

Statement by Congressman John D. Dingell  
July 13, 2006  
National Park Subcommittee

Chairman Pearce, Ranking Member Christensen I want to thank you for holding this hearing today on my legislation, H.R. 5132. I believe that it is important not only for Michigan, but for preserving a vital piece of our national heritage.

This legislation, quite simply, would direct the Secretary of the Interior to study the suitability of including the site of the River Raisin massacre into the National Park system.

The legislation already has support from the people of Monroe, Michigan, our governor, historians, archeologists and, hopefully, this study will bring the full support of the Federal government. In the second panel, you will hear from Monroe's mayor, Al Cappuccilli who has been a vital leader in this effort.

Mr. Chairman, the War of 1812 is one of the least studied, but most important episodes in our nation's history. Following the Revolutionary War, America was a weak nation and was preyed upon by Britain, France and Spain. Britain aimed to re-conquer the newly independent former colonies.

When the war broke out, it was expected that Britain would quickly defeat the poorly equipped and poorly trained Americans. Washington was burned, and British troops torched the Capitol.

Along the Western frontier, in what is today Michigan, Ohio and Kentucky, the war raged. When Detroit fell to the British a contingent of Kentuckians, under the direction of Gen. William Henry Harrison marched to retake the city.

On January 18, 1813 American forces crossed the River Raisin and attacked the British encampment on the other side. They forced the British to retreat. Four days later, British forces and their Native American allies counter-attacked. The Americans were routed.

When the British withdrew, they took with them any American who could travel as a prisoner. The injured were left. The next day, the Native allies returned and massacred the Americans and burned Frenchtown to the ground.

Of the 900 strong American force only 33 escaped death or capture. Throughout the American Army the cry "Remember the Raisin" rallied our troops. Soon thereafter, spurred by the memory of the Raisin, the Americans liberated Detroit and won the decisive Battle of the Thames in Ontario - guaranteeing America's victory in the war.

The River Raisin Battle is still the bloodiest battle ever in Michigan, and was the most violent battle on continental US soil outside of the Civil War. It is an important episode in American history that needs to be recognized.

Since 1813, the site of the battle and massacre has been encroached upon increasingly by the town of Monroe. What was once a small farming settlement is now a bustling city between Toledo and Detroit.

Homes have been built where the American soldiers crossed the river. Jefferson-Smurfit, at one time operated a factory on the site, buildings were built and later torn down. Now, most of the land where the battle took place is in the possession of the City of Monroe and they want to make sure that it is protected for all Americans to visit.

The State of Michigan has provided \$1 million for Brownfield redevelopment and rehabilitation of the site. The City of Monroe and the Monroe County Historical Society have each pledged \$35,000 for the creation of a master plan for the entire battlefield site, and they will soon be applying for a Battlefield Protection Grant through the National Park Service.

A citizens' group has also formed to guide the development of the battlefield, raise funds for historic preservation and develop educational programs.

I introduced H.R. 5132 because I am confident that once studied, the National Park Service would agree that the unique historic, cultural, and educational opportunities of the River Raisin battlefield site warrant its inclusion in the National Park system.

I am aware, as are the members of this Committee that for the foreseeable future there will be a limitation on funds for the operation and maintenance of new properties within the system. To that end, the City of Monroe has expressed their willingness to donate the land to the National Park Service. No acquisition fee would be paid, and the land would be permanently protected.

Achieving National Park status would be a prestigious achievement and one that could act as a catalyst for historic preservation and cultural tourism throughout the region. Trails could connect the battlefield to nearby Sterling State Park and the Detroit River Wildlife Refuge.

I am confident that the energy and commitment of the community would make this a wise inclusion into our National Park system.

Mr. Chairman, in six years we will be marking the 200 th Anniversary of the War of 1812. I can think of no better way to honor the hundreds who gave their lives at the River Raisin than to make the site a permanent memorial to their bravery and sacrifice.

We need to do this in order to protect an important piece of our nation's heritage.