

TESTIMONY OF  
CAROL STIVERS  
PRESIDENT  
JOHN P. PARKER HISTORICAL SOCIETY, INC.

BEFORE THE  
UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES  
COMMITTEE ON NATURAL RESOURCES  
SUBCOMMITTEE ON NATIONAL PARKS, FORESTS, AND PUBLIC LANDS

LEGISLATIVE HEARING  
H.R.6799 - JOHN P. PARKER HOUSE STUDY ACT

JULY 14, 2022

Mr. Chairman and members of the subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to present testimony on behalf of H.R. 6799 the "*John P. Parker House Study Act*" that is sponsored by Representative Brad Wenstrup (R-OH) and cosponsored by Representative Joyce Beatty (D-OH).

I am Carol Stivers, President of the John P. Parker Historical Society, Inc. located in Ripley, southern Brown County, Ohio. Ripley is located on the banks of the Ohio River. I am testifying in favor of H.R. 6799 to initiate a Resource Study for the John P. Parker House in a further step in our quest to become a unit of the National Park System. I am excited to introduce you to John P. Parker, the man, the John P. Parker House and Museum, and the John P. Parker Historical Society, Inc. that is keeping his legacy alive. The "P" in John P. Parker stands for Perceval. He always signed his name using the P. John was an amazing man, born into slavery, he became a model American Citizen. He was self educated, bought his own freedom, became an Underground Railroad Conductor and Extractor, an iron molder, a recruiter of African Americans for the Civil War, a businessman, an entrepreneur, and a hero to many. His story is inspiring. We believe the whole country and world should know about John P. Parker. Because the National Park Service is the foremost organization to promote American heroes, we are seeking a Resource Study as the next step to becoming a Unit of the National Park Service. We already co-operate & work with the National Park Service in several ways. The John P. Parker House has been recognized as a National Historic Landmark since 1997. "The John P. Parker House and Museum Reconnaissance Survey" was completed in 2018 by the National Park Service, U.S. Department of Interior. The Parker House is a Network to Freedom Site through the National Park Service. Through the years we have received several grants from the National Park Service. At our Annual Summer History Camp, we use the Junior Ranger booklets from the National Park Service. We continually keep in contact with the National Park Service Office in Omaha.

**About John P. Parker the man:** Most of what we know about John P. Parker comes from his autobiography, "*His Promised Land*" that was written after he gave interviews in the 1880's about his life. That material was in manuscript form until 1996 when Civil Rights Attorney, Robert Newman, transcribed the manuscript into book form creating the book "*His Promised Land*" for the benefit and information for the John P. Parker Historical Society, Inc.

John P. Parker was born into slavery in 1827, the son of a black enslaved woman and we believe a white plantation owner. John learned first-hand the scourge of being bought and sold like an animal. At the age of only eight years old he was sold, never to see his mother again. John remembered that his mother had

told him some of the best blood in Virginia ran in his veins. After he was sold, he was chained with other slaves, and made to walk ragged and barefoot from his original home in Virginia to Mobile, Alabama. It was on this journey that his spirit was ignited with the anger and hatred of bondage that would fuel his life-long passion for helping others to freedom.

In Mobile, Alabama young John was sold to a doctor. John took care of the doctor's horses, ran errands, and drove the doctor to appointments. The doctor had two sons about John's age. John taught them to hunt & fish. They taught him to read & write which was illegal at that time. They brought him books from the doctor's library. John had a love for reading. He read everything from the Bible to the doctor's medical books. John valued his education all through his life (When he had children, he made sure they got a good education. All his children became college educated).

When John was a little older the doctor felt John should learn a trade. He was apprenticed to an iron molder. John Parker took to this work very well. He was a quick study and became very good as a foundry worker and molder. During John's teen years he became more restless and tried several times to escape. However, he was always found and returned to the doctor. John mentioned he was grateful that the doctor never punished him. When the doctor decided to sell John, John reached out to everyone who he thought might buy him. He finally talked a Mrs. Elizabeth Ryder into buying him. She paid \$1,800 for John. John had in the agreement that if he could earn enough money, she would agree to let him buy his freedom. John was motivated! When he made the required quota for his foundry work, he could keep anything extra for himself. John worked day and night to make extra money for himself. In 18 months, he was able to save enough money to buy his freedom. It was in 1845. He was 18 years old. He immediately left the south and moved north. While living in Cincinnati he met and married Miranda Boulden. By 1849 they had settled in Ripley, Ohio which at the time had a well established & thriving abolitionist town with over 300 members in the organized Anti-Slavery Society. John joined right in, helping as an Underground Railroad Conductor. In Ripley, as it was so close to the area slaves were escaping from, moving escaping slaves on to the next safe house was more important than hiding them and keeping them in the area, although, all aspects of escape took place. In Ripley there were, also, persons who made their living turning escaping persons back to their owners for money. The underground movement was very secretive. The secretive part of the movement was the underground part in the Ripley area. Ripley has no underground tunnels.

Shortly after arriving in Ripley, Parker started a foundry with a Canadian, named William Hood. Their foundry was called Parker & Hood Foundry. Later after Hood left the foundry, Parker changed the name to Phoenix Foundry. Parker continued his iron foundry work during the day and helped fugitive slaves escape at night. Parker frequently crossed the Ohio River to transport these individuals north, keeping the Underground Railroad movement filled with passengers. Parker was not only an Underground Railroad Conductor, but he was also an Extractor. He physically went into Kentucky to bring persons out who wanted to escape. There were very few Extractors. The most famous Extractor in America was Harriett Tubman. Being an Extractor was very dangerous. Parker became suspected for his abolitionist activities, and this led Kentucky slave owners to place a \$1,000 bounty on his head...dead or alive (If you have time or interest there is a John P. Parker reenactor who has a YouTube presentation of one of John Parker's more dangerous and nerve-racking forays. The YouTube presentation is called "John Parker in His Own Words." It is quite good. I recommend it).

John P. Parker was successful in many arenas. During the Civil War, Parker was a key recruiter for the 27th Ohio Volunteer Infantry (Colored) Regiment. Parker's foundry was a major employer in Ripley. He was a

successful businessman, entrepreneur, and inventor. John P. Parker held three patents for agricultural inventions in the 1880's. These patents were among the earliest granted to an African American.

John P. Parker died in January 1900, leaving behind his wife, Miranda, and six college educated children. You can read more about the life and times of John P. Parker in his autobiography "*His Promised Land*" which was mentioned earlier.

**About the John P. Parker Historical Society, Inc.:** We bought the house, and were officially incorporated in November of 1995 as a 501(c)(3) Corporation, with our mission: to recognize, document, preserve, promote, and interpret the extraordinary legacy, life, and times of John P. Parker. We were a group of citizens who had been working to acquire the Parker House since 1966. The house was NOT for sale. We tried but our efforts were in vain. It was being used as an office for a coal yard. Later when it fell into disrepair it was used as a warehouse for storage of tires and automotive materials. We watched in horror as the roof failed and it was slowly falling apart. We had to wait until there was a complete change of ownership due to a death. We had plans and were patiently waiting. In 1985 the House was placed on the National Register of Historic Places. When it finally became available, the price was way over our head (\$96,000 for a tumbled down brick building with the floors in the basement). We wanted this building! We wanted the legacy of John P. Parker to live on for generations to come. We went to our three local banks with our passion and cause. At that time in 1995 & 1996 our banks were all locally owned by benevolent people. Each bank agreed to loan us \$30,000 as a goodwill unsecured loan! (We learned later that their bank examiners were not thrilled with these loans). Our members made up the rest to purchase the Parker House. Now we had loans and a tumbled down brick house. We assessed the damage and what would need to be done. We had fundraisers and applied for grants in many places, Ohio Humanities Council, the State of Ohio, the Department of the Interior, and the Ohio Arts council. We received several substantial grants. We conducted archeological digs around the house. We had an architect friend who helped us with plans. Slowly we put the house back together. Matching the unusual sized brick was one of our biggest problems. Through the generosity of one of our board members who gave us about \$10,000 each year and other board members and friends we were able to pay off our loans. By 2002 we were open to the public with limited displays. We had the John P. Parker story and his house. In 2000 a tobacco warehouse next to the Parker House burned. We were able to buy that lot next to the Parker House and by 2012, through a Green Space Grant, we opened the John P. Parker Memorial Park. Through a grant from the National Park Service, we have been able to acquire better road and on-site signage. We were all volunteers for years. Finally, we hired a docent. We still only have one employee, Dewey Scott, our excellent docent. We improve our displays each year. Last year we dedicated the Phoenix Foundry Display Center, a rustic barn that houses some of the items that John Parker made in his Phoenix Foundry. We have a nine-member volunteer Board of very dedicated & professional persons who spend many hours helping make an inspiring and educational experience for all who visit the Parker House. We are financially sound with no debt. The Parker House is now in good shape needing no major repairs. The Parker House is a Station on the National Underground Railroad Freedom Trail. John Parker, Rev. John Rankin, and other Ripley abolitionists are featured in a film called "*Brothers of the Boarder Land*" that is shown daily at the National Freedom Center in Cincinnati, Ohio. When people learn about John Parker's story things have been named for John P. Parker, Because of John Parker's love of reading, the Library at the Freedom Center is named for John P. Parker. There is also, a Middle School in Cincinnati named for John P. Parker. There is even an opera that has been written based on Parker's life called "Raise to Freedom." Several books have been written based on the stories of John Parker.

**Heritage Tourism makes one of the biggest economic impacts in the town of Ripley, Ohio.** The Underground Railroad is a big theme in our town. We have the Parker House & Rankin House, the home of Rev. John Rankin who was one of the founding members of the Anti-slavery Society in Ripley. He came to Ripley in 1822 about 20 years before Parker arrived. When Parker arrived in Ripley, he joined in the abolitionist movement that was already in motion. The Parker House and Rankin House have thousands of visitors each year. These visitors eat lunch, buy gas and shop in the local shops. It creates a very positive economic impact. During COVID in 2019 & 2020 we took a hit in attendance, but this year our big bus tours are starting to come back. There are a variety of things to do in Ripley. There are self guided walking tours with markers in front of historic homes along Front Street. We have the Ripley Museum and the Ohio Tobacco Museum. We have two riverfront restaurants, a scenic river walk, two parks and two very active antique shops. Ripley, being located on the Ohio River, is also a big boating area. We want to continue to increase Heritage Tourism to our area. The John P. Parker Historical Society, Inc. hopes that you will approve H.R 6799 "*John P. Parker House Study Act*" to initiate a Resource Study in our quest to become a unit of the National Park System. We feel that John P. Parker is a true American hero everyone should know about and because we believe that being a unit of the National Park System is the way to preserve his legacy to live forever & let the world know about John P. Parker. It is our hope that you will pass H.R. 6799