

Statement of the Honorable Donald Payne
Member of Congress

Before the
Subcommittee on National Parks
of the
House Resources Committee

June 9, 2005

I am pleased to appear before the Subcommittee today to speak in support of H.R. 1096 – legislation to benefit the Thomas Edison National Historic Site. I am proud to have the Edison site in my congressional district, and I am fully committed to ensuring that this historical treasure is preserved for the benefit of future generations. I thank you for the opportunity to testify on behalf of this important legislation.

Over the years, Mr. Chairman, I have witnessed first-hand the positive impact that the Edison site has had on our community, particularly our young students. As a former teacher, I am well aware of the value of interactive learning and I feel privileged to have a piece of history in my district where students can feel like they are part of the history they are learning. The Edison Site has taken great effort to assist in this learning, providing lesson plans for teachers and hosting tours and activities for students to observe and interact with the facilities.

Thomas Edison devoted his life to creating technological innovations that dramatically impacted the course of American history as well as the way of life of people around the world. The light bulb, the motion picture camera and the phonograph are among the best known of Edison's unparalleled contributions.

Thomas Edison achieved much of his success at his laboratory complex located in West Orange, New Jersey, in my congressional district, that still survives as a unit of the National Park Service. Unfortunately, the site and the priceless artifacts it holds are at serious risk. Many of the buildings date back to 1887 and are suffering from age-related decay. The artifacts – including Edison's process of invention, prototypes and millions of pages of documents – are deteriorating because the buildings are not adequate to protect them from the elements.

The National Park Service and its private partner, the Edison Preservation Foundation, have launched a campaign to restore and revitalize the aging laboratory complex and reestablish the site as an educational and cultural destination for generations to come. This successful partnership is a fine example of how the federal government should be utilizing the resources and energy of the private sector to leverage public support for these projects. I applaud George Keegan, who will testify later today on behalf of the Foundation, and Foundation Chairman John Keegan for the good work of the Edison Preservation Foundation to steadily make their vision for a rejuvenated Edison site a reality.

The revitalization project is also part of a larger strategy to spur much-needed economic development in an area of West Orange, New Jersey that has faced hard economic times in recent years. Not only is the Edison site one of the most endangered historic landmarks in our country, but it has also been identified as one of the most dangerous national park service sites in the country. The legislation before the Subcommittee demonstrates the Congressional commitment necessary to ensure the site's long-term success.

Again, thank you for the opportunity to appear here today. I urge the Subcommittee to move forward and approve this important legislation.