

Verbal Testimony of Emily A. Jones

Southeast Regional Director
National Parks Conservation Association

Verbal Testimony In support of H.R. 3222 to establish the Alabama Black Belt National Heritage Area. June 15, 2021

To the House Natural Resources Committee, Subcommittee on Natural Parks, Forests, and Public Lands.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman Neguse and members of the committee for the opportunity to provide testimony in support of H.R. 3222, the Alabama Black Belt National Heritage Area Act, to establish the Alabama Black Belt National Heritage Area. NPCA strongly supports the passage of this bill.

I would also like to thank Rep. Sewell and the Alabama Delegation, Representatives Carl. Rogers, Brooks, Moore and Aderholt, and Representative Paul Tonko and Representative Dan Kildee for introducing this bill in the House and for their support. A companion bill, S. 1643, was introduced in the Senate on May 13, by Senators Shelby and Tuberville. We are proud the legislation has bipartisan support.

The Alabama Black Belt Heritage Area is nationally important for its central role in the struggle for equality epitomized in the American Civil Rights Movement. The Black Belt encompasses just 1000 square miles in Alabama, yet events here have indelibly shaped our entire nation.

The Black Belt is a colloquial term referencing the slash of dark, fertile soil across Alabama's midsection that produced cotton in great abundance. That cash crop was harvested by hundreds/thousands of enslaved African Americans whose labor brought incredible wealth to the white planter class in this part of Alabama.

The proposed Alabama Black Belt National Heritage Area is comprised of 19 Alabama counties: Pickens, Greene, Sumter, Choctaw, Washington, Clarke, Marengo, Hale, Bibb, Perry, Dallas, Wilcox, Monroe, Conecuh, Butler, Lowndes, Montgomery, Macon and Bullock. Located in South Central Alabama, the area

stretches from West Alabama, bordering Mississippi, to Macon and Bullock counties in East Alabama.

Over 300 sites have been identified in these 19 Black Belt Counties that illustrate the architecture, folkways, arts, archaeological and natural resource, and history of the region. We say that in the Black Belt, the stories are as rich as the land and those stories continue to unfold.

Alabama Governor Kay Ivey noted in her letter of support for the Heritage Area, "Alabama has made a significant investment in telling its story. The establishment of a Black Belt National Heritage Area will bring even wider attention to the rich history and culture of the area in a way that compliments the recent establishment of civil rights sites championed by the state. **We regard this as the critical next step in the process of recognition and reconciliation for our people, and the preservation and interpretation of our history. All of which, in the Black Belt, are long overdue.**"

Prior to Desoto's arrival in the region in 1540, indigenous people lived on this land. Native American pathways soon become known as The Old Federal Road as settlers discover magnificent expanses of prairie, and river cane that became nearly extinct as the production of cotton created the nation's wealthiest economy in the 1800s.

Land-hungry Americans poured into the backcountry of the coastal South and began moving toward and into what would later become the states of Alabama and Mississippi.

In 1814, Andrew Jackson led an expedition against the Creek Indians climaxing in the Battle of Horse Shoe where Jackson defeated the Creeks and destroyed their military power. Forced into a treaty, they surrendered to the United States over twenty-million acres of their traditional land—about one-half of present day Alabama and one-fifth of Georgia

The Indian Removal Act of 1830, opened Alabama's tribal land to farmers and planters from the Carolinas, Virginia, and Tennessee into the Alabama Black Belt.

With them came an expansion of slavery as enslaved Africans and African Americans were brought by boat to the port of Mobile and up the extensive river

system to Montgomery and other river towns, or over land from plantations to the north and east.

Montgomery Alabama became one of the largest slave markets in the South. The wealth created by King Cotton was a boom not seen again until the California Gold Rush.

It is no accident that this former capital of the Confederacy was where Dr. King chose to make a stand for Voting Rights in 1965. The Civil Rights Movement grew from this geographically and culturally distinct region of Alabama. Small communities in Alabama's Black Belt, such as Tuskegee, Marion, Selma, Hayneville, and Eutaw, transformed into scenes of some of the most critical moments of the African American struggle for equality in the 1950s and 60s. The movement's origins are deeply rooted in the human history and natural landscape of Alabama's Black Belt.

While the landmark events of the American Civil Rights Movement—Rosa Parks' refusal to give up her bus seat to a white passenger, the Montgomery bus boycott, the Freedom Rides, the Selma-to-Montgomery marches—are remarkable and nationally significant in and of themselves, they are far more richly textured and nuanced when explored in the context of the place, people, and cultural traditions from which they arose. Understanding the origins, process, and outcome of this struggle for equality is central to our national identity and to the ongoing effort in our nation to secure freedom from oppression for all citizens.

The Alabama Black Belt of 2021 tells the collective and individual story of the hope of Reconstruction and the terror of Jim Crow, of the African American diaspora that continues to fight for the resources and opportunities it deserves. It also tells the story of educators and community leaders, committed to success despite obstacles imposed by poverty and lack of access to basic resources.

Community members and local government have been working toward this goal since 2003. Grassroots group from several black belt counties initiated a collaborative effort to document their cultural, natural and historic inventories to promote tourism in the region. Supporters of the Black Belt NHA include African American Civil Rights Sites Consortium, Alabama Audubon, Alabama Black Belt Adventures, Alabama Historical Commission, the Elmore Boling Initiative, and Conservation Alabama

H.R. 3222 will provide locals with the resources and structure to more capably protect and interpret their unique history and culture, provide both residents and visitors with a better understanding of the truly significant history and biological diversity this area should be known for. The Alabama Black Belt National Heritage Area is an overdue economic investment in the future of a region rich in history and fortified by the remarkable strength and creativity of its citizens.

Thank you for your time in receiving this testimony and we would certainly appreciate your support.

Written Testimony of Emily A. Jones
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The Black Belt is a colloquial term referencing the slash of dark, fertile soil across Alabama's midsection that produced cotton in great abundance. That cash crop was harvested by hundreds/thousands of enslaved African Americans whose labor brought incredible wealth to the white planter class in this part of Alabama. The Black Belt gives us the opportunity to look at diversity through the lens of diversity albeit the diverse landscape, cultures, people and places that have been collected here.

The origins of the Civil Rights Movement are deeply rooted in the human history and natural landscape of Alabama's Black Belt;

- rooted in the rich black soil for which this region is named,
- rooted in the agricultural traditions which included cotton, enslavement of Africans and African Americans and the transportation systems which saw unprecedented wealth and economic growth of the area in the mid-19th century,
- rooted in emancipation which brought new opportunities and struggles as farming patterns changed, educational opportunities opened up and social structures shifted,
- and finally rooted in the search for equality which reached its apex through many life changing events during the American Civil Rights Movement.

Through everything the community's response has been shaped through music, folk traditions, agriculture, and food ways.

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history and culture of the area in a way that compliments the recent establishment of civil rights sites championed by the state. **We regard this as the critical next step in the process of recognition and reconciliation for our people, and the preservation and interpretation of our history. All of which, in the Black Belt, are long overdue.”**

Prior to Desoto’s arrival in the region in 1540, indigenous people lived on this land. Native American pathways soon become known as The Old Federal Road as settlers discover magnificent expanses of prairie, and river cane that became nearly extinct as the production of cotton created the nation’s wealthiest economy in the 1800s.

Land-hungry Americans poured into the backcountry of the coastal South and began moving toward and into what would later become the states of Alabama and Mississippi. Since Indian tribes living there appeared to be the main obstacle to westward expansion, white settlers petitioned the federal government to remove them.

In 1814, Major General Andrew Jackson led an expedition against the Creek Indians climaxing in the Battle of Horse Shoe where Jackson defeated the Creeks and destroyed their military power. He forced them into a treaty whereby they surrendered to the United States over twenty-million acres of their traditional land—about one-half of present day Alabama and one-fifth of Georgia. Over the next decade, Jackson led the way in the Indian removal campaign, helping to negotiate nine of the eleven major treaties to remove Indians.

The Indian Removal Act of 1830, opened Alabama’s tribal land to farmers and planters from the Carolinas, Virginia, and Tennessee into the Alabama Black Belt.

With them came an expansion of slavery as enslaved Africans and African Americans were brought by boat to the port of Mobile and up the extensive river system to Montgomery and other river towns, or over land from plantations to the north and east.

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While the landmark events of the American Civil Rights Movement—Rosa Parks' refusal to give up her bus seat to a white passenger, the Montgomery bus boycott, the Freedom Rides, the Selma-to-Montgomery marches—are remarkable and nationally significant in and of themselves, they are far more richly textured and nuanced when explored in the context of the place, people, and cultural traditions from which they arose. Understanding the origins, process, and outcome of this struggle for equality is central to our national identity and to the ongoing effort in our nation to secure freedom from oppression for all citizens.

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I should note that community members and local government entities have been working toward this goal with the University of West Alabama, formerly Livingston University, since 2003 when a grassroots group from several black belt counties initiated a collaborative effort to document their cultural, natural and historic inventories to promote tourism in the region. Supporters of the Black Belt NHA include African American Civil Rights Sites Consortium, Alabama Audubon, Alabama Black Belt Adventures, Alabama Historical Commission, the Elmore Boling Initiative, and Conservation Alabama

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