

SHEILA JACKSON LEE
18TH DISTRICT, TEXAS

WASHINGTON OFFICE:
2160 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515
(202) 225-3816

DISTRICT OFFICE:
1919 SMITH STREET, SUITE 1180
THE GEORGE "MICKEY" LELAND FEDERAL BUILDING
HOUSTON, TX 77002
(713) 655-0050

ACRES HOME OFFICE:
6719 WEST MONTGOMERY, SUITE 204
HOUSTON, TX 77019
(713) 691-4882

HEIGHTS OFFICE:
420 WEST 19TH STREET
HOUSTON, TX 77008
(713) 961-4070

FIFTH WARD OFFICE:
4300 LYONS AVENUE, SUITE 200
HOUSTON, TX 77020
(713) 227-7740

Congress of the United States
House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

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CONGRESSWOMAN SHEILA JACKSON LEE
STATEMENT IN SUPPORT OF
H.R. 434, THE EMANCIPATION NATIONAL HISTORIC TRAIL
ACT
BEFORE THE
HOUSE COMMITTEE ON NATURAL RESOURCES
SUBCOMMITTEE ON NATIONAL PARKS, FORESTS, AND
PUBLIC LANDS

APRIL 2, 2019

2:00 P.M.

1324 LONGWORTH HOUSE OFFICE BUILDING

- Thank you Chairwoman Haaland for holding today's hearing to consider H.R. 434, the "Emancipation National Historic Trail Act."
- I want to recognize Ms. Naomi Mitchell Carrier of Houston Texas, for her stalwart efforts to preserve and share the stories of newly freed slaves who settled in the Freedmen's Town section of Houston to begin lives as free persons following the end of the Civil War.
- Ms. Mitchell Carrier is an educator, historian, and author with expertise in African American music, Texas history and heritage tourism.
- She has prepared a written statement for today's hearing, for which I ask unanimous consent to include in the record of today's hearing.

- Her insights and extensive field research on the topic of post-Civil War migration of former slaves to the city of Houston and her detailed work with historical records have brought to light important details that are bearing fruit in the level of international interest in Freedmen's Town.
- I also recognize and thank Ms. Eileen Lawal for her oral testimony in support of H.R. 434, for today's hearing.
- Ms. Lawal is the 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.
- The Emancipation National Historic Trail Act would pave the way for the establishment of only the second nationally recognized historic trail that chronicles the experience of African Americans in their struggle for equality and justice.
- H.R. 434, the Emancipation National Historical Trail Act, 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.
- H.R. 434 requires that we study the post-Civil War history of newly freed slaves in a major slave holding state following the largest military campaign waged on domestic soil in the history of the United States.
- This period is more than just a story about the North's victory and the South's loss—it is a story about a new freed people emerging from over 400 years of slavery and how they survived into the 21st century when other similarly situated communities did not.

- There were dozens of communities comprised of freed slaves throughout the United States—these communities could be found in the North, South, and Mid-western sections of the country.
- Through economic hardship, natural disasters, and the period of 1919-1921 called the “Burnings,” dozens of communities ceased to exist.
- Freedmen’s Town has survived where others did not and is the only surviving 19th century community built by former slaves to have a notable number of original structures that have been protected, preserved, or restored.
- Freedmen’s Town became the center of opportunity for freed slaves.
- By 1915, over 400 African American owned businesses existed there.
- By 1920 one-third of Houston’s population of 85,000 people lived in Freedmen’s Town.
- Freedmen’s Town is a recognized Historic District.
- Emancipation Park was established in 1872, and is Texas’ oldest public park.
- After emancipation, Freedmen’s Town became one of the only sanctuaries for freed men in Houston, Texas.
- Today, Freedmen’s Town hosts an impressive number of post-Civil War surviving structures—which include homes, public buildings, and commercial spaces built by former slaves.
- The Freedmen’s Town community has fought to preserve structures, unique construction features, period materials that are unique in their continued presence as originally installed.

- One such struggle was the work to preserve handmade red brick street in Freedmen's Town that were under threat of destruction until the community and preservationist fought to successfully get needed infrastructure improvements, and the re-installation of the period bricks onto the street.
- Establishment of the Emancipation National Historical Trail will preserve future generations 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.
- In the written testimony of the P. Daniel Smith, Deputy Director of the National Park Service, the views of the agency regarding the establishment of an Emancipation National Historic Trail are expressed.
- H.R. 434 will require that a study be performed prior to any action taking place regarding the establishment of a National Historic Trail.
- To conduct the initial study, I am committed to obtaining the needed funding, along with the funds needed to conduct 30 previously authorized studies, which have not been conducted.
- Given the timing for the study of the Emancipation National Historic Trail being completed, I am open to discussion with the Committee and the National Park Service on the timing for its completion to assure that sufficient time is provided to the National Parks Service to deliver the final report.
- Regarding the issue of realization of the Emancipation National Historic Trail, I would not want the merits for the trail to be

acknowledged and affirmed by the study, and then not come to fruition.

- I appreciate the need for the National Park Service to have adequate funding to meet the obligations imposed by their mandate to care for our public lands and to conduct research into adding public lands to the list of those already under the purview of the agency.
- The reason the National Parks Service exists is to preserve the public lands for all to use and enjoy.
- The nation has invested a great deal in protecting national parks and historic places due to their unique beauty, topographical features, or historic relevance.
- The stories that make up the American Experience have, for far too long, been limited to those of one group of Americans.
- The limited view of what is of value or interest to the American public has changed with the establishment of a Native American History Museum and most recently the opening of the National African American History and Culture on the Mall.
- The “whites-only” version of American history has ended and room is being made for other American stories.
- In 1915, the first suggestion of creating an African American History Museum came from African American Union veterans of the Civil War.
- Proposals for a museum began circulating again in Congress in the early 1970s.
- In 1981, Congress approved a federal charter for a National Afro-American Museum in Wilberforce, Ohio.

- In the early 1980s, Tom Mack, the chairman of Tourmobile, a tourist bus company, founded the National Council of Education and Economic Development (NCEED), which sought to promote economic development, education, and the arts in the black community.
- Mr. Mack contacted Congressman Mickey Leland about his idea for a national museum focusing on African Americans and won his support for federal legislation in 1985.
- Congressman Leland sponsored a non-binding resolution (H.R. 666) advocating an African-American museum on the National Mall, which passed the House of Representatives in 1986.
- In 1988, Congressmen John Lewis and Mickey Leland introduced legislation for a stand-alone African-American history museum within the Smithsonian Institution.
- Their bill faced significant opposition in Congress due to its cost.
- Supporters of the African-American museum tried to salvage the proposal by suggesting that the Native Indian museum (then moving through Congress) and African-American museum share the same space.
- But the compromise did not work and Congress took no further action on the bill.
- In 2001, Congressman Lewis and Congressman J.C. Watts re-introduced legislation for a museum in the House of Representatives which became law, creating a federal commission to study the idea of an African American Museum near Capitol Hill.
- After completing a 2-year study the Commission determined that an African American history museum would be of substantial benefit to the nation.

- In 1994, despite winning approval in both House and Senate committees the bill died once more, due to opposition by North Carolina Senator Jesse Helms, who refused to allow the legislation to come to the Senate floor despite bipartisan support.
- In 2003, the House passed the "National Museum of African American History and Culture Act," which passed the Senate and was signed into law by President George W. Bush.
- On September 24, 2016, the National Museum of African American History and Culture (NMAAHC) opened its doors after 13 years of planning, and construction and over a hundred years of struggle to see the history of former slaves as part of the complex of museums on the Capital Mall began in 1915.
- The success of the National Museum of African American History and Culture reveals the hunger in the nation and across the world for authentic stories from our past.
- Since its opening the NMAAHC has generated a sustained demand for tickets, an unprecedented problem for a museum—where interest far outstrips capacity to accommodate visitors.
- About three million people have already visited the NMAAHC, which is the newest museum in the Smithsonian Institution and houses close to 37,000 rare artifacts within three stories.
- Not only is demand for tickets high, according to the museum's associate director, so is the amount of time visitors spend in the museum once they get in.
- The museum's associate director told NPR.com that while most venues have a "dwell" time of an hour and 45 minutes to two hours, visitors are spending up to six hours exploring. It's already an important part of many people's list of things to do in Washington, D.C."

- The richness of these diverse stories of the many peoples who are part of our nation's history fills in gaps of the story of the United States that too many Americans do not know or understand because these stories are now being taught as part of American history.
- It is important to ensure that public trust to preserve our nation's history is a commitment to preserving all of its history, including that which reflects both its best and worst moments.
- By way of example, when I was a young girl, I learned the story of Crispus Attucks—a key figure in our nation's history who on the eve of the American Revolution lost his life during a protest of British rule prior to the start of the Revolutionary War.
- However, Crispus Attucks was not the sole person of African descent who wanted to see freedom from British rule—he fought for the United States and was joined by thousands of other persons of African descent who participated in the Revolutionary War.
- Over time the history of the American War for Independence is revealing a tapestry of diversity that had not been well understood.
- In the 1980s the daughters of the American Revolution initially would not accept black women as members until one stood up and took a stand.
- According to a March 1984 story in the Washington Post, Lena Lorraine Santos Ferguson, a retired school secretary, was denied membership in a Washington, D.C. chapter of the DAR because she was black.
- Her two white sponsors, Margaret M. Johnston and Elizabeth E. Thompson, were shocked at Ms. Ferguson's rejection.

- Ms. Ferguson met the lineage requirements and could trace her ancestry to Jonah Gay, a white man who fought in Maine.
- When the reason for not admitting Ms. Ferguson became known, the public reaction was swift and negative.
- The Daughters of the American Revolution revisited their denial of Ms. Ferguson, and upon reconsideration accepted her as a member, making her the first of many women of color who became members of the organization.
- The history of the United States is more complex and immensely richer than would be apparent if we only consider the history of one group of people.
- The tenacity demonstrated and the focus on historical accuracy and the need to save what is a unique aspect of American history for future generations is important.
- There is a hunger in the nation for stories about African Americans from our past that link us to our present and act as guideposts to our future.
- This is a momentous opportunity-one that fires the imagination for fully telling the American story from the voices and perspectives of all of our nation's citizens.
- I look forward to working with you Madam Chair and with Chairman Grijalva and the members of this Committee to secure passage of H.R. 434 the Emancipation National Historic Trail Act.
- Thank you.