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Granddaughter of Speaker Thomas P. "Tip" O'Neill, Jr.

Testimony on H.R. 4400  
A bill designating the Salt Pond Visitor Center at Cape Cod National Seashore  
as the "Thomas P. O'Neill, Jr. Salt Pond Visitor Center"

U.S. House Committee on Natural Resources  
Subcommittee on Parks, Forests, and Public Lands

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Mr. Chairman, members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony on H.R. 4400, a bill to designate the Salt Pond Visitor Center at Cape Cod National Seashore as the “Thomas P. O’Neill, Jr. Salt Pond Visitor Center.” My name is Leigh O’Neill, and as one of the eight grandchildren of Tip and Millie O’Neill, I have been asked by my father, Tom, my uncle, Kip, and aunts, Susan and Rosemary, to represent the O’Neill family here today.

We are grateful to you, Chairman Bishop, for including this bill in today’s hearing. We would also like to extend a special thanks to Ranking Member Ed Markey for his leadership in introducing H.R. 4400, to Congresswoman Tsongas, who also sits on this committee, and each of the members of the Massachusetts delegation, as well as Democratic Leader Nancy Pelosi, all of whom sponsored this bill.

On December 9 of this year, my grandfather would have celebrated his 100th birthday. We are delighted that his colleagues are commemorating his centennial year by honoring him at the Cape Cod National Seashore. Dedicating the Visitors’ Center to my grandfather is a fitting tribute—he played an instrumental role in the creation of the National Seashore.

My grandfather was concerned that Cape Cod was on course to be consumed by commercialization and that the pristine, majestic coastline, which features so prominently throughout American history, would be lost in a massive development boom. He was also concerned that with this development, only the wealthy would be able to enjoy what remained beautiful of Cape Cod. Today, the protected seashore offers the same natural splendor as it has for generations and is shared by millions of visitors every year.

According to our family history, my grandfather was inspired in the early 1950s by his close friend and Washington roommate, Congressman Eddie Boland, who had visited the Outer Banks of North Carolina and learned of efforts to preserve that land.

When they filed legislation to establish the Cape Cod National Seashore in 1958, it was not received well by residents there. We all heard tales growing up of how my grandfather and Congressman Boland were booed and jeered out of a town meeting and how some incensed Lower Cape residents even hung them in effigy!

But after five years of hard work by many serving in elected or appointed office at the time—including members of the Massachusetts delegation, early conservationists in the federal government, cooperation with local officials, help from Senate colleagues, and the White House—the final bill was signed in 1961. A Cape Cod paper noted in an editorial that the National Seashore would stand as “a monument of the vision and persistence” of my grandfather and the few others who had supported the idea from the start.

Within a decade, the Cape Cod National Seashore was recognized as a universal success, with locals, seasonal residents and tourists enjoying the benefits of the protected land. It was at this time, in the early 1970s, when my grandparents bought their home in Harwich Port.

Just as my grandfather’s early years and public life centered on North Cambridge, friends from Barry’s Corner, Boston College, representing the people of the eighth congressional district, and serving in this great institution, Cape Cod served as a retreat for my grandfather and grandmother away from the demands of Washington.

They had been regular visitors to Cape Cod over the years, but with their five children spread between Boston and Washington—and the next generation fast approaching—they wanted to have a central place for the family to gather during the summertime and on holidays and special events.

For the eight of us grandchildren—Catlin, Abby, Michael, myself, Peter, Michaela, Tom, and Tommy—Cape Cod is synonymous with our grandparents. It is where Tip O’Neill became Pop-Pop, the moniker we chose for our grandfather. And it was that role that made him important to us.

It was on Cape Cod where some of our most special childhood memories were made. We all recall, vividly—he would greet us with a huge smile and a jovial, booming “come here, darlin’” as we climbed onto his enormous ottoman chair to hug him hello.

He taught us the messy ritual of eating steamers, made sure we had enough oyster crackers for our chowder, showed us how to break into lobster claws, and let us order the largest size ice cream at the Dairy Queen.

On deep sea fishing trips, he passed his wriggling line to the one of us who hadn’t caught anything that day. And from the side lines of the go-cart track, he would cheer on whichever one of us lagged behind in the slowest car. He made sure we were still rooting for the Red Sox, even if it was a heartbreaking season—which was every year back then!

Summer birthdays were celebrated among an army of family and friends around my grandparent’s back yard pool. Somewhere in between the scavenger hunt and ice cream cake, my grandfather would appear with his jar of change and throw handfuls of coins in the water for us to dive and collect. He got a kick out of us kids and his full-body laughter would always end with “God love ya.”

Every Fourth of July, he hosted the family in Chatham for brunch and to watch the town parade. On Christmas, gifts poured into every corner of the living room and the tree twinkled with my grandmother’s prized glass ornaments. We watched my grandfather proudly tend to the fire and didn’t quite get the jokes about the strength of his eggnog.

Every Thanksgiving, after my grandmother’s delicious turkey dinner and decadent dessert spread, we would gather around the dining room table for a card game—my grandfather and grandmother at each end, the rest of the family squeezing in around them. The strategy was clear—learn fast and play smart to avoid bedtime.

After finishing a round of golf, my grandfather would take us in his blue station wagon for an adventure around town. He drove with his right hand and held a cigar in his left, keeping that arm on the window to wave and smile to anyone who called out hello as we drove down Main Street. He would turn to us and start singing one of his favorite songs: If you’re fond of sand dunes and salty air/quaint little villages here and there/you’re sure to fall in love with old Cape Cod.

Those lyrics are from Patti Page’s 1957 classic *Old Cape Cod*, a hit song from when the national seashore started to gain traction—and just one year before he first filed legislation to protect the land.

Nearly ten years after, on Memorial Day weekend in 1966, the stretch of beach that inspired the Thoreau, Beston, Kerouac, Eugene O'Neill and many others, was dedicated as the Cape Cod National Seashore. My grandfather took part that day in the dedication ceremony at the newly constructed visitors' center overlooking Salt Pond and Nauset Bay.

From that point on, my grandfather and his lifelong friend, Leo Diehl, who vacationed nearby, acted as the unofficial Cape Cod Tourist Board, taking all houseguests and visitors—official and otherwise—to tour the National Seashore and experience for themselves the great natural wonder of Cape Cod. My grandfather loved it there—he would walk for hours on the beach and especially enjoyed watching the coastline during gale-force storms and hurricanes.

Despite the early controversy and opposition, the area my grandfather feared would become too “honky-tonk” is instead a national treasure—home to miles of unspoiled beach, sand dunes, historical structures, and wildlife habitat.

Today, the Cape Cod National Seashore is one of America's ten most visited national parks, sought after by millions of visitors annually—from the descendants of the original settlers at First Encounter Beach, to the artist and writer communities in Provincetown, day trippers from Boston, and thousands from around the United States and all over the world.

As Henry Beston wrote in his 1928 renowned work, *The Outermost House*—my grandfather's favorite book—this “last fragment of an ancient and vanished land...Worn by the breakers and the rains, and disintegrated by the wind, still stands bold.”

This is exactly what my grandfather envisioned over fifty years ago. And there is no greater legacy he has left. Cape Cod remains a special place for friends and families to gather year after year, just as our family did and will continue to do, for generations to come. We are all very proud of his vision and honored by the action proposed in this Resolution.

Thank you.