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Testimony of Michael N. Castle  
National Underground Railroad Network to Freedom Reauthorization Act of 2007  
H.R. 1239  
Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests, and Public Lands  
Committee on Resources  
May 15, 2007

Mr. Chairman, I would like to thank the Subcommittee on National Parks for holding this hearing on the National Underground Railroad Network to Freedom Reauthorization Act of 2007, H.R. 1239. I would also like to thank my colleague Representative Alcee Hastings for sponsoring this important legislation. And finally, I would like to welcome Robert Stanton, Chair of the National Council of the National Parks Conservation Association and former Director of the National Parks Service, who you will hear testimony from later this morning on the National Parks Services' role in the National Underground Railroad Network to Freedom.

As you have heard from Representative Hastings, the Network to Freedom has served as a tremendous historical resource throughout our national parks since its establishment in 1998. Encompassing over 250 programs, sites, and partners in over 27 states and the District of Columbia, it is the only national program dedicated to the preservation, interpretation, and dissemination of Underground Railroad history. By playing a critical role in helping local communities to effectively share the stories of the men and women who resisted slavery through escape and flight in the Underground Railroad, this program is a vital asset to our National Park System. The Network to Freedom has been extremely successful and it is my hope that Congress will renew its commitment to its continued success.

Recent National Park Service financial projections, however, show the Network to Freedom budget reducing by 72 percent by the year 2011. Without continued and adequate funding, efforts to disseminate this history and build on the program's successes will be greatly diminished. For this reason, we must protect the ability of the National Parks Service to protect, preserve, and interpret the history of the Underground Railroad through the Network to Freedom.

The Underground Railroad played such an important role in our nation's history and the history of the state of Delaware. It has been reported that more passengers came through the city of Wilmington in Delaware on the Underground Railroad than any other place. Delaware is home to nine participating Network to Freedom sites.

A few very effective abolitionists worked in the Underground Railroad stations throughout Delaware in Blackbird, Camden, Middletown, New Castle, Hockessin and Wilmington. As a border state, Delaware had citizens who felt strongly both for and against slavery. However, people like Isaac Flint, John Hunn, Joseph Walker, and Thomas Garrett worked to provide a safe journey for the slaves they met.

Thomas Garrett (1789-1871) is known as Delaware's greatest station master. The site of his former home in Wilmington is part of the Network to Freedom. Beginning near the end of the 1820's he spent the greater part of his lifetime working in the Underground Railroad and is credited with helping 2,700 slaves reach freedom.

I was fortunate to spend some time with Bob Seeley, a descendant of Thomas Garrett, earlier this spring at the Wilmington Friends Meeting House, who shared with me family history on the life of this brave and generous man. The Wilmington Friends Meeting House and Cemetery is also a Network to Freedom site, representing the well documented contributions of the members of the Religious Society of Friends to the Underground Railroad. In the early decades of the 19th century, abolitionist members used the law to assist freedom seekers through the acting committee of the Delaware Abolition Society.

Other official Network to Freedom sites in Delaware include: Delaware's State House in Dover, which became the critical focal point of the life of Samuel D. Burris, an educated free black man who was arrested and tried for assisting in the escape of slaves; the Historic Society of Delaware, which has played a critical role in helping to document and interpret Delaware's crucial role in the Underground Railroad through its historic buildings, programs, and museum and library collections; the Long Road to Freedom program, which introduces school children to the history of the Underground Railroad and slavery through the stories of those who made this region one of the most successful Underground Railroad routes to freedom; the New Castle Courthouse, which represents the place where Thomas Garrett and John Hunn, Delaware's two most prominent Quaker abolitionists and stationmasters on the Underground Railroad, were prosecuted under the Fugitive Slave Acts of 1793 for aiding and harboring runaways; the Rocks at Fort Christina State Park along the Christina River that served as a natural dock where Captain Alfred Fountain landed runaways; the Star Hill Historical Society museum, which displays and interprets the history of this area which was home to a large number of African Americans, many of them freed slaves; and the Tubman-Garrett Riverfront Park & the Market Street Bridge, which have been developed as a major focal point for the interpretation of the Underground Railroad in the City of Wilmington, marking the historic area and bridge that Harriett Tubman crossed at Market Street.

There is a story I like to share from my days as Governor living in the Woodburn house, built circa 1798, which has served as the official residence of the Governor of Delaware since it was purchased by the state in 1965. The Harriet Tubman Society records list Woodburn as a station of the Underground Railroad during the 1840s and 1850s. Allegedly, a tunnel ran from a secret room in the basement and traveled beneath the rear grounds of the property out to the St. Jones River. Here, slaves escaping the south, sneaked into waiting boats, and from the St. Jones River, they were transported north along the Delaware River to Pennsylvania and New Jersey.

These are only a few examples highlighting Delaware's rich history and participation in this secret resistance movement. The reauthorization will protect the interpretive interests of our National Park System by providing increased funding to cover needed operations costs associated with carrying out the provisions of the program and it will increase the availability of grant funding to support a wide variety of Underground Railroad preservation and interpretative projects throughout the United States. I fully support this legislation because I believe promoting programs and partnerships to commemorate this time in history and educating the public about the historical significance of the Underground Railroad is vital.

I am honored to join Representative Hastings as the lead Republican cosponsor of the legislation and I do hope that we will soon be successful in our efforts to reauthorize the program.

Mr. Chairman and members of the Subcommittee, thank you again for the opportunity to testify.

