

Camden County Historical Society

Statement

by

Robert A. Shinn, Treasurer

submitted for the Record to the

United States House of Representatives

Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests and Public Lands

in support of

H.R. 2317

Designating the Peter J. McGuire Memorial and Peter J. McGuire Gravesite

as a

National Historic Landmark.

The Peter J. McGuire Memorial and Peter J. McGuire Gravesite qualifies as a National Historic Landmark (NHL) because it is an exceptional historic place that holds national significance and has the demonstrated ability to illustrate U.S. heritage. It indisputably satisfies the second of six possible criteria, any one of which may be used, to determine the national significance of properties nominated as NHLs because it is “associated importantly with the life of a person nationally significant in the United States,” the nation’s transcendent labor leader Peter J. McGuire.¹

The Camden County Historical Society therefore strongly supports passage of H.R. 2317 designating the Peter J. McGuire Memorial and Peter J. McGuire Gravesite as a National Historic Landmark.

McGuire’s national significance and transcendent importance was recognized and lauded by one of the nation’s other most important labor leaders, Samuel Gompers, who partnered with McGuire to bring their unions together with the nation’s major trade unions to found and lead the American Federal of Labor. McGuire’s national significance is well documented in the documents I prepared and submitted to successfully nominate McGuire’s Memorial and Gravesite for listing on the New Jersey State and National Registers of Historic Places.² We respectfully request that you enter those documents into the record of your hearing along with the fact the site was approved by and registered on their registers as an historic place.

McGuire’s inspiring biography and outstanding contributions to improving the quality of life not only for his members, but for all Americans, are well summarized in the preamble of H.R. 2317, in the testimony of Congressman Donald Norcross, and in the Statement of Robert Fisher-Hughes. As noted therein, McGuire’s national significance is also memorialized on the U.S. Department of Labor’s “Hall of Honor” which includes “those Americans whose distinctive contributions to the field of labor have enhanced the quality of life of millions yesterday, today, and for generations to come.” It states:

Peter J. McGuire built the largest trade union of his time. Born in New York of immigrant parents, McGuire joined his friend, Samuel Gompers, to found the American Federation of Labor, also in 1881, and he served as its secretary for many years. Through the AFL and the Carpenters, McGuire led the great strikes of 1886 and 1890, which put the eight-hour workday on the nation's agenda. Like the first Labor Day in 1882, which he also led, the eight-hour workday strikes were part of his strategy of achieving progress through the concerted action of organized workers.³

¹ The full listing of the criteria can be found in [36 CFR § 65](#).

² The McGuire Memorial and Gravesite National Register of Historic Places Registration Form is accessible on the New Jersey State Historic Preservation Office website at: https://www.nj.gov/dep/hpo/1identify/nr_nomntns_07_19_2018_srb_drafts/McGuire_WEB_2018-05-09.pdf

³ https://www.dol.gov/general/aboutdol/hallofhonor/2004_mcguire

Not every property associated with a national event or person is eligible to be a NHL and not every National Registered listed property can meet the high standards of historical integrity (location, setting, design, materials, workmanship, feeling, and association) to be included as an NHL. The McGuire Memorial and Gravesite, however, meets that high standard. The photos attached to its national register nomination are evidence that it continues to retain to a high degree the physical features that made up its historic character and appearance.

The McGuire Memorial and Gravesite is far more than the final resting place of a giant in the labor history of the United States. Unlike any other property dedicated to a single national figure, the Peter J. McGuire's gravesite has been and continues to be "voted" a national historic landmark by the feet of thousands who have made annual pilgrimages to the site every year for the last 113 years.

The dedication McGuire's headstone on September 3, 1906 was the first Labor Day celebration honoring McGuire. It began in Philadelphia with a huge parade of several thousand working men of various trades from Philadelphia, Camden, and vicinity. The parade marched in a long loop on Philadelphia's major downtown streets ending at the ferry at the foot of Market Street. Eight hundred printers, who had been on strike for ten months for an eight-hour day, led the parade followed by members of the Allied Building Trades Council, the Metal Workers and the International Garment Workers. The Brotherhood of Painters wore white caps, the Carpenters black caps, and each carried canes tipped with tiny stars and strips. Nearly every body of toilers carried flags and placards, many appearing for an eight-hour day. They took the ferries to Camden and streetcars to the gravesite and listened to eulogies for the Father of Labor Day. True to McGuire's vision, the parade was followed by a picnic later in the afternoon at a nearby park and with baseball "matches" between teams representing various unions.

In 1952, to mark the centennial of McGuire's birth, the United Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners, the union McGuire founded, authorized the erection of an appropriate monument "so that McGuire's memory and the good he accomplished for the American worker may be perpetuated for all time." Several thousand people, many ordinary union members, attended the dedication ceremonies on August 9, 1952. Speakers honoring McGuire included the U.S. Secretary of Labor, Maurice Tobin President of the New Jersey Federation of Labor, the president of the American Federation of Labor, and the secretary and treasurer of the American Federation of Labor (who later attained near legendary status himself) George Meany.

This annual tradition continued every year, including this year, and will continue into the indefinite future as long as labor honors its past. For the McGuire Memorial and Gravesite is far more than the final resting place of a great American. It is a place to remember the great challenges the nascent labor movement faced in the second half of the 19th Century and how McGuire went about organizing, collective bargaining, and, where necessary, striking to improve working conditions. McGuire saw workers not only as economic beings, but also as family and community members, and as citizens and agents of democratic change. This sites helps the public understand how important

working people have been to the nation's physical and economic development and that organized labor's struggle for economic welfare and human dignity included benefits for all Americans such as the eight-hour day, the free weekend, the end of child labor, unemployment and old age insurance, occupational health and safety and more. Marking labor history on the national landscape by designating such sites as the McGuire Memorial and Gravesite will help Americans understand labor's struggle for economic freedom, social security, development of civic freedom, and representative democracy. These historical sites show how the workers' search for power, and the union movement's struggle for recognition, advanced a crusade to protect civil rights and liberties and to expand democracy. In at least two ways— economic and civic—labor history really is American history.⁴

⁴ U.S. Department of the Interior, American Labor History – Draft, accessible at <http://www.npshistory.com/publications/nhl/theme-studies/labor.pdf>.