

H.R. 160

The Revolutionary War and War of 1812 Battlefield Protection Act

Written Statement of Proposed Testimony before the Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests and Public Lands, July 10, 2008, 10AM, Longworth House Office Building, room 1324, by David Hackett Fischer

Introduction

Thank you for inviting me to appear before you today. This bill is only a small part of this committee's work, but it is of large importance to many Americans who are interested in history. From long experience I can testify that one of the best ways to learn about history is to go to sites, and get on the ground. This legislation will make it possible for more people to do that in many places throughout the country.

Let me begin by thanking Congressman Rush Holt, and the eighteen cosponsors of this bill to preserve those sites. Many of you have long been supporters of historic preservation. Your interest and activity is greatly appreciated, and this effort in particular could truly make a difference.

The bill is timely in several ways at once. Interest in history has been growing through the past few years, it has been growing very rapidly in the American Revolution and the New Republic. Patterns of interest also have been changing in important ways-- and some of those changes could make a difference in what we might do about it. We can build on this momentum.

The bill is also timely in another way. Even as interest in history is growing, some historic sites-- even some of the most important-- are much at risk. This problem is urgent. Last year, in 2007, we suffered the loss of a very important site. This year, an important part of major revolutionary battlefield could be lost. These problems are urgent, and this bill could make a difference.

At the same time we have a more hopeful opportunities. Some come from recent historical research which is adding new layers of importance to the study of these fields. We have new possibilities for broadening the base of this initiative, and also opportunities for funding which could support the purposes of the bill.

For this hearing I have submitted written testimony which I won't read today. I'll try to summarize it in a few brief remarks, and respond in any way that might be useful.

The revival of interest in history, especially of the American Revolution and Early Republic has occurred mainly in the past two decades. This trend has followed an earlier period in the late 20th century when trends were moving in the opposite direction. Books were published proclaiming that we had moved beyond "The Edge of History" and had reached "The End of History."

That was a time when history books disappeared from best seller lists, history sections moved to the rear of the bookstores, and they were replaced by "New Age" books at the front. In the public schools, history as a subject had been replaced by "social studies" or "problems of democracy." In the universities, history requirements were abolished, and history enrollments declined in undergraduate and graduate programs.

There were countermovements to those trends, keyed to the centennial of the American civil war in the early 1960s, and the bicentennial of the American revolution in the 1970s, but the mood was captured in the song of the sixties that began "Don't know much about history," and boasted of ignorance as if it were a badge of grace.

During the 1990s, these trends reversed. In the United States, serious works of history became best sellers. Booksellers moved their history shelves once again, this time toward the front of the store, where they are often found today. In the United States, world history such as Jared Diamond's Guns, Germs and Steel were hugely successful, and remained on best seller lists for years. Interest in the second world war surged with the 50th anniversary of that event. The Civil War and Abraham Lincoln reached a very large public.

One of the most striking tendencies was a surge of interest in the American Revolution and the founding of the republic. A leading example was David McCullough's excellent book about John Adams-- an improbable subject for a runaway best seller. Other books about the American Revolution, some of them very academic, reached a large reading public.

While this was happening, history enrollments in the universities began to grow again, and history in the public schools was invigorated by gifted teachers. A kids' survey in 2006 found that children in the United States were more familiar with early American leaders than were their parents.

Even more interesting was growth of historical approaches in other academic disciplines. Sociologists, anthropologists, political scientists increasingly published historical works. The history of ideas grew into a major field of philosophy. Two American scholars won Nobel prizes in economics for linking econometric and historical methods.

When leaders struggle to deal with some of the major problems before us they are apt to make more use of history. One quick example: Chairman Bernanke, struggling with new patterns of volatility in our markets, a few weeks ago asked his economists to make an historical study of economic manias, bubbles, panics, and collapses. Another example is an army officer, Colonel R. H. McMaster, who won distinction in the Gulf War, and then while still in the army earned a doctorate in history at the University of North Carolina. His dissertation was an application of historical methods to problems of command in the army. Then he went to Iraq, took command at Tel Afar and used methods of historical inquiry once again to develop a new approach that we know as the surge, which General David Petraeus further refined and applied through larger areas of the country.

In all of these examples we find a new and very serious constituency for history today. Those of us who write history know about it because our readers write to us. As the email streams in, we discover more evidence of a new and very large reading public for historical work. It is qualitatively different from earlier groups. Much of the email comes from people who have discovered history in midcareer. They tend to be in the knowledge business-- the old professions or the new digital disciplines. Every day they work with complexity in a rigorous way. They don't want it to be dumbed down, and they also have little interest in academic historiography which they regard as the shadow of the thing and not the thing itself. They are interested in what actually happened--in large problems, major events, great leaders, people making choices, and choices making a difference in the world.

This new American constituency for history is reckoned in the millions, and it is growing. They write in their emails that they not only read about history. They also visit historical sites.

Historical Sites and Awareness of History: People on the Ground

Other millions of Americans are not part of this expanding consciousness of history, and have little interest in history. That's a problem for us. Surveys show that people who don't know much about history also know little about current events. They are less apt to vote, and don't have a strong sense of civic engagement. By comparison with other groups, they are not curious about the world, and are not actively engaged in the life of this great republic.

The question is how we can serve one large public who are deeply interested in history, and how we can reach another large public who are not.

How can we engage young people in this revival of history? We've tried coercion, and some of the new history requirements in the schools are useful. Coercion might also work in other settings. Two years ago I talked to a group of army officers about the leadership of George Washington. Afterward the commanding general came up and said, "I'm going to order every officer to get interested in George Washington." I said, "that approach doesn't work in academe." He said, it does in the army!"

The question is how to attract and engage people-- especially young people-- of their own free will.

An interest in history is an exercise of the imagination. And here is where historical sites have a very powerful role. Here are a few short stories about these American Revolution these sites and their impact on individual people.

One happened in Lexington, Massachusetts. We were watching a reenactment of fighting 1775, on a site here it happened, on open ground in th town. A crowd gathered and the reenactors included men, women and children in civilian dress. Their job was to work the crowd and talk quietly to individuals about they were observing, and tell them something of the history. One of these pickets was Miles McConnell, who was standing between the battle scene and a busy bike path, where many families pedaling by. We watched as a family of bikers approached in lycra bodysuits and

intergalactic bicycle helmets. As they went past the battle scene, the children noticed first. One of them screeched to a stop near Miles McConnell. They started to talk-- the small child in his intergalactic bike helmet and Miles in his cocked hat. Volleys were fired in the background and the child was fascinated. Other children came up, and then the parents. The children listened with a complete concentration that they don't always show in the classroom. Miles McConnell told the old stories very well, and for those children that bike trip became a journey through time

Another story. Recently my wife Judy and I were in Charlotte, North Carolina. We had some time to ourselves and drove to the national battlefield at Cowpens in South Carolina. I noted in the parking lot an unmarked van with New York license plates. As we walked onto the field, we met two men, lean and muscular, with haircuts high and tight. They were wearing black boots, and black tee shirts inscribed "We own the streets! NYPD" They were New York city policemen, who were on the sharp edge in that city, and they had a way about them that made Tarleton's Legion look like a pacifist organization. Their hobby was history, and especially the history of the American Revolution. They took a week of their vacation and drove several thousand miles to visit battlefields in the southern states. From their reading they knew the ground at Cowpens as intimately as well as the streets of their city. I learned from their depth of knowledge. They responded in another way. It was as if they were on sacred ground. There is a book about that by a philosopher, Edward Tabor Linenthal, called Sacred Ground: Americans and Their Battlefields (Illinois Press, 1993). It is about how these old fields have become sacred spaces for many Americans.

A third story happened at Minuteman National Park in Concord and Lincoln, Massachusetts. I was there with a Hollywood director, and producers and screen writers. They were a wonderful group, full of high spirits and irreverent Hollywood jokes. As we drove through Concord they loved the big old houses. One of them said, you didn't tell us that the American revolution happened in Boston's Beverly Hills!" We talked about what had happened there, and walked a stretch of country road in the town of Lincoln, maybe half a mile through what was called the Nelson neighborhood, past ruins of 18th century farm houses that had belonged to families of that name. The road was unpaved, and it ran between stone walls that had been built in the 18th century. Overhead were ancient oak trees on either side of the road. It was early in the morning, and the sunlight was beginning to filter through the leaves. It had rained the night before. The ground was wet and wisps of mist were rising around us. Suddenly the group went completely silent and we walked the old road without a word. We had talked about the history earlier, and they knew what had happened there. Now suddenly they felt it. They shared a new depth of perception--that others had walked this earth before them, and their lives were linked to ours. That's the power of these sites.

Sites at Risk: The 2007 Report and the Urgency of Action

Experiences of that sort deepen our concern for the preservation and protection of historic sites. We have a new depth of knowledge about that from the Report to Congress on the Historic Preservation of revolutionary War and War of 1812 Sites in the United States, issued in September 2007. It is an excellent piece of research, very comprehensive and accurate in its judgments, by the test of my experience. The authors began by identifying 2700 sites and graded them in importance. At an early

stage 2,000 sites were judged to be of local importance, and were not examined further. The bulk of the work was a survey of 677 sites of national significance-- of which about two-thirds were from the American Revolution, one third from the War of 1812.

They found that many sites and properties had been well preserved and carefully protected. This was specially the case for buildings and attached properties. But the land was more at risk, especially the battlefields of the American Revolution. Of 243 major battlefields in that war, many have been lost, but 147 survive in whole or in part, and at least 130 are wholly or partly protected by the national park service, or state or local governments, or nonprofit stewards.

But they also found that many of these protections are limited to small parts of the battlefield. Some sites were entirely unprotected. And of all the 147 surviving revolutionary war battle sites, most were threatened. The surveyors found 82 revolutionary battlefield sites that are threatened in a serious way with either "high threat" or "moderate threat" levels. Most of them are threatened now, and in the immediate future.

In this report, threat is conceived mostly as private development. But threats also take other forms. One of them happened in 2007, when the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission ordered the destruction of the last remaining part of the original fortifications at Fort Pitt, the "Music bastion," the only surviving remnant of the walls and moats of this very large fort. They replaced it with an open field for concerts and food vendors. There were strong protests, in vain. Leaders in the city and state government, and business leaders wished to establish an open field for concerts and food vendors. The head of the Historical and Museum Commission defied the protests, and buried that what remained of the music bastion should be buried underground by bulldozers. She agreed to cover it a "geotextile lining" of "clean fill" that might allow later generations to dig it up again. Fort Pitt was a scene of minor fighting in the American Revolution (June, 1777). It was one of the most important historic sites for the French and Indian wars. Now the original Fort Pitt is gone. In 2007 it was destroyed by its custodians.

Another problem of a different sort exists today at the primary site the battle of Princeton, one of the most important battles in the war. Part of the field is well protected by a state park. Another part is on the land of the Institute for Advanced Study, Einstein's home. For many years they were faithful stewards of the site and they actively supported the preservation of the battlefield. They kept their piece open as part of the field, and part of it was registered as a National Historic Site. Their management of the land made a major difference in strengthening the entire area. Now the institute proposes to build a housing development for retired faculty on that open land which was the scene of some of the heaviest fighting in the battle, and also of its climax. The Institute commissioned an archaeological survey by a highly respected company, Hunter Associates, who found many battle-artifacts on the land. The Institute terminated their employment, bound them to silence with a confidentiality agreement, and replaced them with another group who did a perfunctory survey (one man with a metal detector) and reported that they found no battle artifacts on most important part of the institute's land. Other surveys were done in 1989 and 1990 by Keith Bonin, an instructor of mathematics at Princeton University. He also turned up a trove of battle-artifacts. The land itself belongs to the Institute, but there are land-use regulations and procedural rules. Preservation groups are increasingly mobilized. The survey done by the National Park Service assigns this battlefield its highest threat rating. Conservation groups have expressed deep concern. In this case the threat comes not from a private developer but from a great institution of higher

learning. It is my hope that the the Institute might agree to one of several solutions that could promote their housing and preserve much of the battlefield. This second battle of Princeton continues today. The outcome is in doubt.

These issues are important to this inquiry in two ways. First they demonstrate the urgency of the problem and the need for action. We could lose a central part of another Revolutionary War battlefield very soon, as we have just suffered a major loss at Fort Pitt. Second, they demonstrate an urgent need for prioritization, and for identification of the specific sits that are most urgently at risk.

A Suggestion on Priorities

In the years since 2000, when the report to Congress about battlefields was framed, the growth of interest in the American Revolution inspired much research and writing on the War of independence and some work on the War of 1812.

This work has made new discoveries about the military history of the revolution. There is increasing interest in the campaigns of the war. In earlier generations of scholarship centered either on broad studies on the war or specific studies of individual battles. Now another layer of inquiry is being added in between. It is about the conduct of campaigns, and it has produced a new assessment of the leadership of Washington, Lafayette and Nathaniel Greene.

One historian of the revolution wrote a few years ago that George Washington lost more battles than any victorious general in history. Assessments of Washington's performance conclude that he was a great leader, but not a great general. New work has radically revised this assessment. Even as Washington lost many battles, he won the campaigns. Altogether by one count the American forces conducted 24 major campaigns. Of that number Washington and his two closest lieutenants Greene and Lafayette commanded 10 of them, and they won 8. Other American officers commanded fourteen campaigns. They won three, lost eight, and three had mixed results.

To study the leadership of Washington, Greene, and Lafayette is to find that they invented by trial and error a new way leadership for their armies of cantankerous free spirits. Their leadership was open and interactive even as all three were firmly in command. They were skilled at mobilizing free people. They found a way of working with Congress in a manner that established civil supremacy, but allowed the generals to get on with the war. They were highly principled in the ethics of war, and connected the conduct of the War of Independence to the values of the American revolution. They decentralized intelligence gathering and made it work. They were aggressive, and quick to seize the initiative, but they were very careful with the lives of their men. Greene wrote to Washington from the Carolinas, "we fight, get beat, and fight again." Lafayette added from Virginia, "we are too weak even to get beaten." Even as they lost battles, they won the campaigns and were able to rally the army and the country.

The new history of campaigns makes a difference in judgments on individual battles. It does not contradict the Report to Congress in any important way, but it underscores findings, reinforces

priorities in some ways, and makes a few changes of emphasis.

One example is the campaign of Saratoga. Much of the Saratoga battlefields are well preserved and maintained, But other events in that campaign not so well served. A leading example is the battlefield at Bennington, which is largely neglected, perhaps in part because Bennington is in Vermont but the battlefield is in New York. It is largely unspoiled by development, but the land is entirely unprotected and is increasingly at risk from the rapid pace of development around Bennington. To visit this field is to get a sense of urgency and opportunity.

Another is Lafayette's campaign in Virginia during the months before the Yorktown. There were several battles, small in size but large in significance for what they reveal about the leadership of these men, and also important in the chain of events that led to Yorktown. A leading example is the battle of Greenspring, which is highlighted in the report, mainly because it is a field that is almost entirely unspoiled, largely unprotected, and greatly at risk of development along Virginia's Highway 64. Here again the new campaign history reinforces a sense of opportunity and urgency in the report

One could add other examples of the same sort, in central New Jersey from March to July 1777, a campaign that has been little studied. In the spring and early summer of 1776 when General Howe led an operation from New York City and New Brunswick to destroy Washington's army. The result was a major campaign without a major battle. In some brilliant manoeuvring on both sides, Howe failed to trap Washington, and lost nearly half of the campaigning season in 1777, with disastrous results for British forces in the Philadelphia campaign and Saratoga campaigns that followed. The area of this second Jersey campaign is very dramatic in its scenery, with a high escarpment that runs diagonally across the countryside. Only a few years ago much of it was open land. Today it is largely developed, but pockets of land could be preserved if we act quickly. Here is more evidence of the need for urgent action.

A Suggestion for Broadening the Base

One problem about rallying national support for sites on the American Revolution and the War of 1812 is that they tend to be concentrated in the eastern states. The 677 battlefields and historic properties surveyed in the Report to Congress cover a large areas in 31 states, but half the country is not included.

I would ask the committee if this bill might be strengthened or weakened by enlarging the operative phrase with seven additional words. Would it wise, or not wise, to take the phrase "significant battlefields and associated sites of the Revolutionary War, and the War of 1812," and add the words "and the founding of the American Republic." This could include many sites along the Lewis and Clark Historic Trail, and many other important trails and sites.

To enlarge the bill that way might lose the tight center in the present formulation, but it would add important sites and associated properties which are also risk in all fifty states and many territories, and the primary purpose of the bill would remain intact. The result could attract more support in

Congress and might reach more people throughout the country.

It would also entail an additional survey of sites in other states, but the program could proceed with materials in hand while the additional survey could begin.

A Suggestion on Funding: Pay as We Go

Another question, not addressed in the draft legislation, is how to pay this program. Expenditures of \$10 million a year are envisioned. How might the funds be raised?

On the principle of "pay as you go," and to win support both in the Congress and the Country, some successful precedents might be found in the work that was done to protect civil war battlefields.

Congress in 1992 authorized the Treasury to mint and sell civil war commemorative coins which yielded a net return of 5.9 million dollars. It was used to buy lands for civil war battlefields, and 5,200 acres were acquired.

In 1998, the Congress authorized approximately 32 million dollars to be awarded in grants to the states from Land and Water Conservation Funds, for the purpose of acquiring and protecting battlefield lands. These funds were used to add another 11,800 acres to protected civil war battlefields. These grants and gifts were combined with matching funds which further extended their reach. Something similar could be done to pay for the acquisition of historic sites and battlefields from the American Revolution, and the war of 1812, and perhaps the early republic.

One could also encourage small contributions that would have another purpose. In fundraising for USS Constitution, coins are solicited from small children-- even pennies. The object was to encourage young Americans to form a sense of identity and even ownership for these lands and for this republic. Those very small sums could pay large dividends not only for the protection of battlefields, but for the preservation of this Republic in generations to come.

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