

## **H.R. 390**

### **“Maurice D. Hinchey Hudson River Valley National Heritage Area Enhancement Act.”**

June 27, 2024

Testimony by Sean Kelleher, Historian, Town of Saratoga, NY

I stand before you today to urge your support for H.R. 390, the "Maurice D. Hinchey Hudson River Valley National Heritage Area Enhancement Act," a critical piece of legislation that will preserve our nation's history and drive economic growth in the Hudson River Valley.

The Town of Saratoga is committed to initiatives that enhance our economic, historical, and environmental well-being. Inclusion in the Maurice D. Hinchey Hudson River Valley National Heritage Area would significantly bolster our efforts to preserve our rich heritage while fostering sustainable development and tourism. This opportunity is particularly timely as we approach our celebration of the 250th anniversary of the American Revolution in 2027, which will commemorate pivotal events such as the Battles of Saratoga. These battles played a crucial role in shaping our nation's history and continue to be a source of pride and education for our community.

The Saratoga Campaign of 1777 was pivotal in the American Revolutionary War. British General John Burgoyne led an army to seize control of the strategically crucial Hudson River Valley. However, his campaign culminated in defeat at the Battles of Saratoga, forcing his surrender to American General Horatio Gates on October 17, 1777. This unprecedented event—the first surrender of an entire British army in history—had far-reaching consequences. It enabled Benjamin Franklin to secure vital foreign assistance for the American cause, transforming the conflict into a global war spanning North America, the Caribbean, Africa, Asia, and Europe. The Battles of Saratoga were monumentally significant because they breathed life into the ideals set forth in the Declaration of Independence. Until this point, these principles of freedom and self-governance were merely words on paper. The American victory at Saratoga demonstrated the viability of these ideals, not just for our fledgling nation but for all of humanity. It proved that the concepts of liberty and independence could triumph against seemingly insurmountable odds, setting a powerful precedent for future generations.

The Hudson River Valley National Heritage Area was established 28 years ago, encompassing 10 counties and the village of Waterford in Saratoga County. Its primary purpose was to commemorate the American Revolution and highlight our nation's ongoing commitment to the fundamental human rights of liberty, equality, and dignity. However, the heritage area's boundaries were initially determined based on Congressional districts rather than on communities recognized for their historical significance in the Hudson Valley. Over

time, the heritage area has evolved administratively, incorporating Saratoga National Historical Park - which Saratoga County proposes renaming to Saratoga National Battlefield Park. It's crucial to note that while the National Park was added, the surrounding communities that also witnessed actual combat and the British surrender were not included.

We deeply value Saratoga National Historical Park, its dedicated staff, its stunning landscape, exceptional preservation efforts, and outstanding interpretive programs. However, we recognize that the park is distinct from the communities where part of the Battles of Saratoga actually unfolded. Our towns and villages in Saratoga and Washington counties, each with their unique heritage and historical significance, bear the responsibility of preserving this vital part of American history. Unlike the National Park Service, our communities lack substantial resources to fulfill this important duty effectively.

The proposed Enhancement Act would expand the Heritage Area to include all locations where fighting occurred, where patriots made the ultimate sacrifice, and where American independence was secured. This region is of international importance, and our communities require your support to continue this critical conservation work and develop economic independence. By including these areas, we can ensure a more comprehensive preservation and interpretation of the events that shaped our nation's history.

The proposed addition of Saratoga and Washington Counties to the Hudson River Valley National Heritage Area through H.R. 390 is crucial for preserving and promoting our region's rich history. This inclusion aligns perfectly with the goals of the Saratoga County 250th Commission, established by the Saratoga County Board of Supervisors to educate the public about the Battles of Saratoga, increase heritage tourism, and enhance infrastructure at historic sites.

The 250<sup>th</sup> anniversary commemorations of the Battles of Saratoga will be landmark events featuring gatherings of patriotic organizations, parades, reenactments, fireworks, and scholarly symposiums. Inclusion in the Hudson River Valley National Heritage Area would significantly enhance these efforts by providing additional resources, expertise, and national recognition. This designation would improve coordination with other Revolutionary War sites along the Hudson, facilitate access to federal funding, and expand commemorative events.

The goals of the County's 250th Commission complement those of the Maurice D. Hinchey Hudson River Valley National Heritage Area. Inclusion in the Heritage Area will increase visibility for historic sites, potentially leading to higher visitation and improved preservation efforts. It will also foster collaboration with other sites in the heritage area, enhancing the coordinated 250th-anniversary celebrations along the Hudson River.

Our communities stand to benefit economically from increased heritage tourism. For instance, Schuylerville is transitioning from an aged mill community to a heritage tourism center. The Heritage Area can bring resources to assist this transformation by improving infrastructure and supporting preservation efforts. Additionally, it can provide expertise in creating enhanced educational resources for local schools and communities.

The economic impact of National Heritage Areas is significant. A 2018 report to Congress stated that these areas leveraged \$5.50 for every \$1 of federal funding received and created approximately 920,000 jobs nationally. By joining the Hudson River Valley National Heritage Area, Saratoga and Washington Counties can tap into these benefits, fostering economic growth and preserving our historical legacy for future generations.

For more information about the Saratoga County 250th Commission and its initiatives, please visit [Saratoga250.com](http://Saratoga250.com).

National Heritage Areas have generally been considered successful across the United States, and the Hudson Valley National Heritage Area has had specific successes. Studies have shown that national heritage areas contribute significantly to local economies. A 2012 study found that they contribute \$12.9 billion annually to the national economy by supporting job creation, particularly in the tourism and preservation sectors. The Hudson Valley National Heritage Area has supported the preservation and interpretation of numerous historic sites, including those related to the American Revolution. In addition, the Hudson Valley National Heritage Area has supported efforts to preserve and celebrate the diverse cultural heritage of the Hudson Valley, including Native American, Dutch, and African American histories, which are also important themes of the American Revolution. Most importantly, the Hudson Valley National Heritage Area has helped to strengthen regional identity and pride in the Hudson Valley's heritage. The Hudson River Valley is the identity of our communities. The Hudson River defines our community.

In conclusion, adding three simple words to existing legislation will empower and facilitate our communities' better collaboration with federal and state agencies to achieve our common goals. By supporting H.R. 390, you will not throw away your shot to correct a historical oversight, thus boosting local economies and ensuring that future generations can fully appreciate the birthplace of American independence. I invite you to visit Saratoga County and witness our heritage's significance and preparations for the 250th Commemoration of the Battles of Saratoga.

Thank you for considering my testimony. For more information, please visit our website at [saratoga250.com](http://saratoga250.com)