

**JEC Hearing Testimony before Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests, and
Public Lands
Re. H.R. 920: Brown v. Board of Education National Historic Site Expansion
Act
(5 minutes)**

April 21 at 1pm

*Remarks as prepared for delivery

Mr. Chairman, other Members of the Committee, thank you for allowing me to be a part of today's hearing.

I recognize the significance of the many programs and initiatives that fall within your jurisdiction. As someone who studies history every day, I am also aware of the tremendously positive impact this Committee's work has on our country and the preservation of American history. I welcome this opportunity to testify in support of legislation I have introduced to provide a more robust and inclusive appreciation of the remarkable bravery that led to the integration of American public schools.

Mr. Chairman, the 1954 Supreme Court decision in *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* was described by constitutional scholar Louis H. Pollak as "probably the most important American government act of any

kind since the Emancipation Proclamation.” This decision transformed the United States, striking down the separate-but-equal doctrine established by *Plessy v. Ferguson* in 1896.

Many people do not realize that the *Brown v. Board of Education* lawsuit was actually a combination of five separate cases. *Briggs v. Elliott*, a suit filed in Clarendon County, South Carolina was the first such case to reach the Supreme Court and provided the spark that ignited the movement for school desegregation. I grew up in the neighboring county, and had the privilege of knowing many of the plaintiffs in this case. Today, I honor them by displaying their photographs in my office, and I secured the Congressional Gold Medal for the lawsuit’s namesakes, Harry and Eliza Briggs, and Reverend J.A. De Laine and Levi Pearson, who were also instrumental in the legal challenges to segregated schools.

The legislation we are discussing here today seeks to expand the *Brown v. Board of Education* National Historic Site currently in Topeka, Kansas, to include historic sites in South Carolina, Delaware, Virginia, and Washington, DC. Each of these locations were home to students and

parents represented in the five *Brown v. Board* cases. The geographic dispersion of these locations demonstrates that *Brown v. Board of Education* is truly a story of a national struggle with national significance.

The bill reflects the input of each community and is written to keep faith with their vision for how to best preserve and commemorate these sites. I commend the National Trust for Historic Preservation, for visiting each of these communities and helping to inform this process.

It has been a personal mission of mine to ensure that all *Brown v. Board of Education* sites receive their due recognition for the contributions they made to end ‘separate but equal’ education in this country. The story that will be told at these sites is an under-recognized story of heroism and courage that helped shape American society.

Like many others who grew up in the segregated South, I faced hostility and discrimination as a young man. It was this institutionalized, unfair treatment that forced the plaintiffs of these lawsuits to take extraordinary risks to fight for change. The bravery of students, parents, and their allies launched the movement for equal rights in education.

Including these additional sites in the National Park System will help these communities tell of their unsung contributions that forced this country to confront the painful inequities of racial segregation. Their uncommon courage must not be forgotten, and current and future generations should know of their significant role in our complicated history.

Mr. Chairman, I thank you for allowing me the opportunity to participate in today's proceedings, and I will answer any questions you may have.

JEC Introduction of National Trust Witness: 30 seconds

It is my pleasure to introduce Leslie Canaan, Senior Field Officer at the National Trust for Historic Preservation. Ms. Canaan has more than 20 years of professional experience in the historic preservation field and is the project manager for the Brown v. Board of Education National Historic Site Expansion Act project. As project manager, she was responsible for visiting each of the communities represented in this legislation to conduct site visits and community outreach. She listened to site stewards as they discussed the importance of *Brown v. Board of Education* history and its impact on their community. Thank you for being here with us today Ms. Canaan.