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REMARKS OF U.S. REP. ED WHITFIELD

SUBCOMMITTEE ON NATIONAL PARKS, RECREATION
AND PUBLIC LANDS

H.R. 646

SEPTEMBER 16, 2003

Thank you, Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee, for allowing me testify regarding an issue that is very important to me: the legacy of the First District of Kentucky. I am honored to present H.R. 646 for your consideration, because it relates to a piece of our nation's history I have always been interested in. The stories about what took place in my District during the Civil War are of great historic importance to western Kentucky. It is difficult to find any natives of the First District of Kentucky who do not have ancestral ties to this great national conflict.

My legislation proposes an expansion of the boundaries of Fort Donelson National Battlefield from its current size of 558 acres to 2,000 acres. This expansion would allow Fort Henry, in Tennessee, and Fort Heiman, in Calloway County, Kentucky, to be included in Fort Donelson's boundaries and, therefore, managed by the National Park Service. Most of the land in Fort Heiman is currently owned by private citizens who are willing to sell the land for inclusion in Fort Donelson National Battlefield.

Fort Henry is controlled by the U.S. Forest Service. In addition to allowing Fort Donelson's boundaries to be expanded, H.R. 646 calls for a Memorandum of Understanding between the Forest Service and the National Park Service to allow the remaining portion of Fort Henry to be managed by the National Park Service. Management by the Park Service would provide much needed recognition of these historic forts and would help preserve the complete story of the battle of Fort Donelson for future generations. The inclusion of Fort Heiman in the Fort Donelson National Battlefield would not only aid in providing Americans with a more thorough understanding of how the Civil War was fought, but the recognition of this major conflict in western Kentucky could bring new visitors to my District and promote economic development in the surrounding community.

Please allow me to give you a brief history of these three forts. Fort Henry and Fort Heiman were constructed by Confederate forces on the Tennessee River, on opposite banks from each other. Fort Donelson was constructed on the Cumberland River and all three were intended to guard the rivers from invasion by Union troops. In 1862, General Ulysses S. Grant led an attack on Fort Henry from both the river and from land, while Fort Heiman was attacked from land by General C.F. Smith. Confederate troops left Fort Heiman, which at that point had not been completely constructed, and moved across the river for refuge in Fort Henry. But while Fort Henry was still under attack by General Grant, part of it became flooded by the Tennessee River, and Confederate General Lloyd Tilghman, who was in command of both Fort Heiman and Fort Henry, sent most of his troops overland to Fort Donelson nearby and surrendered the remainder of his forces to Union control. After 10 days of fighting between the North and the South at Fort Donelson, this third fortress also fell to the North. The conflict over these three forts represents one of the first major battles of the war.

This also marked the first major victory in the Union's "Anaconda Plan" which consisted of utilizing important rivers to cut off the South's western forces from its eastern forces. With major roads being scarce, the Cumberland and Tennessee Rivers were major arteries of transportation and were heavily traversed and vital to the army's movements. When the three forts on the rivers fell to the Union, it was a great loss to the South. The North now had control of an important transportation hub of the South. That marked the early stages of the South being divided by northern forces, which ultimately led to the downfall of the Confederacy.

However, the story of Fort Heiman was not over yet. After it was abandoned by Union forces in 1863, Confederate General Nathan Bedford Forrest re-occupied Fort Heiman in 1864, and used his position there to ambush Union gunboats on the Tennessee River, some of which he sank, and others he captured for re-use by southern forces. Using these gunboats, he led a successful raid on a major supply station of the Union in Johnsonville, Tennessee. However by that time the war was drawing to a close and it was too late for even such a successful mission to make a large impact on the outcome of war.

Civil War sites outside the management and care of the National Park Service are becoming an endangered species. Many of them are disintegrating due to neglect and erosion. Sites sacred to our nation's history are being consumed by urban sprawl. After the owner of Fort Heiman passed away several years ago, the land was subdivided, and several lots were sold for use as private residences. As this became known, concerned western Kentuckians formed a committee, consisting of local interest groups and concerned citizens, to save Fort Heiman from being developed into a housing complex. After much effort on the part of these dedicated Kentuckians to raise money and acquire grants to purchase this property, over 200 acres of Fort Heiman is ready to be bought, and in turn will be donated to the National Park Service in order to become a part of Fort Donelson National Battlefield. H.R. 646 would facilitate the forward movement of this land acquisition by allowing the National Park Service to accept the donated land.

I want to stress the point that this legislation does not allow for seizure of private property and does not allow the Park Service to claim eminent domain, but only authorizes the National Park Service to acquire land by way of donations or purchase from willing sellers. There are a small number of home owners with small plots of land within the Fort Heiman boundaries who do not wish to sell their property at this time. This legislation would in no way require them to relinquish their land unless they choose to sell. Fort Heiman is not the only Civil War Battlefield with private residences within its boundaries; Gettysburg National Battlefield, for one, still has various private properties interspersed throughout its boundaries, with which the Park does not interfere.

We need to continue to honor those Americans who perished in the Civil War and are buried at Fort Heiman and other battlefields throughout the country. As the only time in the history of our nation when brother fought against brother, it is important to recognize and preserve battlefields and forts from this conflict as memorials sacred to their memory.

Again, I want to thank you for giving this legislation your consideration today, and I hope I have been able to effectively demonstrate why this project is so important to me and my constituents. In addition to this legislation, I have an amendment that would add Kentucky into the Vicksburg Campaign Trail Study, and I would like to work with your staff to add this during the markup, if possible. I have several letters of support from local officials, as well as a map of the area in question that I would like to submit for the record. I will now answer any questions you have.

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