

**Written Testimony
for the
House Committee on Natural Resources
Subcommittee on Federal Lands
On March 7, 2024**

**Regarding H.R. 1647
*Salem Maritime National Historical Park Redesignation and Boundary Study Act***

**Submitted by
Annie C. Harris, Director and CEO
Essex National Heritage Commission, Inc.**

Mr. Chairman and distinguished members of the Subcommittee, thank you for this opportunity to give testimony for H.R. 1647 – the Salem Maritime National Historical Park Redesignation and Boundary Study Act.

My name is Annie Harris, and I am the Director and CEO of the Essex National Heritage Commission, Inc., commonly known as Essex Heritage, which is the management entity for the Essex National Heritage Area. The national heritage area was designed by Congress in 1996. It encompasses 500 square miles of eastern Massachusetts, north of Boston, stretching along the Atlantic coast to the New Hampshire border. The heritage area has a population of more than 800,000 people and hosts nearly 2 million visitors annually. The cultural and historic themes of the area are colonial era settlement, maritime industry & trade, the industrial revolution, and immigration. The natural resources in the area include significant marshlands and tidal estuaries, a rocky coast region, freshwater rivers, inland woodlands, historic farms, and town commons. Within the boundaries of the national heritage area, lie the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Parker River National Wildlife Refuge, two national parks – Salem Maritime National Historic Site and Saugus Iron Works National Historic Site, 28 National Historic Landmarks, and 481 National Register of Historic Places districts and sites. The Essex Heritage’s mission is to preserve and promote these historic, cultural, and natural resources. We accomplish our mission by working collaboratively in partnerships with non-profits, governmental agencies (federal and state), municipalities, educational institutions, and citizen groups across the national heritage area.

The Salem Maritime National Historic Site is one of the foremost historic resources within the Essex National Heritage Area. It was established in 1938 as the first National Historic Site in the United States¹ and it was created to preserve and present America’s and New England’s maritime history and the important role that Salem played in the development of international maritime trade from the late 17th century through the 19th century. In the past 86 years, the original purpose has been expanded through additional legislation and boundary changes², accompanied by new scholarship and interpretation. The park’s focus has grown to include the domestic life of colonial Salem, northern slavery, 19th and 20th century immigration and

¹ www.NPS.gov/sama/index.htm

² PL 88-199, PL 95-625, PL 101-632

industrial history, and the evolution of historic preservation and cultural landscape practices.³ Recent scholarship has identified that the nationally important themes of Coastal Defense (1640-WWII), and US Military History including the Birthplace of the National Guard could also be more fully told by this park.

The Salem Maritime National Historic Site contains 10 historic structures, numerous archeological resources, four historic wharves, a lighthouse, a museum collection with more than 4,500 objects, and a significant cultural landscape including the tall ship *Friendship of Salem*, a replica of an 18th century merchant vessel. The park owns and manages the Salem Regional Visitor Center located beyond the park's boundary in downtown Salem. At this visitor center, NPS rangers welcome more than 300,000+ annual visitors to the park and to the heritage area. The park also collaborates outside its boundaries with numerous heritage resources and has formed partnerships with other organizations to extend its interpretive and educational outreach. These collaborations include working with the Essex National Heritage Area, the Peabody Essex Museum, the Salem Athenaeum, The House of the Seven Gables, the region's National Historic Landmarks and National Register Districts along with other historical societies, museums, and historic preservationists.

For these reasons, it is important to change the name of the Salem Maritime to more accurately reflect the park's multiple, nationally important themes and numerous historically significant structures. The title *historic site* does not fully convey the rich, multifaceted experience that this park provides to the American public. The National Park Service explains in its literature that "national historic sites ... contain a single historical feature, but national historical parks ... discuss multiple stories from different times"⁴. Also, park units that have non-contiguous resources are usually given the broader title of *historical park*. Redesignating the site as the Salem Maritime National Historical Park will more accurately communicate to the public the larger themes, stories, and resources available at this park, and the new name will similarly assist in communicating that the downtown visitor center is part of the park.

I would like to speak also in favor of the boundary study whose purpose is to study and evaluate sites and resources associated military and maritime history in the greater Salem area. Within a mile of Salem Maritime still stand three very important Revolutionary War sites – Fort Lee, Fort Pickering, and Fort Sewall. There is also the site of the 1637 first muster which marked the beginnings of the National Guard. Within Salem Harbor lie former shipyards, maritime structures, aids to navigation, natural hazards, and shipwrecks, abundant reminders of the area's extensive maritime heritage from Indigenous settlements through World War 1 -with especially rich historical artifacts from the 18th and 19th centuries. As technology and research have become more sophisticated, these objects and sites are easier to identify and interpret. The NPS study will enhance the growing body of knowledge and support this scholarly research. Even if the National Park Service and Congress ultimately decide not to extend Salem Maritime's boundaries to include any additional sites, the study will be beneficial in expanding our collective knowledge of this nationally significant history.

³ *Foundation Document, Salem Maritime National Historic Site*; National Park Service, US Department of the Interior; 2019.

⁴ <https://www.doi.gov/blog/americas-public-lands-explained>

Lastly, we believe that the redesignation will have several positive economic benefits for the park and the City of Salem. Renaming the site will generate renewed interest from tourists and the media and serve to elevate its status in the public eye. Visitors will be more likely to view the park as a significant destination worth visiting, thereby increasing foot traffic and tourism revenue. The new name will provide more marketing opportunities to highlight the park's expanded scope and draw attention to its diverse historical attractions. It will also help to signify that the history of Salem extends far beyond the Salem Witch Trials of 1692. It will serve to attract a broader audience to visit Salem, and it is likely to spread the benefits of tourism beyond the months of September and October. This, in turn, will strengthen the city's job opportunities in the hospitality, retail, and tourism sectors, providing more employment for local residents and generating tax revenue for the community. Additionally, there will be new opportunities for revenue generation at the park site from tours and special events.

In summary, I hope that this committee will look favorably on the proposed legislation. Thank you for this opportunity to present my testimony.