communities. Women banded together during World War II to support the war effort – not just as riveters, but in so many important and diverse ways. They planted victory gardens, donated nylons to be used for making equipment and even took up collections that yielded enough money to purchase aircraft bombers. Women have succeeded in shaping our nation in important and lasting ways.

One needs to go no further than today's history textbooks to see why such a museum is so important. Approximately 10% of historic references in such textbooks refer to women. Less than 8% of statues in National Parks are of women leaders. And our U.S. Capitol Building, which hosts millions of tourists each year, displays only 15 statues of women -- out of some 218 currently on exhibit. There are only two statues of women on the National Mall. Of the 76 museums, memorials, and exhibits in Washington, only 4 feature works or accomplishments of women. Women have mostly been left out of our national narrative.

Each year the National Women's History Museum's hosts *The de Pizan Honors*. Honorees last year included the Honorable Elizabeth Dole, photographer Annie Liebovitz and Poet Maya Angelou. This year's event honored the opera great Denyce Graves, actress and activist Phylicia Rashad and Dr. Etta Pisano, a pioneer in the field of radiology whose work in screening for and diagnosing breast cancer has gained national recognition and led to her being named one of the 20 most influential people in the field of radiology.

Upon accepting her award, Dr. Pisano became quite emotional – as did the audience -- when she spoke of losing her mother to breast cancer when she was only 15 and the oldest of seven children. When I spoke to her backstage she confided being caught off guard by the wave of emotion when speaking of her mother. It had been 40 years since her passing. The ties between a mother and her children are so strong, that long after they leave us, the connection remains as strong as ever. Our mothers give us life. and that's the one common thread that every human shares – we are here because of our mothers. I have personally dedicated my work on establishing this Museum to the memory of my mother whose love and caring is with me to this day. Abraham Lincoln said it best, "Everything I am, or ever hope to be, I owe to my mother."

Women have woven the very fabric of this nation – whether through the essential role of motherhood or in the fields of education, healthcare, business, technology, entertainment – no matter what the field of endeavor, women have been there. It is **far** beyond time for the women of our nation to be recognized.

By way of background, the NWHM, as it exists today, was incorporated in Washington, DC in 1996 as a 501(c)(3) nonprofit, educational organization and initiated as its first project the relocation of the Portrait Monument of Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony and Lucretia Mott from the Crypt to the Rotunda of the United States Capitol. The statue had been dedicated in the Rotunda in 1921 to celebrate passage of the 19<sup>th</sup> amendment to the Constitution, providing for women's right to vote. The statue was then relocated to the Crypt where it remained for 76 years. Several attempts were made by women's groups to seek authority from Congress to relocate the statue back to the Rotunda, where our Foremothers would stand alongside our Forefathers, but they were unsuccessful.

The NWHM embraced this project because it represented the pathway of women's history – it comes to the light of day for a brief moment and then is stored away in the archives, library or crypt. It does not remain part of the story.

After raising funds to defray expenses to relocate the statue, the NWHM convinced Congress to relocate the statue to the Rotunda. It was moved on Mother's Day of 1997 and remains there to this day. Now, millions of visitors to the Capitol have an opportunity to view the statue and be inspired by the grit and determination of the three women depicted, and the 72-year campaign for the right to vote, which, by the way, resulted in enfranchising more citizens than any act of Congress before or since.

The National Women's History Museum now embraces the project of advancing a permanent museum in our nation's capital recognizing and honoring half of our nation's history – women's history. The establishment of a feasibility commission is the first step. There is precedence for a commission of this kind. The National Museum of African American History and Culture, and The National Museum of the American Latino had Congressional commissions and provided similar reports to Congress, including site recommendations for their permanent homes. The Holocaust Museum had its origin through a Presidential Commission before securing a site on 14<sup>th</sup> Street

adjacent to Independence Avenue. Today, the African American Museum is constructing its home on a site between 14<sup>th</sup> Street and 15<sup>th</sup> Street on Constitution Avenue, and the American Latino Museum Commission has identified three possible sites for its museum.

Since its inception, the NWHM has raised over \$12 million, mainly from individual donations, and developed an extensive website with 24 on-line exhibits and over 300 biographies of women. It has also placed \$1 million in reserve to potentially underwrite the Commission or as a deposit toward the design and development of the Museum, so that no taxpayer dollars will be used for this endeavor. A women's museum would demonstrate the gratitude and respect we owe to the many generations of American women who have helped build, sustain, and advance our society and for that reason, celebrity ambassadors like Alfre Woodard, Kate Walsh and Geena Davis, women's history scholars, and the more than 50,000 Museum Charter Members have dedicated their time, money and expertise to this endeavor. Actress Meryl Streep pledged one million dollars – her salary from *Iron Lady*, the widely acclaimed motion picture about the life of Lady Margaret Thatcher, Great Britain's first woman and longest serving Prime Minister.

The NWHM is also hosting a number of educational endeavors. Earlier this year, the Museum agreed to partner with The George Washington University on a lecture series entitled *Initiating Changes/Adapting to Change*. The forum offers an opportunity for a women's history scholar and a contemporary individual to discuss a topic guided by a moderator. Recent topics included *A New Order: Change for Women in the U.S. Military* and *Making a Business of Change: American Women in Business*. Next year's programs include *Game Changers: American Women & Sports* and *Women and the Civil Rights Movement*. Nearly two hundred attended the first two events.

Also, this past year the NWHM produced a public service announcement directed by acclaimed filmmaker Catherine Hardwicke with Actress Alfre Woodard as spokeswoman and an online exhibit on Women Entrepreneurs sponsored by Microsoft.

In an effort to raise awareness about women's history, the Museum has distributed over 5 million pieces of mail consisting of historical information and educational materials about women's history as well as fundraising appeals; we have established a "preview" exhibit in our offices in Alexandria, Virginia, with an independently appraised value of \$97,000; and we have curated and displayed 4 "traveling exhibits" in Washington, DC and New York City.

The Museum has widespread, bipartisan support. In 1999, The President's Commission on the Celebration of Women in American History called for the creation of a women's history museum, recognizing NWHM for its support. In 2004 and 2007 The United States Senate passed legislation authorizing a site. In October 2009, the House approved legislation authorizing the acquisition of a site. In the past 12 years, there have been 288 cosponsors of legislation authorizing the acquisition of a site for a women's history museum --183 members of the House, and 105 members of the Senate.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion. I will leave you with one astonishing fact: There is no world-class women's history museum in any nation's capitol in the world. A museum established under the auspices of this Commission would be the first in any nation to show the full scope of the history of its women; thereby serving as a beacon to people everywhere. It will stand as further testament that America is **truly** a nation of liberty and justice for **all**.

It is vital that America, a nation that has done so much to advance equality for women, houses the National Women's History Museum to celebrate the deep and lasting impact women have made. This legislation will provide a blueprint of steps to take in order to finally honor 51% of our population. I am certain that you would agree with me that women are worthy of being recognized as one our national treasures. Passing this legislation is the right thing for Congress to do.

Thank you again for this opportunity to testify. I would be happy to answer any questions.