

Committee on Resources

Subcommittee on National Parks & Public Lands

Witness Statement

September 7, 2000
Testimony of
Dr. Robert M. McChesney, President
University of Montevallo
in support of H.R. 4503
before the
Subcommittee on National Parks & Public Lands
Honorable James Hansen, Chairman

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to testify in support of H.R. 4503, the "Historically Women's Public Colleges or Universities Historic Building Restoration and Preservation Act." I also want to thank the sponsor, Congressman Pickering, and the author of the Senate companion, Senator Jeff Sessions. I am honored to represent the University of Montevallo, established in 1893 as the Alabama Girls Industrial School, later becoming the Alabama Girls Technical Institute, Alabama College for Women, and, with coeducation in 1956, the University of Montevallo. With unique features and traditions emanating from its rich heritage as a pioneering public college for women, today Montevallo is also distinguished as Alabama's public liberal arts university.

I represent a campus, designed by the Olmsted brothers, which is designated as a National Historic Register District with 28 structures or sites on the National Register of Historic Places. Several of its buildings exist, in large measure, because Congress, 101 years ago, made a grant of 25,000 acres of public land to support two Alabama educational institutions with unique missions. One was Tuskegee, because of its pioneering role in educating African Americans. The other was Montevallo, because of its unique role in providing industrial and technical education for women.

I speak today about seven universities which share the same roots -- they were all:

born as a result of the American Industrial Revolution

founded on the radical idea that America needed to educate women (especially poor women) for industrial and technical work, an idea first espoused by Ms. Julia Tutwiler of Alabama who had witnessed first hand after the Civil War the plight of a generation of women who had no employment skills and no prospects of earning a livelihood

the product of the 19th Century feminist movement -- which happened to coincide with an agrarian, populist movement -- that insisted that public colleges be established to help poor women lift themselves from abject poverty.

As a separate document filed with this Committee shows, the birth certificates of these institutions -- the statutory enactments of their respective states -- all attest to their common and unique-to-the-times purpose: opening the doors to women for a kind of education previously thought to be suitable only for men. In each of our seven states, a group of determined women, usually acting with the support of farmers, agitated, lobbied, bullied, pleaded and ultimately prevailed.

Our institutions were not the stereotypical "finishing schools," the type of education women of that day were usually provided. Far from it, these were special purpose institutions established to provide a practical, technical and industrial education for women to prepare them to earn their own way in life. As Governor B. R. Tillman of South Carolina stated: "...both justice and wisdom demand that our girls should have an equal chance with our boys."

The Industrial Revolution changed America. Congress sensed a national purpose in supporting agricultural, mechanical, and technical schools. Land grants were made to the States to create agricultural and mechanical colleges, and Federal support continues even today. In our states, by and large, land grant institutions and programs were closed to women.

Members of the Committee, these universities -- and their historic campuses -- are national treasures. They are reminders that the Industrial Revolution gave life to "radical" ideas: that women could be bread-winners, that they should and could receive technical and scientific educations, and that they could chart their own courses in life.

Today on my campus -- Main Hall, built brick by brick in the closing months of the 1800s, is still used by students. I -- indeed all of the presidents of these universities -- share a deep sense of stewardship for our historic buildings: they are beautiful structures, their architecture bespeaks of the history of the times and of the role of our schools in America's blossoming industrial and women's revolutions. Yet they are endangered. Many are obsolete, and more than a few are mothballed because of significant fire, electrical and life safety code issues. The vital support and hope offered by this legislation will address but a part of our overall restoration and preservation needs, but all of us feel that with it, you can make a major difference.

These historic structures are worthy of preservation -- as grateful tributes to the female pioneers whose perseverance built them, and as living, dedicated spaces where a college education continues to be provided to students, especially to women, minorities, first generation students, those from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, and others who enroll.

In conclusion, may I urge the Committee: these historically women's public institutions and their stately historic buildings are worthy of renewing. Born at the end of a century where women of our region faced deep poverty and closed doors, they offered hope through industrial and technical education. They stand as monuments to America's journey toward equality. They stand as testimony of our deep American faith -- then and now -- that determined Americans can open doors and change the future by expanding opportunities and building a better tomorrow.

Mr. Chairman, that concludes my prepared remarks. Thank you very much.

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