

Testimony by Rebecca Blankenbaker
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Before the U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Natural Resources,
Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests, and Public Lands, Concerning
H.R. 4648, Cane River Creole National Historical Park Boundary Modification Act

October 14, 2021

Chairman Neguse, Ranking Member Fulcher and other distinguished members of the Subcommittee, my name is Rebecca Blankenbaker, and I am the Executive Director of Cane River National Heritage Area (CRNHA), a Congressionally designated National Heritage Area and non-profit organization that works in partnership with the Cane River Creole National Historical Park to protect, preserve, and promote the tangible and intangible historic, natural, and cultural resources of the Cane River region. Thank you for the opportunity to present testimony in support of H.R. 4648, a bill introduced by Representative Mike Johnson (LA-4) to expand the boundary of the Magnolia Plantation Unit of the Cane River Creole National Historical Park in the State of Louisiana.

H.R. 4648 would expand the legislative boundary of the Magnolia Plantation Unit of Cane River Creole National Historical Park from 18 acres to approximately 46.1 acres. The land that would be added to the boundary is part of the historic Magnolia Plantation, which is a National Historic Landmark, and is currently owned by the descendants of the original plantation owners. The property includes the main house, seven outbuildings, and several cultural landscape features and archeological sites. At present, the National Park Service owns a smaller portion of Magnolia Plantation, maintaining 18 acres with approximately 20 historic structures.

In 1994, Public Law 103-499 simultaneously created the Cane River Creole National Historical Park and Cane River National Heritage Area, the only instance of an NPS unit and National Heritage Area being co-legislated to protect and preserve a region's cultural resources and heritage. The legislation recognized the "importance of the Cane River Creole culture as a nationally significant element of the cultural heritage of the United States," and determined a partnership approach would best serve the preservation needs of the area, ensuring the vital need for cultural sensitivity, and emphasizing local public-private partnerships.

Located in northwestern Louisiana, along the Cane River in Natchitoches Parish, the Cane River Creole National Historical Park preserves the distinctive architecture and cultural landscapes of the only two intact French Creole cotton plantations in the United States and interprets the mix of cultures whose long and complex history began with Native American trade and early 18th century European exploration and settlement in Louisiana's first Creole colony. The Park celebrates the resulting cultural interaction and interdependence among the Native American, French, Spanish, and Africans, as well as the subsequent development and evolution of Creole culture and plantation life along the Cane River.

At the height of its operation, Magnolia Plantation was the largest plantation in Natchitoches Parish in the mid-1800s, both in terms of land and in terms of enslaved peoples. It has direct

connections to African American history from the late 1700s to 1970s, from the period of enslavement to the Civil War, and from Reconstruction to sharecropping and tenant farming of the mid-20th century. Many of the individuals who lived at the plantation and were responsible for the construction and continued development of Magnolia's vernacular architecture, agricultural landscapes, and material culture were enslaved. Their legacy can be seen throughout the park from handmade tools used for heavy labor held in the museum collection to the surviving brick slave/tenant quarters standing as a testament of the adversities facing the enslaved living at Magnolia Plantation.

During the establishment of the Cane River Creole National Historical Park in 1994, the Magnolia Plantation was divided: half was acquired by the National Park Service, and the other half remained in private ownership. However, at the time it was noted that important plantation resources existed outside the current 18-acre park boundary. H.R. 4648 would allow the National Park Service to acquire and preserve the privately-owned half of the historic plantation core, fulfilling the park's mission to protect Magnolia Plantation in its entirety. Doing so would allow the National Park Service to tell the complete story of all people, of French, African, Native American, and Spanish descent, free and enslaved, at Magnolia Plantation.

The Cane River Creole National Historical Park is a vital component of the Cane River National Heritage Area and the Natchitoches region's heritage tourism and travel economy. Annual Park visitors spend an estimated \$1.8 million annually in the local gateway region surrounding the park, which supports small businesses, restaurants, and members of the cultural economy. Enlargement of the park to include the entire Magnolia Plantation core is welcomed as an opportunity to present this important place as a whole and is supported locally among city, parish, and state officials, as well as the landowners and descendants of the plantation's traditionally associated people.

In closing, Extending the Magnolia Plantation Unit boundary will ensure that the region's unique cultural resources are preserved and interpreted and is crucial to sustaining this unique place.

Chairman Neguse, Ranking Member Fulcher, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today. I would be happy to answer any questions you or other Members may have.