

H.R. 4491 Buffalo Soldiers in the National Parks Study Act - Witness Testimony

My name is Geneva Marie Brett; I'm a Realtor/Broker Associate, Vice President of the Los Banos Buffalo Soldiers 9th & 10th Cavalry Association, President of the Los Banos Chamber of Commerce, and the only child of a Vet who died in Korea. On behalf of every Veteran who has ever served this great nation, I thank you for the opportunity to testify in support of H.R. 4491, The Buffalo Soldiers in the National Parks Study Act.

Few Americans are aware Yosemite, Sequoia & Kings Canyon National Parks were protected by the U.S. Army from 1891 -1913. Buffalo Soldiers (African-American Cavalry and Infantrymen) traveled by horseback from the Presidio of San Francisco to Sequoia and Yosemite in 1899, 1903 and 1904 to work as park protectors. Among other things they built the first usable wagon road into Sequoia's Giant Forest, the first trail to the top of Mt Whitney, as well as the first museum in the national parks.

These Veterans of Foreign and Domestic Wars made significant contributions in the development of our nation and the National Parks System yet they remain near invisible in the pages of American history. H.R. 4491 will help bring to light this hidden history and commemorate the service of pioneers like the remarkable Colonel Charles Young, the 3rd Black Graduate of West Point, 1st Black Superintendent of a National Park, 1st Black Military Attaché and 1 of 10 people to ever have a memorial service in the marble amphitheater at Arlington.

The Los Banos Buffalo Soldiers 9th & 10th Cavalry Association was formed to share this delicious slice of American history. At the heart of the 18 communities along the Trail, we not only embrace this historical treasure but have become its champion, sharing this remarkable story from sea to shining sea. Our organization is currently planning activities that will educate, engage, and inspire current and future generations. Evidencing the wide community support for this Bill we've brought letters from our City Council, Chamber, Church members, Veterans, and the general public. City Council declared 2010 the Year of the Veteran, our National Cemetery declared it the Year of the Buffalo Soldier. We are confident the passage of H.R. 4491 will aid local historic preservation, commerce and tourism in all 18 communities along the Trail. It is a rare yet thrilling opportunity to share new, old history of local and national significance.

Our Chamber brought the Buffalo Soldiers to our attention when researching the cultural diversity of Los Banos for our centennial celebration in 2007. We were not *only* astonished to learn of the Buffalo Soldier connection to our community, but also that the greatest resource for Buffalo Soldier history is the National Parks Service! Is it irony, or perhaps destiny, that the Buffalo Soldiers were among the first stewards of the little known or understood notion of national parks and now the National Parks Service is the steward of the fragile and little known history of the Buffalo Soldiers?

H.R. 4491 is necessary because there this is NOTHING official to commemorate the contributions of these Veterans. A National Historic Trail makes a statement to future generations that this history, this contribution is important. Historic trail status would

force academia to pay attention to this history, meaning universities to grade schools would begin to study the story. If American children will understand at an early age that national parks belong to all Americans.

In truly honoring the 100th Anniversary of the National Park Service, Congress has been challenged with exploring visionary strategies to attract and accommodate new visitors through innovation and outreach. This Historical Trail Project is undeniably such a visionary strategy; it provides 18 opportunities to bring the National Parks to the people in their communities as referenced in the NPS Centennial Initiative for 2016!

In 2006 President George Bush called on all Americans to help in these efforts and to enhance our parks as we get ready for the National Park Service's centennial celebration. Los Banos answered that call and the quiet whispers from a hundred years past to honor the little noted and mostly forgotten Buffalo Soldiers.

Neither Congress nor this Subcommittee can change the omissions of yesterday; however you can ensure that this history is not just preserved, but also presented. It is both your duty and your honor to do so by passing H.R. 4491. We're in this for the long haul, working together, We Can -We Will stand and salute these remarkable and deserving Veterans.

In her Press Conference announcing the Bill Congresswoman Speier said, "I lived my entire life within walking distance of El Camino Real and never knew this chapter in our local history. Locally, my hope is that this remarkable story is incorporated into lesson plans for children learning about our region. We all learned in history class about the Spanish missionaries, the 49ers and the railroad barons. In more recent years, educators have stressed the history of local Native American tribes who made their home along what would later be known as San Francisco Bay. The story of the Buffalo Soldiers should be added to that history." We concur.

On behalf of our community and the Buffalo Soldiers we wholeheartedly thank Congresswoman Speier and the 52 cosponsors for introducing H.R. 4491 - The Buffalo Soldiers in the National Parks Study Act, we thank you here today for voting yes.

Respectfully Submitted. By:

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February 23, 2010