

Testimony on H.R. 1846

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Mr. Chairman and members of the subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today on behalf of HR 1846, the Lower East Side Tenement National Historic Site Amendments Act.

The Lower East Side Tenement Museum was founded in 1988; for 25 years now it has preserved and interpreted the history of immigration through the personal experiences of the generations of newcomers who settled in and built lives on Manhattan's Lower East Side, America's iconic immigrant neighborhood. The Museum forges emotional connections between visitors and immigrants past and present through tours of its historic building at 97 Orchard Street, which was declared a National Historic Landmark in 1994. The historic site became an affiliated site of the National Park System (NPS) in 1998 in PL 105-378 and is part of the National Parks of New York Harbor, which includes the Statue of Liberty, Ellis Island, and Castle Clinton.

The Museum now serves 200,000 visitors per year, including 40,000 school children. Visitors explore recreated apartments and hear the stories of real families from over twenty nations who lived in the building from 1863 until 1935, when the City of New York condemned the building as unfit for human occupancy. The Museum has transformed this everyday tenement into a National Historic Site, its worn hallways and tired homes a monument to how imaginative historic preservation can summon the ghosts of the past to explain America's most cherished ideals. The Museum helps visitors explore how the tenement's immigrant residents worked, raised families, kept house, built communities, accommodated to America's promise, and built this wonderful country.

The Museum purchased 103 Orchard Street, an 1888 tenement building, in 2007 and renovated its lower floors as a visitor and education center. Unlike the Museum's first historic structure, 103 Orchard Street did not close to residents in mid-century, and so provided homes to more recent immigrant waves. The Museum is now developing an exhibit to present stories of Jewish Holocaust survivors, post-1965 Chinese families, and 1950s Puerto Rican migrants. Together, these will extend the Museum's immersive historic interpretations beyond 1935, where they now end, into the present.

This project is a direct response to former NPS Director Jon Jarvis's "Call to Action" to tell America's untold stories. The exhibit would be the first at a National Park Service site to interpret the history of Holocaust survivors rebuilding lives in America. It would also be one of the few telling the stories of Puerto Rican migrants to the mainland and post-1965 Chinese immigrants. The interpretation differs from ethnic museums in that it presents the larger narrative of how Americans came to be the people they are today; in presenting these three distinct cultural narratives side by side for the first time, the Museum will provide a powerful lens on how Americans moved beyond the race-based immigration quota laws of the 1920s. The new exhibit will provide the setting for a powerful narrative reflecting the experiences of contemporary Americans in the diverse communities that now constitute much of the nation.

House Bill 1846 expands the boundaries of the National Park Service affiliated site at 97 Orchard Street to include this newer tenement building. Including 103 Orchard Street is a direct response to the Department of Interior's 2006 General Management Plan for the site, which recognized the need for visitor orientation, administrative facilities, and additional exhibit space. It determined that any boundary adjustment include significant features related to the primary purpose of the site, address operational issues including access, or protect resources critical to the site's mission. It also required legislation to adjust the site's boundaries.

These new exhibits are directly related to the Museum's mission and allow visitors to see how immigration has continued to evolve into the present. We estimate the expansion

would allow it to accommodate 50,000 additional visitors annually, including 12,000 school students. Furthermore, these exhibits will be fully ADA accessible which the majority of the original exhibits are not.

This legislation will secure a partnership between the new space and the National Parks of New York Harbor. NPS would be able to assist this site with education workshops, tours for New York City school children, and exhibition construction and preservation, just as it has done at the original site. This designation would help preserve America's iconic immigrant neighborhood. It is critical to provide the Tenement Museum with the resources it needs to continue to educate our children and tell the important stories of our past immigrant experience. The immigration story is America's story; New York's Lower East Side has been a portal to freedom for countless generations of new Americans.

The Lower East Side Tenement Museum has worked for 25 years to enhance appreciation for the profound role immigration has played and continues to play in shaping this country. Today we ask that you support HR 1846 and expand the affiliated site boundaries to include this second historic building and help ensure the Tenement Museum's success for years to come.