

Testimony of George Q. Keegan,
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Before the
Subcommittee on National Parks
of the
House Resources Committee

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Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee, my name is George Keegan and I serve as Executive Director of the Edison Preservation Foundation. Our foundation is proud to be a partner with the National Park Service on a capital improvement campaign to restore and preserve the Edison National Historic Site in West Orange, New Jersey. I appreciate the opportunity to appear before the Subcommittee today.

I am pleased to offer the Foundation's strong support for H.R. 1096, legislation that is crucial to restoring and preserving the Edison National Historic Site. This site is a national treasure that has enormous historical significance for America, and indeed, for the world. I want to thank Congressman Garrett, Congressman Payne, and the other members of the New Jersey delegation for their efforts in developing this legislation and for highlighting the pressing need to preserve an important part of our country's historical legacy.

Mr. Chairman, the impact of Thomas Edison's work on today's world is evident all around us. Edison's genius is responsible for development of the light bulb, motion pictures, recorded sound, and countless other transcending inventions used in our every day lives. In fitting recognition of Edison's enormous impact on the world, Life Magazine named Thomas Edison as the "Man of the Millennium." Upon his death in 1931, the world dimmed their lights for a minute in his honor. Last year, the Edison coin was minted in recognition of the 125th anniversary of electric light.

No site in the world better captures the significance of the "Man of the Millennium" than the Edison National Historic Site, which has nearly 90,000 visitors each year. But, the historic structures where Edison worked and lived, and the priceless historical artifacts they hold, are at serious risk. Mr. Chairman, H.R. 1096 is needed to help ensure that Edison's significant legacy of accomplishment continues to inspire future generations around the world. Currently, the Site works with approximately 100,000 grade schools students a year either at the site or their own schools in order to inspire innovation through learning the principles of Edison. Furthermore, the Foundation also educates our youth by showcasing approximately 40 programs a year at various schools to motivate our youth to learn from the principles of Edison.

The Edison National Historic Site is actually comprised of two separate sites -- Thomas Edison's home and his laboratory complex. The eight-building laboratory complex, with structures dating back to 1887, was one of America's first research and development facilities, and Edison earned over half of his 1,093 patents at this site. Edison's home, known as Glenmont, was built in 1880 and contains original furnishings and other important family items. Edison's gravesite is also located on the grounds of his beloved Glenmont.

In addition to these historical structures, the Edison National Historic Site contains the world's largest collection of Edison materials. This collection is the largest archival collection in the National Park System, and the second largest individual archival collection in the world, next to Leonardo da Vinci's. The Edison collection includes an estimated 5 million pages of documents, over 400,000 artifacts, approximately 37,000 sound recordings, and 10,000 books from the inventor's personal library. Edison's notebooks hold the key to the birth of invention and provide a unique glimpse of this tremendous mind especially through his original sketches of the phonograph and other momentous inventions.

Mr. Chairman, the need to preserve the Edison site's historical structures and artifacts has been identified for decades by the National Park Service. The site was also listed, in the early 1990's, by the National Trust for Historic Preservation as one of America's "most endangered historic places." The Edison National Historic Site faces many significant challenges including:

- Administrative spaces, visitor services, and museum collection storage are located in historic buildings, which are ill-suited for these purposes;
- Priceless historical artifacts are stored in various small rooms throughout the historic buildings, making it difficult to properly inventory and secure collections;
- There is no workspace for processing, cataloging, and preserving documents and artifacts;
- National Park Service staff work under conditions characterized by insufficient office space, poor storage, and inadequate restrooms; and

- Existing facilities cannot accommodate the increasing requests for on-site educational programs, interactive learning, audiovisual programs, and large group interactive presentations.

To help address these, and other pressing needs, our foundation joined the National Park Service in a public-private partnership to jointly raise funds for a capital improvement campaign. Proceeds from this campaign will: restore and preserve Edison's laboratory complex and family home; sustain the site in the future; complete the Edison Papers, a documentary editing project of Edison's archives; create and maintain scientific and technology programs for students, especially for women and minorities who remain underrepresented in these fields; and help make the site a significant component of a local community revitalization effort.

Mr. Chairman, we are proud of what this public-private partnership has accomplished since its inception in November 1997. To date, we have raised nearly \$20 million, of which approximately \$14 million has come from corporate sponsors such as General Electric, Sony, Mitsui, and Toshiba. This money has funded the first planned phase of the restoration effort, an approximately \$12 million project that addresses the Edison site's most pressing needs and which is expected to be completed in 2006. It is important to note that this project was not undertaken until the funds to fully pay for it were in hand.

While the Foundation's partnership with the National Park Service is making progress, a visible long-term commitment from the federal government is essential to the successful restoration and preservation of the Edison site. H.R. 1096 represents such a commitment, and would enable the Edison site to more effectively attract the resources – from federal, state, local, and private sources – necessary to keep Edison's legacy alive for future generations. Additionally, the Foundation supports the bill's redesignation of the Edison site as a "national historic park" as an important part of the restoration effort and as consistent with National Park Service guidelines.

Mr. Chairman, as we sit here today, the Edison site is temporarily closed to the public for renovations. It is imperative that we all work together to ensure that the wonders of the site, and the magic of Edison's legacy, will always be open to future generations.

Thank you for considering my views, and I would be happy to answer any questions.