



**Statement of Robert G. Stanton  
Chair, National Council of the National Parks Conservation Association**

**Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests, and Public Lands  
Committee on Natural Resources  
United States House of Representatives**

**May 15, 2007**

The National Parks Conservation Association (NPCA) works to protect, preserve, and enhance America's national parks for present and future generations. On behalf of NPCA's 335,000 members, I appreciate the opportunity to appear before this committee today to express our strong support for H.R. 1239, the Network to Freedom funding reauthorization bill introduced by Representatives Alcee Hastings (FL-D) and Michael Castle (DE-R). I wish to thank both these gentlemen, along with the other 48 cosponsors of H.R. 1239, for their leadership on this issue.

H.R. 1239 will raise the authorized level of funding for the Network to Freedom program (NTF) from \$500,000 to \$2.5 million. This modest but much needed increase will fully address the severe funding shortfalls that are a clear and present danger to the very existence of this dynamic National Park Service program, and ensure the ability of program staff to fulfill their Congressional mandate to protect and preserve Underground Railroad history. In testimony given last month before the Subcommittee on Interior, Environment and Related Agencies, NPCA President Tom Kiernan cited a funding increase for the Network to Freedom program as one of NPCA's top priorities for the National Park Service, and I am here today to reinforce that sentiment.

In the foreword of a National Park Service guidebook on the Underground Railroad published in 1998, I wrote that,

The Underground Railroad story is like nothing else in American history: a secret enterprise that today is famous, an association many claim but few can document, an illegal activity now regarded as noble, a network that was neither underground nor a railroad, yet a system that operated not with force or high finance but through the committed and often spontaneous acts of courage and kindness of individuals unknown to each other.

John P. Parker was one of those individuals who risked life and limb to aid fugitive slaves. Parker, a formerly enslaved African American, purchased his own freedom and eventually settled in Ripley, Ohio. There, he ran an iron foundry by day and served as a conductor on the Underground Railroad at night, frequently making dangerous forays across the Ohio River into Kentucky to help escapees. Although it is impossible to substantiate the claim it has been

suggested that Parker helped 1,000 people to escape the horrors of slavery. John Parker's house is but one of 300 sites, programs, and facilities supported by the Network to Freedom program.

The National Underground Railroad Network to Freedom program has been an unequivocal success, enhancing park system diversity and generating effective partnerships between the Park Service and many non-traditional allies. Funding limitations, however, have impeded the growth of the Network by leading to reductions in staff and prohibiting the Park Service from conducting the outreach necessary to sustain the program. In addition, the unreliable nature of funding for the NTF grant program has introduced a troubling air of uncertainty about the ability of the NTF to provide pledged financial support to its members. Combined, these funding related challenges have reduced the effectiveness of the NTF and cloud the future of this vital Park Service program.

Originally authorized to receive \$500,000 annually, the NTF has suffered from inadequate funding since its inception. The \$479,000 appropriated for the NTF in FY07 fails to cover staff salaries or benefits, and does not pay for any basic programmatic costs. Currently, NTF staff must rely on financial assistance from other Park Service programs and departments in order to survive. Given the operational funding shortfall in excess of \$800 million faced by the entire National Park Service, such assistance cannot always be guaranteed.

In November 2006, the Park Service's own core budget projections indicated that without assistance, the actual spending power of NTF budget would be reduced by an additional 72 percent by the year 2011, cutting the NTF staff from six to one or two full time employees and ending almost all programmatic outreach. This worst-case scenario must not be allowed to take place. The good news is that these funding challenges can be easily resolved.

A new or renewed commitment to the survival of the NTF program is being voiced throughout the Park Service, and a vehicle for implementing the needed changes exists in the legislation being considered by this committee today. We need now simply marry this goodwill to action, pass H.R. 1239, and allow the American people, with the support and guidance of the Park Service to complete the unfinished business of documenting the history of the struggle to escape from slavery to freedom.

### **Honor the Struggle for Freedom by Preserving Our History**

The Underground Railroad has been described as an "American epic." It remains, however, a legacy claimed by many but not nearly as well understood as it could be. In 1990, Congress directed the Secretary of the Interior, via the National Park Service, to study alternatives for capturing and commemorating Underground Railroad history. Eight years later in 1998, the National Underground Railroad Network to Freedom program was established through Congressional legislation to protect, interpret, and disseminate that history. To date, the NTF remains the only national program dedicated to enhancing public awareness and understanding of the struggle to resist enslavement through escape and flight.

The NTF includes 300 members (sites, facilities and programs) in 28 states and the District of Columbia. The program has a rigorous appraisal process, which ensures that its members adequately research, accurately interpret, and faithfully preserve Underground Railroad history at uniformly high levels. The NTF matches Park Service resources, most especially technical

assistance and grant money (when available), with local expertise to better enable communities all across the country to more capably tell their part of the Underground Railroad story; and do so without having to box-up hometown or home-state heritage and ship it to some far away museum.

NTF staff work closely with their 300 members to promote high standards, integrity of research and programs, and accountability. Park Service staff assigned to the NTF program serve as historians, ethnographers, archeologists, grant writers, and heritage preservation experts. They are, like their uniformed ranger counterparts serving in national parks all across the country, often the first point of contact between the public and the National Park System. As such, they are diplomats, counselors, and friends to a wide variety of Network to Freedom partners who have come to rely on the Park Service for support and guidance.

The NTF program has helped sort out Underground Railroad fact from fiction, demonstrated through its partnerships and research the breadth and scope of the Underground Railroad in the United States, Canada, Mexico, and the Caribbean, and provided real assistance in the form of 52 grants totaling \$1.2 million to Network partners. No other program, agency, institution, museum, or organized effort has come close to creating this substantial a network of Underground Railroad sites and scholarship, and should this program be allowed to fail, there is nothing else extant that could soon take its place.

### **The Impact of Inadequate Funding**

Inadequate funding has hurt the NTF program in two ways. First, tight budgets have led to staff reductions and voluntary, temporary transfers of NTF personnel to other departments in order to help “stretch” the program’s meager budget. With just six full time staff to cover the entire United States, the Park Service is already challenged to provide adequate assistance to its growing Network of partners. Further reductions in staff are on the near horizon for the NTF program if a funding increase is not authorized and appropriated. Such losses would mark the beginning of the end for this important program.

Inadequate funding prevents the NTF staff from engaging in the kind of day-to-day and month-to-month work necessary to cultivate new contacts and keep existing partnerships flourishing. The current financial troubles limit or prevent altogether the ability of NTF staff to make site visits, attend conferences, publish newsletters, or create outreach materials that would assist with program development and help grow the Network.

Second, the on again off again nature of funding for the NTF grant program makes it extremely difficult for the Park Service and Network partners to plan on extending or receiving financial support for Underground Railroad programming. Stricken from the Park Service budget in 2003, the NTF grants program relied upon the kindness and commitment of allies such as former Ohio Senator Mike DeWine, who fought successfully to reinstate the funding in 2005 and 2006. No grant money has been made available for the NTF in 2007, and no authorization or appropriation is expected in 2008.

Although the grants have, to date, provided support for a relatively small number of NTF members, the availability of that money adds another incentive to apply for Network membership and adhere to Network standards and guidelines. To date, NTF grants have helped

pay for the completion, either partially or in full, of a variety of Underground Railroad projects including:

- \$25,000 to stabilize and repair the roof of the Johnson House in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, which served as a strategically located station on the Underground Railroad and was run by a Quaker family with strong anti-slavery sentiments.
- \$19,000 to compile and catalog comprehensive information for 19 Underground Railroad sites in Clermont County Ohio, which led to the publication of interpretive materials and guided tours that helped increase heritage tourism bookings in the region by 300 percent.
- \$6,861 to create a public access database for U.S. Colored Troops in Southern Maryland (La Plata).
- \$15,394 to the Resource Center at Murphy Orchards in Niagara County New York to provide educational materials for schools and the general public about the significance of western New York State in the Underground Railroad. And,
- \$1,250 to assist Fort Donelson National Battlefield with incorporating the history of Freedmen and women into the park's interpretive materials, which has resulted in a significant increase in the racial and ethnic diversity of the park's visitation.

H.R. 1239 addresses these grave concerns by authorizing funding for the Network to Freedom program at a level high enough to wipe out the current salary deficit and provide enough financial support to make the programmatic investments necessary to sustain and grow the Network. The bill would also incorporate the grant program into the overall NTF budget, thus eliminating the annual guessing game about the availability of grant money.

A \$2.5 million authorization for the NTF program does not allow for extravagances, but rather covers the basic costs associated with effective operation of the NTF program. The higher level would provide NTF managers the opportunity to budget for:

- Upgrading the NTF website.
- Producing and distributing the NTF newsletter and related outreach materials.
- Planning the ten-year anniversary of the creation of the NTF program in 2008, to increase public awareness and understanding of the Underground Railroad.

## **Conclusion**

Time is of the essence for the Network to Freedom program. Many Underground Railroad sites are threatened by development, collections of books, papers and artifacts sit moldering in attics, and individuals – the greatest source of knowledge available to scholars – are passing away, often taking their knowledge with them. The ability of the NTF and its members to help us better understand this integral part of our American heritage should not be inhibited by a simple lack of wherewithal.

The American people asked for this program. Congress mandated its creation. The Park Service is committed to ensuring that this history will be preserved for current and future generations. All that remains now is to at long last provide this modest but much needed increase in authorization that will help secure the ability of this unique program to protect, preserve, and interpret the history of the Underground Railroad.

I urge Congress to act now with courage and kindness and pass H.R 1239, so that the preservation of this important piece of our American history may be protected and preserved unimpaired for the benefit of all.