

Statement in support of HR 1192

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Mr. Chairman, members of the subcommittee and fellow citizens. 150 years ago this June, President Abraham Lincoln signed the first act by a government to preserve land in its natural state for public use and enjoyment.

That pivotal act resulted, in great part, because of the tireless advocacy of an extraordinary woman, Jessie Benton Fremont.

She was a native of Virginia, the daughter of Missouri Senator Thomas Hart Benton, and grew up here in the Capitol, where her library was the Library of Congress. As a little girl, Jessie was a favorite of President Andrew Jackson. She learned about Lewis and Clark's expedition from William Clark, himself. By her teen years, she was fluent in Spanish and French, a gifted writer, and at ease in any political discussion.

At the age of 16, Jessie was brilliant, beautiful and had her choice of suitors, though fell in love with the handsome and dashing Lieutenant John C. Fremont. His job was as romantic then, as any astronaut's. Lt. Fremont was assigned to explore and survey the west.

Upon his return, Jessie turned his stories into best-selling books that helped guide people west. She was a proponent of ending slavery and took up the cause of preserving Yosemite Valley and the Mariposa Grove of Giant Sequoias during a time when women could not vote or hold office and therefore what they did never appeared on the public record.

Jessie, along with Galen Clark – the first protector of Yosemite – and Israel Ward Raymond, proposed that Yosemite Valley and the Mariposa Grove of Giant Sequoias should be preserved in their natural state for all people. This was a new

idea. Wilderness had never before been set aside by a government to be preserved as a public park.

Jessie's role was in influencing prominent figures of the day of the worth of this idea. They included: Horace Greeley, Carlton Watkins, Thomas Starr King and U.S. Senators John Conness and Edward Baker.

Today, several mountain peaks inside Yosemite National Park bear their names, but not Jessie's. In fact, the only mountain peak named after a woman is one named after a girl who just happened to be the first non-Indian child born in the park. HR 1192 seeks to right that omission. It would rename Mammoth Peak inside Yosemite National Park as "Mount Jessie Benton Fremont."

I speak for many individuals, including historians, journalists, conservationists and national park advocates who have joined together to see Jessie Benton Fremont recognized. I hope you will join us in approving HR 1192.

Horace Greeley, who had met with Jessie, wrote of the giant sequoias, "I'm sure they will be more prized and treasured a thousand years from now... should they be preserved so long." Jessie Benton Fremont unlocked the idea that precious places like Yosemite should be preserved for all time. It's time that this courageous woman be recognized for her advocacy of this idea.

Q. Why do you think Jessie Benton Fremont was never recognized for her contributions to establishing The Yosemite Grant, previously?

A. She was overlooked. Historians say she never sought public attention, but was happy working behind the scenes to influence change. She met with President Lincoln on at least eight occasions in which she promoted ending slavery and spoke of the wonders of Yosemite. He was so moved by what she said that he'd planned to travel west to see Yosemite following the end of the Civil War. In "Yosemite Muse," an article posted by the Sierra Club, last year, Jessie Benton Fremont was credited by Yosemite's much more famous Galen Clark, "as the one

person most responsible for the Yosemite Land Grant.” In his “Reminiscences,” Clark wrote that “Mrs. Fremont and I.W. Raymond were the most active in the effort to set apart Yosemite as a public park.” Because women had no formal public role in the mid 1800s, what she did to promote Yosemite’s preservation was not recorded officially. Though her actions then, now confirmed by what others have written about her, have established Jessie’s formidable role as one of the most influential proponents of The Yosemite Grant.

Q. Why has Mammoth Peak been suggested to be renamed Mount Jessie Benton Fremont?

A. First, it is easily reached. Mammoth Peak is located very close to California State Route 120, just west of Yosemite’s Tioga Pass Entrance Station. Second, renaming Mammoth Peak would eliminate any confusion with Mammoth Mountain, a ski area outside and to the southeast of Yosemite National Park. Third, it is a significant peak inside Yosemite National Park. It rises to 12,117 feet in elevation, is listed as the park’s 22nd tallest peak, and is at the northern end of the Kuna Crest. Finally, despite its height, Mammoth Peak is hiked fairly easily. We believe renaming the peak “Mount Jessie Benton Fremont” will encourage many young girls to climb it and be inspired to achieve great things, just as Jessie did.