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Good Morning. My name is Robert Emerson, and I am Executive Director of the Old Fort Niagara Association in Youngstown, NY. It is my pleasure and honor to testify before the subcommittee on National Parks, Forests, and Public Lands of the Committee on Natural Resources. I thank Raúl Grijalva of Arizona, for leading this hearing on the establishment of the Niagara National Heritage Area. I also thank Congresswoman Louise Slaughter of the 28th District, New York, who, during her tenure, has provided outstanding support to Western New York for the preservation of historic structures, economic growth through tourism, and educational heritage programs for youth and adults, all of which bolster civic pride in a region beset with economic challenges.

When I was invited to speak here today, my thoughts turned to a much earlier journey from the shores of the Niagara to the nation's capitol. In the summer of 1813, a United States Army officer named Major George Armistead traveled from Fort Niagara to Washington to present President Madison with British flags recently captured across the river in Canada. Armistead served at Fort Niagara under a huge garrison flag that survives today and is exhibited to the public in Fort Niagara's new Visitor Center. After laying the captured British banners before the President, Armistead was given a new command; Fort McHenry in Baltimore. Soon the major ordered a proper garrison flag for his new post, a flag that came to be known as the Star Spangled Banner.

I'm sure that Armistead would be both pleased and surprised to learn that both flags have survived and are lovingly preserved for future generations to enjoy. The flag connection is only one of many nationally significant stories told by Old Fort Niagara National Historic Landmark. This historic site welcomes some 100,000 visitors each year and features the six oldest buildings in the Great Lakes Basin. The Fort's oldest structure, known today as the French Castle, built in 1726, was already eight years old when Independence Hall in Philadelphia was constructed. British soldiers walked the Fort's ramparts sixteen years before the fateful battles of Lexington and Concord. Today, Old Fort Niagara is open to the public 362 days each year and features a wide array of educational programs that tell important stories about the early history of the Niagara Region.

Niagara's stories are memorable ones that resonate with audiences throughout the world. They tell of Native Americans describing Niagara Falls to early French explorers as "somewhat high...where little water descendeth," certainly the understatement of the 17th century. They tell of French and British soldiers struggling to control the vital water passage to the upper Great Lakes and the North American interior; of traders and diplomats forging economic and political alliances between European and Native

American peoples; of young American soldiers desperately defending Fort Niagara from British assault during the War of 1812, and of peaceful coexistence between the United States and Canada.

Other stories remind us of immigrant labor building canals and railroads that bound our nation together, of enslaved Americans seeking freedom across the Niagara River in Canada, of scientists and inventors who harnessed the waters of the Niagara to generate enormous electric power, and of excited young newlyweds packed aboard Pullman cars on their way to the honeymoon capital of the world.

In short, the Niagara Region possesses a fascinating history full of human drama and stunning natural beauty. Unfortunately, only a small percentage of the more than 15 million visitors who gaze at the Falls each year, return to their homes with an appreciation for the rich tapestry of human history that has played out near the famous cataract. While the name Niagara Falls has almost universal recognition, few have a deeper knowledge of the area's heritage and its contributions to our civilization today.

This is why the establishment of the Niagara National Heritage Area is so important. By identifying and interpreting important themes, and tying together the many heritage resources the region possesses, the Niagara National Heritage Area will add another important dimension to an already popular tourism destination. A new emphasis on heritage will entice a broader audience to visit the region, will encourage repeat visitation, and will extend the stay of those whose Niagara Falls experience is today only brief and superficial.

By drawing more visitors and encouraging them to extend their stay, The Niagara National Heritage Area will have a positive economic impact on the entire region, and it will help instill civic pride that is a key not only to economic development, but to quality of life.

In closing, I would like to stress that the benefits of establishing The Niagara National Heritage Area will not just accrue to the residents of Western New York but to the nation as a whole. Niagara is among several American icons that possess worldwide recognition value. In an increasingly global tourism market, a revitalized Niagara will not only attract more international visitors to the United States, it will help to present a unique American story to the world; a story of natural beauty, brave exploration, armed conflict and peaceful co-existence, and technological triumph. I urge the committee to approve the establishment of the Niagara National Heritage Area. Please accept my sincere thanks for allowing me to testify this morning. I would especially like to thank Congresswoman Slaughter for inviting me to be here today. I welcome each of you to the Niagara Region and hope that you will one day visit America's other Star Spangled Banner.