

Testimony by Kate Masur, Ph.D.

Hearing on H.R.5532, To redesignate the Reconstruction Era National Monument as the Reconstruction Era National Historical Park, and for other purposes. "*Reconstruction Era National Historical Park Act*," July 17, 2018.

Thank you for inviting me to testify on behalf of H.R. 5532. I am a professor of history at Northwestern University. I have written and edited books, articles, and essays on the Reconstruction era and was co-author, with historian Gregory P. Downs, of the National Historic Landmark Theme Study on the Era of Reconstruction.

The Reconstruction era is among the most important periods in American history but also perhaps the most neglected and misunderstood. Reconstruction began in the earliest days of the Civil War. As U.S. forces entered the South they weakened slavery, and enslaved African Americans immediately pressed for freedom. Over the course of the Reconstruction era, some four million African Americans remade their lives, reuniting families separated by slavery, building churches, founding schools, and participating in politics. The nation faced critical questions: How would the former Confederate states rejoin the union? How could the country guarantee that slavery was extinguished and that all Americans would, from that time forward, enjoy basic individual rights? Between 1866 and 1870 Congress passed and the states ratified three new constitutional amendments that permanently transformed the nation. The amendments promised freedom, birthright citizenship, due process, and equal protection to all persons living under U.S. jurisdiction and prohibited racial discrimination in voting rights. These constitutional changes were so momentous that many have called Reconstruction the nation's Second Founding.

Despite its drama and lasting significance, the history of Reconstruction has often been mischaracterized or ignored. Well into the twentieth century, history textbooks and American popular culture represented the era's congressional policy as disastrous, driven mainly by vindictiveness toward the white South. That historical interpretation, which also implied that black men's enfranchisement had been a mistake and that white southerners alone should determine the South's future, helped bolster the Jim Crow order that lasted from the 1890s through the 1950s. Historians revisited Reconstruction in the decades after World War II, shedding biases that had warped previous interpretations and drawing on previously unused sources. It is now a commonplace in historical scholarship that Reconstruction was a crucial period in American history, one well worth understanding both on its own terms and for its debates about issues of lasting concern, including the legacies of slavery, the nature of federalism, and the meanings of freedom and equality.

Despite the importance of Reconstruction, our National Park sites, which are so important for promoting informed discussions of American history, have not kept pace with changes in our knowledge and understanding. Until President Obama declared the Reconstruction Era National Monument in 2017, not a single site within the National Park Service (NPS) system was dedicated to the preservation and interpretation of Reconstruction history. That absence was all the more noteworthy because the NPS oversees dozens of sites devoted to the Civil War.

The Reconstruction Era National Monument in Beaufort, South Carolina, marks an excellent beginning for remembering this period and bringing it to the attention of the American people. Redesignating it the Reconstruction Era National Historical Park, as the bill proposes, will help ensure the permanence and accessibility of this unique site.

Why Beaufort, South Carolina? The idea of creating a national monument to Reconstruction in the Beaufort area has long enjoyed strong local support. For more than a decade, leaders and community members pressed for national recognition of the area's remarkable Reconstruction history. In June 2016, Mr. Clyburn and Mr. Sanford introduced bipartisan legislation for a Reconstruction National Monument at Penn Center.

Around the same time, the NPS decided to survey the nation's Reconstruction history and historic sites associated with it. In 2015, NPS hired historian Gregory P. Downs and me to write a National Historical Landmark Theme Study that explained the history and significance of the Reconstruction Era and evaluated sites for their Reconstruction-related significance. With help from the NPS chief historian and other NPS staff and from State Historic Preservation Offices, we compiled information about Reconstruction sites across the South, mostly in the former Confederacy. Reconstruction was not located in any single place, nor can its history be summarized through the story of any one person or moment. National policy was shaped amid political contests here in Washington, but the drama of Reconstruction happened on farms and plantations where freedpeople began working for wages or shares of the crops; at post offices and shops that served as polling places where African American men voted for the first time; in state capitol buildings, where legislatures met to remake state constitutions; in cities where African Americans insisted on equal access to public places; and across the entire region, where white and black southerners debated, sometimes violently, the future of their communities.

Our study found that the Beaufort area best captured "the political, economic, organizational, and religious transformations of Reconstruction." National Historic Landmarks (NHLs) must represent events of national significance and must possess "a high degree of integrity of location, design, setting, materials, workmanship, feeling, and association." The Beaufort area was at the forefront of many of the changes that characterized Reconstruction and has a large concentration of sites that meet NHL criteria. In November 1861, U.S. naval forces brought under federal control a stretch of South Carolina coast around Port Royal Sound. Most of the local white inhabitants fled their homes, while thousands of slaves remained. The occupation made possible a remarkable experiment. Northerners came to the area to begin cotton production on a free labor basis and missionaries established schools, all of which made the place, in one historian's memorable phrase, "a rehearsal for Reconstruction." Lowcountry South Carolina became a hub for African American political power after African American men were enfranchised. The area's most illustrious politician was Robert Smalls. Born enslaved in Charleston, South Carolina, Smalls became famous when he commandeered a Confederate ship in Charleston harbor and sailed it to U.S. forces nearby. He settled in Beaufort after the Civil War and began a political career that spanned three decades. He helped rewrite South Carolina's constitution in 1868, served in the state legislature, was elected five times to the U.S. House of Representatives, and then served as customs collector in Beaufort.

The historic sites currently included in the Reconstruction National Monument—the Brick Baptist Church, Darrah Hall, and Camp Saxton—are all places of national significance. The church was constructed by slaves in the 1850s. In spring 1862, teachers Laura M. Towne and Ellen Murray of Pennsylvania began giving classes in a nearby plantation house, and the following year they moved their school to the church. The school, known as Penn School, grew and developed, continuing for decades and evolving into what is now Penn Center. Darrah Hall is the oldest standing structure on the site of the Penn School grounds. Brick Baptist Church, in turn, became an African American congregation, representing the development of independent black churches across the south in this period. Camp Saxton in Port Royal was a U.S. army camp that served as headquarters of the First South Carolina Volunteers, a regiment composed mainly of former slaves from the surrounding region. The camp was also the site of a reading of the Emancipation Proclamation on January 1, 1863, the day it was issued. More than 5,000 people, most of them newly freed, assembled beneath live oak trees to hear the proclamation read and celebrate their freedom. Each of these sites is worthy of preservation and appreciation, for they help us understand one of the most momentous transformations in all of American history.

Beyond the sites in the existing Reconstruction National Monument, the Beaufort area is dense with additional properties where the Reconstruction era could be interpreted. H.R. 5532's provision to authorize the Secretary of the Interior to expand the boundaries of the park, contingent on agreement between the NPS and private property owners, offers the park and its neighbors needed flexibility. It also makes sense from a historic standpoint, since such properties as the Robert Smalls House, the Beaufort Arsenal, and the National Cemetery all stand outside the confines of the monument but have strong Reconstruction significance.

In light of Reconstruction's importance, the Beaufort site should be only the beginning of NPS's effort to bring the era's history to public attention. The proposed Reconstruction Era National Historic Network is a logical and important next step. The network model, already successful in the case of the National Underground Railroad Network to Freedom, will allow NPS to lead and guide a broader effort to commemorate and bring to public attention a transformational epoch in which important—but currently little-known—events occurred in a vast array of places. Not every Reconstruction historic site rises to the level of national significance we found for the Beaufort area, and yet many have the potential to educate and inform the American public. Indeed, no single site can do justice to the Reconstruction era, which encompasses multiple and diverse histories.

Recent developments indicate that Americans are increasingly interested in grappling with Reconstruction. Plaques commemorating the era have recently been installed in such places as Memphis, Tennessee, and Charleston, South Carolina. Public attention is newly focused on Ida B. Wells, the crusading African American journalist of the 1880s and 1890s, and Ulysses S. Grant, president from 1869 to 1877. The National Constitution Center in Philadelphia is mounting a new exhibit on the Reconstruction Amendments, while the lynchings and racial violence that characterized the period are being remembered through local historic markers, in

documentary film, and at the new National Memorial for Peace and Justice in Montgomery, Alabama. Across the nation, Americans are engaging in the process of discovering and reevaluating the history of Reconstruction.

The Reconstruction Era National Historic Network would allow NPS to foster collaboration within the agency and to work with state and local governments and private parties interested in commemorating and interpreting Reconstruction history. Many existing NPS sites, although not originally framed in terms of the history of Reconstruction, have the potential to connect with that history. Such sites include plantation houses like Dunleith, in Natchez, Mississippi; the Charles Young Buffalo Soldiers National Monument in Wilberforce Ohio; and the Andrew Johnson National Historic Site in Greeneville, Tennessee. The network would promote and nurture Reconstruction history within the NPS by providing interpretive resources and opening new possibilities for collaboration.

The potential for collaboration with entities outside NPS is even greater. New and existing sites on the National Register of Historic Places could be incorporated into the network, allowing them to benefit from resources offered by the NPS while still remaining under existing management. Such sites exist across the South and throughout the nation. For instance, the home of Joseph H. Rainey of Georgetown, South Carolina, is a National Historic Landmark and on the National Register. Rainey was the first African American to serve in the U.S. Congress, and he began his political career during Reconstruction while living in that home. In Virginia, the Josephine City Historic District in Berryville preserves buildings associated with a community founded by former slaves who purchased land from a white plantation owner in 1870. The Reconstruction Era National Network would allow sites like the Rainey house and the Josephine City Historic District to benefit from support and collaboration with the NPS, helping them to draw visitors and to integrate their stories into the Reconstruction narrative. The network also provides incentives for communities to learn about and protect their local history of Reconstruction by nominating new sites for inclusion on the National Register. In short, the network's potential for promoting local and nationwide education and discussion of the Reconstruction era is tremendously exciting.

H.R. 5532 is a welcome measure that will help Americans understand and learn from an essential period of our history that has been ignored and misunderstood for far too long.

<https://www.nps.gov/orgs/1207/07-28-2017-reconstruction-theme-study.htm>

<https://www.nps.gov/nhl/learn/themes/Reconstruction.pdf>