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## Testimony of Suzanne Dixon, Texas Senior Program Manager

*RE: H.R. 6176, to authorize the expansion of the Fort Davis National Historic Site*

Before the Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests and Public Lands of the Natural Resources Committee U.S. House of Representatives

July 15, 2008

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Mr. Chairman and members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today on H.R. 6176, a bill to expand the boundary of Fort Davis National Historic Site (NHS) in Fort Davis, Texas for the purpose of protecting the park's historic 19<sup>th</sup> century viewshed in perpetuity.

Since 1919, the National Parks Conservation Association (NPCA) has been the leading voice of the American people on behalf of our national parks. Our mission is to protect and enhance America's National Park System for current and future generations. On behalf of our more than 340,000 members, I want to express our strong support for H.R. 6176, the Fort Davis NHS boundary expansion act. Introduced by Representative Ciro Rodriguez, H.R. 6176 would increase the acreage cap at Fort Davis to 646 and authorize the Park Service to accept an additional 55 acres of adjacent land from willing sellers.

According to the National Park Service, "Fort Davis is one of the best surviving examples of an Indian Wars' frontier military post in the Southwest. From 1854 to 1891, Fort Davis was strategically located to protect emigrants, mail coaches, and freight wagons on the Trans-Pecos portion of the San Antonio-El Paso Road and on the Chihuahuah Trail." Fort Davis was authorized and added to the National Park System in 1961. Standing on the parade ground at the center of the fort today, visitors are able to see the same landscape and many of the same historic structures that soldiers and residents of the Fort Davis community would have seen in the 1870s and 80s. The integrity of the park's viewshed is as much a part of the historic fabric and character of this unique Park Service unit as are the buildings, the foundations, and the stories they help convey,

Until quite recently, the entire western viewshed of Fort Davis NHS, except for one very prominent bluff, was protected land. A private owner who wanted to develop the area in ways that would have been incompatible with the fort's historic preservation mission and vision had acquired this lone parcel of property. Fortunately, conservation groups, local business interests, and citizens were able to reach a compromise.

The bluff was sold to a conservation buyer who, in turn, desires to convey the property to the National Park Service. Fort Davis NHS cannot, however, take ownership of the property until its federally authorized boundary and acreage ceiling are adjusted to accommodate the new land. Timely passage of H.R. 6176 is the next crucial step in the process to protect the historic 19<sup>th</sup> century viewshed at Fort Davis in perpetuity.

The preservation of Fort Davis National Historic Site is a high priority for NPCA, the residents of the Fort Davis community, and citizens from all parts of the United States. The fort has proven itself to be a good neighbor providing economic benefits for the local community. And thanks to a superlative interpretive staff, Fort Davis has remained at the cutting edge in helping to redefine the history of the American west as far more racially diverse and complex than we have been traditionally led to believe.

Between 1867 and 1890, Fort Davis was home (at one time or another) to the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> U.S. Cavalry, and the 24<sup>th</sup> and 25<sup>th</sup> U.S. Infantry. These were the four all-black regiments of the regular U.S. Army known collectively as the Buffalo Soldiers. These men, many formerly enslaved African Americans, proved their dedication to their country by ably serving on the western frontier.

Fort Davis also tells the story of a crossroads community that was equally diverse by ethnicity and gender as it was by race. The Fort Davis of the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century was home to Mexican entrepreneurs, Irish and German immigrants and settlers, American Indians, soldiers, civilians, and adventurers of all stripes. It was a microcosm of the American west and continues to serve today as our premier classroom on the western frontier. As we rapidly approach the centennial of the National Park Service in 2016, it should be our mission and our obligation to ensure that places such as Fort Davis National Historic Site receive the full measure of protection they so richly deserve.

Thanks to the leadership of Representative Ciro Rodriguez, we are poised to do just that. H.R. 6176 will authorize the Park Service to expand the boundary at Fort Davis to accommodate land vital to the preservation of the park's 19<sup>th</sup> century viewshed. Passage of this bill will ensure that Fort Davis remains an important and inspiring part of our national heritage for generations to come. In conclusion, Mr. Chairman, NPCA commends you for holding this hearing. We strongly support H.R. 6176 and we look forward to working with the Committee on this important piece of legislation. I would be happy to answer any questions you may have. Thank You.