

U.S. Rep. Michael A. Arcuri (NY-24)
Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests, and Public Lands
Hearing on “Lands Exchange; National Historic Parks”
Statement on H.R. 1078
March 24, 2009

I would like to begin by thanking Chairman Grijalva, Ranking Member Bishop and the members of the Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests, and Public Lands for holding this hearing today, and for allowing me the opportunity to testify regarding H.R. 1078. This bill, which I introduced, would honor the legacy of Harriet Tubman by establishing two separate units within the National Park Service, one in New York and one in Maryland.

This legislation is important, not only to New York and Maryland – where these new units of the Park Service would be located – but to our nation as a whole. The value of preserving the legacy of Harriet Tubman cannot be overstated.

The reason that we teach elementary school students the story of Harriet Tubman is because her story is one of hope; of inspiration; of selflessness; of perseverance; and of success. The American Dream has always encompassed the notion that no matter what circumstances or background a person comes from, the United States is a nation where that person can make a better life for themselves and their children – a

nation that rewards an individual's hard-work and determination with that opportunity.

Harriet Tubman was born into slavery in Dorchester County, Maryland. It is hard for us today to even begin to imagine the impact that the conditions of slavery must have had on the development of Harriet Tubman and so many children. Slavery will always be a blemish on the history of the United States, but what is truly remarkable about Harriet Tubman and her story is that she managed to not only escape slavery, but to work tirelessly throughout her life to improve the lives of others, not only of fellow slaves, but all Americans – regardless of color.

As many people know, Harriet Tubman escaped from slavery and later returned to Maryland to help free her family and other slaves. She became famous as a conductor on the Underground Railroad. She was also involved in a number of other principled causes. She served in the Union Army as a nurse, a scout, and a spy during the Civil War. In 1857, she relocated her family to Auburn, New York and bought property from William H. Seward, a local resident as well as the Secretary of State under President Lincoln.

Tubman resided in Auburn for over forty years. During that time, she was active in the women's suffrage movement that began in nearby

Seneca Falls. Tubman also established one of the first incorporated homes for age-ed African Americans.

I will leave it for the National Park Service to discuss the Special Resource Study, which guided the development of this legislation. I will also defer to my colleagues from Maryland to discuss the aspects of the Harriet Tubman Underground Railroad National Historical Park. What I would like to highlight from this legislation however is related to the National Historical Park that would be created in Auburn. It is the amazing opportunity that we have to protect not only important historical physical structures associated with Harriet Tubman's life, but equally – or some might argue – more important the memory of the spirit and drive to be free and improve the lives of others that Harriet Tubman symbolized for all Americans.

The park in Auburn will be focused around the home that Tubman purchased from William Seward, the Home for the Age-ed that she established, the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Zion Church of which she was a member, and her gravesite in the Fort Hill Cemetery – a short distance from these properties.

It is truly amazing that these structures are still standing today. This is the result of over one hundred years of stewardship by the AME Zion Church and the Harriet Tubman Home, Incorporated.

I would like to conclude by thanking the subcommittee for the opportunity to appear here today in support of H.R. 1078. The legislation is important because, among the many things it does, it will authorize the Park Service to create a National Historical Park comprising these sites in Auburn and it will authorize matching grants to preserve, rehabilitate, and restore those properties.

I look forward to working closely with Chairman Grijalva and the other members of the Committee to advance this legislation in the coming months.

Thank you, and I yield back my remaining time.

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