

**Statement of
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National Mall Liberty Fund D.C.
Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests & Public Lands
House Committee on Natural Resources
National Liberty Memorial Act, H.R. 4036
September 16, 2010**

Chairman Grijalva, Ranking Member Bishop and members, thank you for the invitation to testify on H.R. 4036, the National Liberty Memorial Act. Our purpose is to instruct the landscape of Washington in the unifying narrative of African American patriots and freedom seekers of the Revolutionary War. These men and women strove to become "We the People." They reared their children and grandchildren to give freely of themselves to America, from the Revolution to Iraq. We commend Rep. Donald Payne for his fidelity over 20 years.

Since 2006, Liberty Fund had sought to assume a site on the Mall already approved in 1988 for a predecessor project. By late 2008, progress was not apparent. Five years earlier, the Mall had been re-designated "the Reserve;" in that portion of Area 1, a moratorium on future construction was imposed. Although grandfathered to a site at Constitution Gardens, the organization's authorization expired in October 2005.

In November 2009, Rep. Payne, Sen. Chris Dodd and Sen. Charles Grassley introduced new legislation to authorize the memorial at an unspecified location. On June 21, 2010, the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee reported an amendment to S. 2738. Among other things, the amendment reaffirms the bipartisan decision of the 100th Congress and President Reagan to designate the deeds of "preeminent historical and lasting significance."

If the House Resources Committee reports H.R. 4036 with those amendments intact, and the package is approved by the House and Senate, Liberty Fund could work with the National Park Service to identify a compelling site in Area 1. Although, the project approved in 1986 eventually imploded, discoveries since are meaningful and mounting. The long delay is revealing itself as a building block instead of a missed opportunity.

Over 60 descendants have discovered their heritage and joined either the Daughters of the American Revolution or Sons of the American Revolution (SAR). The coming together of ancestor and descendant is liberating. I have seen women organize commemorations to communicate ancient memoirs. I have seen black and white families honor common ancestors and ancestors who knew one another. I have seen it bring grown men to tears.

The SAR estimates that as many as 10,000 African Americans fought for Independence. Serving largely in integrated units, they were killed, captured and wounded, from 1775 to 1783. Slaves and free persons volunteered in the hope of winning liberty and citizenship. Afterward, they lived exemplary lives, nurturing families and the tree of liberty. Some founded churches and self-help groups. These spawned the civil rights movement.

Many were farmers and artisans; others became preachers and entrepreneurs. A few even voted. Tens of thousands were emboldened to run away or petition for liberty. Some bartered chains for muskets. These personal declarations are foot-printed on roads, backwoods and advertisements seeking to apprehend them in their tracks. They still drift in mountain air and fill auditoriums, churches, and concert halls. In 2006, Chairman Rahall championed the spiritual as a national treasure. Composed between 1619 and 1865, these hymns, he said, "were a method of survival, a representation of hope."

Every day, records -- and the spirits abiding within them -- are unshackled; they are free and discoverable. Last year, after 24 years of back and forth, the names of over 5,000 were published. ***Forgotten Patriots*** contains proof of their military service, residences and clues to spouses and children. Heirs to this legacy could number in the millions and reside in your districts.

Last night at the National Archives, the Congressional Black Caucus screened a multi-generational documentary, ***For Love of Liberty***. The audience learns an eroded truth -- how military service to achieve liberty during the Revolutionary War motivated African Americans in every war and endeavor thereafter, whether they were conscious of the origins or not.

The website of the Southern Campaigns of the American Revolution is among many trying to grow awareness. Posted there are complete pension records of scores of African American patriots. A participant, Jim Gillgam of North Carolina, wrote this in an email: "The pensions of these men of color could shed light on our true history as a nation." He said, "...our entire country's fate hangs in the balance."

Each new book, website, ceremony, film or clue ennobles the nation's principles and makes it easier for descendants to connect with their heritage and seek common ground with their neighbors -- whether first or fifteenth generation. A day does not pass when the history could not instruct the often-discordant dialogue on race and who exactly is an American.

Hundreds of thousands have visited the Capitol over 200 years. How many knew that among those who built it was an enslaved generation that overlaps the one that fought for independence. They were among the tens of thousands forsaken but not made faint by the unfinished business of the American Revolution.

Only weeks ago, the House leadership, including the Speaker and Minority Leader, dedicated plaques to those who toiled without wages and without recognition. Those souls may have sung songs of freedom, citizenship, and voting rights into the woodwork of the "People's House." Surely, they were aware of their soldier-brethren who vocalized with blood and musket balls.

A National Liberty Memorial will open our senses to their harmonies and merit.