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Testimony

Before the Subcommittee on National Parks, Recreation, and Public Lands  
United States House of Representatives

H.R. 4481, to amend Public Law 86-434 establishing Wilson's Creek National Battlefield

June 15, 2004

Mr. Chairman and Committee Members,

Thank you for this opportunity to speak in support of H.R. 4481, to amend Public Law 86-434 establishing Wilson's Creek National Battlefield, and to expand the boundaries of the park. I testify as a Civil War historian. As a professor at Southwest Missouri State University in Springfield, Missouri, I teach courses on military history and the American Civil War, and I am co-author of a history of the Battle of Wilson's Creek. I served as an unpaid, volunteer consultant to the Battlefield during the development of its 2002 General Management Plan. I was particularly active in the area of Boundary Assessments, identifying property adjacent to the Battlefield for possible acquisition should willing sellers and available funding come together. Since 1988 I have also been a member of the Wilson's Creek National Battlefield Foundation, a civilian organization that supports the National Park Service in a variety of ways. I attach a copy of my vita and a disclosure statement to this testimony.

My testimony focuses on three things: 1) the historical significance of the Battle of Wilson's Creek; 2) the current importance and value of the Wilson's Creek National Battlefield to the public; and 3) the benefit to the Battlefield and the public of an authorization to expand the boundaries of Wilson's Creek National Battlefield, via the purchase of property from willing sellers.

Although not as well known to the public today as other battles, Wilson's Creek was one of the most historically significant events of the Civil War. It occurred on August 10, 1861, on what was then open farmland nine miles from Springfield, Missouri. The battle was the culmination of a campaign that pitted Northern General Nathaniel Lyon against the Southern commanders Sterling Price and Ben McCulloch. The campaign began in May, 1861, when in defense of the Federal arsenal in St. Louis Lyon moved successfully against pro-secessionist militia outside the city. Rallying forces loyal to the national government, Lyon initiated in June a full-fledged campaign against the pro-secessionist Missouri State Guard under General Sterling Price.

Overcoming seemingly insurmountable obstacles, the U.S. Regulars and Volunteers under Lyon's command marched across the state, securing the capital, Jefferson City, as well as the railway and river transportation network crucial to the Union cause. At a time when Northern military commanders in the East and Midwest seemed paralyzed by their responsibilities, Lyon moved with speed and decision. The fortunes of war varied greatly for Missourians over the next four years, but it is clear in retrospect that Lyon more than any other man saved Missouri for the Union.

Lyon faced formidable adversaries, however. When driven into the southwest corner of the state by Lyon's advance to Springfield, Price received help from Confederates in Arkansas under the command of General Ben McCulloch. Together, McCulloch's Confederates and Price's Missouri State Guard advanced on Springfield, halting for water where Wilson's Creek crossed their route. They planned to attack the town on August 10, but Lyon attacked them first, in one of the boldest moves in American military history.

Although outnumbered almost two-to-one, Lyon split his force into two columns and surprised the Southerners in their camps at dawn on August 10. Five hours of fierce fighting ensued, during which Lyon became the first Union general to die in battle. The Union army eventually withdrew, but Lyon's men considered themselves the victors. Their daring attack paralyzed the Southern army and maintained the prestige of the Federal government against the secessionist movement. While other campaigns and battles followed, the Confederate cause in Missouri never fully recovered from the blow Lyon launched on August 10.

Fought just twenty days after the battle of Bull Run in northern Virginia, Wilson's Creek was the second major battle of the Civil War. Although later battles were larger, Wilson's Creek involved more men and higher casualties than most of the battles of the American Revolution, the War of 1812, or the Mexican War. At Wilson's Creek Native Americans participated in the Civil War for the first time, fighting on the Confederate side. While not organized as a unit, a small number of African Americans also fought at Wilson's Creek. Civilian women were present on the battlefield and performed heroic service in relation to medical care. The battle was a proving ground for military talent, as almost two dozen of the soldiers who fought at Wilson's Creek eventually rose to the rank of brigadier general or higher in the Union or Confederate armies. Veterans of the Blue and Gray remembered their participation at Wilson's Creek with pride, commemorating their service during reunions. These became joint reunions in the later years, as the passions of war gave way to pride in a reunited nation.

The Wilson's Creek National Battlefield is of tremendous importance and value to our nation's current citizens. Since it was established as a unit of the National Park Service more than forty years ago, the Battlefield has honored the participants who fought and died there in 1861, preserving the memory of their sacrifices as well as the battlefield itself and material culture related to it. Recent attendance figures suggest that more than 200,000 people may visit the Battlefield in 2004. Visitors have an opportunity to learn about Wilson's Creek in a variety of ways. These include the automobile tour road and walking trails that guide the visitor to significant locations and provide on-site interpretation of historical events. At the Visitor Center the public may watch an introductory film, explore an electronic map, and study interpretative historical displays of uniforms, weapons, and flags. The Wilson's Creek Battlefield is also home to the John K. Hulston Library, one of the largest research libraries in the National Park Service system. Along the tour road, at the surviving Ray House, visitors learn how the battle impacted local civilians, including slaves. Because of these resources, and because a large portion of the original battlefield remains in nearly pristine condition, Wilson's Creek serves as a popular tool for educators at many levels. Each year thousands of middle and secondary school students from Springfield and the surrounding region take field trips to Wilson's Creek. I take my own graduate and undergraduate students to the battlefield annually. Colleagues of mine from Drury University in Springfield; Missouri Southern College in Joplin; the College of the Ozarks in Point Pleasant, Missouri; and Emporia State College in Emporia, Kansas, frequently bring their students to the Battlefield. United States Army units stationed at Ft. Leavenworth in Kansas and Ft. Leonard Wood in Missouri routinely utilize Wilson's Creek for educational purposes. Visitors may also use designated trails for hiking, bicycling, or horseback riding. Such recreational opportunities are particularly welcome, as urban expansion is continually shrinking the amount of "green space" available to residents of southwest Missouri.

As the above information demonstrates, the Wilson's Creek National Battlefield is an invaluable public asset, one to be treasured and valued by all citizens, and fully worthy of the support it has received over the years. Legislation authorizing the expansion of the Battlefield's current boundaries to include property acquired from willing sellers is not only wise but also timely, given the rapidly expanding sprawl of Springfield and the nearby towns of Republic and Battlefield.

The 2002 General Management Plan for Wilson's Creek National Battlefield identifies areas adjacent to the park for consideration in terms of boundary adjustment. These are identified as Areas 1-6 on page 33 of the "Legislative Support Data Package" that was submitted to this subcommittee by the Wilson's Creek National battlefield. The total area is modest, approximately 615 acres, and almost all of it is currently used for agriculture. Should any of these areas become available through willing sellers, the acreage could be integrated into the Battlefield's existing interpretation at minimal cost.

Area 1 is the site of General Sweeny's Museum of Civil War History, privately owned, which houses the finest collection anywhere of artifacts relating to the Civil War in Missouri and Arkansas. Acquisition of the more than 15,000 artifacts, displays, and physical structure of the Sweeny Museum would increase by a factor of ten the ability of the Battlefield to use material culture in its interpretation of the battle, particularly in relation to the common soldiers, women and children, African Americans, and Native Americans. The

Sweeny Museum has five times more display space than the Battlefield's Visitor Center. The Museum's displays place the Battle of Wilson's Creek in the context of prior and subsequent events in the war west of the Mississippi River. These includes attention to the national debate over slavery and the coming of the Civil War, the role of women, Native Americans, and African Americans during the conflict, the experiences of the common soldiers, and the evolution of medical practices. In addition to the artifacts on display, the Sweeny Museum houses thousands of Civil War documents--a veritable archive of photographs, letters, diaries, reports, etc. Acquisition of this material will give the Battlefield's Hulston Library the largest collection of original Civil War material in the National Park Service system, and make Wilson's Creek an indispensable resource for historians and genealogists. The owners of General Sweeny's Museum are willing sellers. The property could be utilized by the Battlefield almost instantly, with minimal adjustments. To acquire an equivalent collection piece by piece would take the Battlefield decades at a cost far greater than the current evaluation of the Sweeny Museum. Although the land on which the Museum sits was not the scene of fighting, it is immediately adjacent to the route used by many of the Union forces to exit the battlefield. Acquisition of this land would therefore offer protection to an important view shed.

Area 2 was utilized by a Union column under Colonel Franz Sigel as part of Lyon's two-pronged surprise attack on the Southern forces camped along Wilson's Creek. Sigel opened highly effective long-range artillery fire at dawn from Area 2 before moving north to continue the battle. As this was one of the most decisive events of the battle, addition of Area 2 to the Battlefield would greatly enhance visitor appreciation of the course and consequences of the fighting. Area 3 was the scene of a Confederate assault on the high ground the soldiers nicknamed "Bloody Hill." They were attempting to turn the flank of Lyon's battle line on the crest. While repositioning his troops to meet this threat, Lyon was killed in action, a grave blow to the Union battle effort. The acquisition of Area 3 would greatly enhance visitor understanding of the importance of command and control during combat, as well as increase visitor appreciation for the first Union general to die in battle during the war. Area 4 was the scene of significant conflict as men from Sigel's command withdrew from the battle. It encompasses parts of the historic Little York and Wire Roads, which are crucial to visitor understanding of the maneuvers both prior to and following the battle. Area 5 encompasses the route Lyon's column used to approach the battlefield and is important for the same reasons as Area 4. Area 6 was used by Confederate troops as a rallying point after temporary setbacks. From here they returned to the battle with renewed determination. Acquisition of this area would enhance visitor appreciation for the complex ebb and flow of battlefield events.

In conclusion, the bill to authorize the expansion of the boundaries of the Wilson's Creek National Battlefield, and allow the acquisition of property from willing sellers, is entirely in the public interest and consistent with the mission of the National Park Service in general and the Wilson's Creek park in particular. Passage of H.R. 4481 will benefit the whole citizenry of our nation and honor the sacrifices of our forefathers.