

**Testimony of Terry Wilbur
County Clerk, Oswego County**

**H.R. 1031, the Fort Ontario Holocaust Refugee Shelter National Historical Park
Establishment Act**

Chairman Tiffany, Ranking Member Neguse, and members of the Subcommittee, my name is Terry Wilbur, and I serve as County Clerk of Oswego County, New York. Thank you for the opportunity to testify before the committee in support of H.R. 1031, the Fort Ontario Holocaust Refugee Shelter National Historical Park Establishment Act, introduced by Representative Claudia Tenney, who represents New York's 24th Congressional District, including my county.

I am proud to represent Oswego County and to help advocate for this bipartisan legislation to establish the Fort Ontario Holocaust Refugee Shelter National Historical Park. It preserves and protects the history of the 982 holocaust refugees sheltered at Fort Ontario from August 1944 through February 1946. The history of Fort Ontario is one that leads back to 1755 when the first wooden stockade fort was built. The Fort has been destroyed multiple times and rebuilt throughout history because of various battles in Oswego. The current design and construction of Fort Ontario was completed in 1872.

In 1944, President Roosevelt announced that the United States would provide refuge to a group of people fleeing Nazi persecution and the devastation of the Holocaust. That year, a group of 982 men, women, and children fleeing unspeakable horrors arrived from 18 different countries, almost all of them Jewish. Many arrived with nothing more than the clothing they were wearing.

With their arrival, Fort Ontario became the only shelter established in the United States for Holocaust refugees.

After their arrival, the community came together to welcome their new neighbors. Residents passed food and gifts through the fence during the first month of mandatory quarantine, kids enrolled in local schools, and friendships formed that lasted the rest of those families' lives.

As many of you know, U.S. knowledge about the Holocaust is quickly fading. As the number of Holocaust survivors continues to dwindle, many young adults and students lack basic knowledge about the horrors of the Holocaust. In a 2020 study by the Claims Conference, 48% of Millennial and Gen Z couldn't name a single concentration camp, 63% did not know 6 million Jews were murdered in the Holocaust, and 11% believed Jews caused the Holocaust.

These startling statistics come at a time of drastically rising antisemitism and antisemitic hate crimes. According to the ADL, just in 2024 and 2025, over 15,500 antisemitic incidents took place. According to the American Jewish Committee, last year, almost one-third of American Jews were personal targets of antisemitism.

These two things are not unrelated. As knowledge about the history of antisemitism and the Holocaust continues to decline, antisemitism is rising once again. That is why many major antisemitism organizations, such as the American Jewish Committee (AJC), the Anti-Defamation League (ADL), the Jewish Federations of North America (JFNA), the Combat Antisemitism Movement (CAM), and the Zionist Organization of America (ZOA) have all endorsed this bill.

The fort is an essential part of America's longstanding role in combatting antisemitism and can help students better understand the horrors of the Holocaust, and the American role in ending it. It records the resilience of people who survived the Holocaust and experienced the safety of the United States. As survivors pass from living memory, the stories preserved by the Safe Haven Holocaust Refugee Shelter Museum become even more important. That is not a local claim. It is the factual findings of the National Park Service.

Congress directed the National Park Service to study Fort Ontario in 2018 under Public Law 115-255, which was signed by President Trump. NPS concluded that the refugee-shelter locations within the area satisfy all four tests for a new park unit: national significance, suitability, feasibility, and a need for direct NPS management. The study found that this history has no comparable representation elsewhere in the National Park System, and that it would provide a genuinely unique addition. On feasibility, the study found that current ownership, local planning and zoning, access, and site conditions do not preclude designation, and that local and national support is extensive. On the need for direct management, the study concluded that permanent protection of these resources requires the National Park Service.

This bill would preserve about 2.5 acres comprising 4 buildings, and no private property would be taken. For a footprint that small, the return is real.

Oswego County is ready for this opportunity, and the volunteers of Safe Haven have carried this site to preserve the history of Jewish Americans for nearly forty years and have continued to share the stories of those who fled the Holocaust. We are all willing and able to support a permanent partnership with the National Park Service, we have given support and information during the study period, and continue to support this effort today.

This legislation also has broad support in the Senate, with a package of legislation including this provision passing in December 2025. I respectfully urge that this bill be marked up and swiftly passed on the House Floor. Thank you all for your time, your support of Holocaust education and combatting antisemitism, and your support of my local community.