

Testimony of Representative Tony Gonzales

Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests, and Public Lands Legislative
Hearing on H.R. 149, H.R. 250, H.R. 3197, H.R. 3531, H.R. 4009, H.R.
4380, H.R. 4454, H.R. 4648, & H.R. 4706

October 14, 2021

Chair Grijalva, Chair Neguse, Ranking Member Westerman, and Ranking Member Fulcher,

I'd like to thank you for inviting me to provide opening remarks at today's legislative hearing on my bill, H.R. 4706, to establish the Blackwell School National Historic Site in Marfa, Texas. In fact, this being my freshman term in Congress, I'd like to thank you for giving me the opportunity to testify to a Committee for the first time.

One of the most precious gems in America is our robust assortment of National Parks. From east to west coast, Americans are able to experience breathtaking landscapes and re-live some of the most monumental events in American history.

When we think of our great nation's history, it's paramount that we look outside the traditional parameters. We must identify and preserve history from all walks of life and share stories of forgotten Americans. We must work together in Congress to paint a more accurate picture of how this country came to be. And that picture is not complete without including the history of Mexican-Americans and their struggle for equality.

Segregation is an ugly stain on America's legacy, and while we have progressed as a people, we must acknowledge the painful role segregation played in our nation's history. From 1909 until 1965 Blackwell was Marfa's segregated school. Though at the time law mandated separate schools for African Americans, it was optional for school districts to decide whether or not to segregate Mexican students. Marfa chose to segregate.

In July of this year, I joined my friend Representative Filemon Vela from Texas in introducing this bipartisan piece of legislation. Additionally, my friend, the senior

United States Senator from Texas, Senator John Cornyn, introduced this bill in the Senate with his colleague, Senator Alex Padilla of California.

This is not complex legislation. The Blackwell School Bill aims to:

- Establish the Blackwell School National Historic Site as a unit of the National Park System
- By doing so, this will help preserve, protect, and interpret for the benefit of future generations.
- As you know, the site may not be established until the Marfa School District enters an agreement with the National Park System- they are ready to do so
- Lastly, my bill prohibits any private property or nonfederal public property from being included within the boundaries of the historic site or managed as part of such site without the written consent of the owner

My district, Texas 23rd Congressional District, is home to 8 of Texas' 16 National Parks, Big Bend being the most famous. As I travel across my 29-county district, I have seen firsthand the positive economic, ecological, and societal impacts national parks have on their surrounding communities. Establishing the Blackwell School as a center of education and tourism will help bring needed dollars to Presidio County and the town of Marfa.

Though not every story of our past is one to take pride in, there are stories to be told and honored from every chapter in the story of America. Today, I thank the Committee for taking a step in the right direction in preserving the story of generations of Mexican-American school children from Marfa, Texas by establishing the Blackwell School as unit of the National Park System.