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**Testimony of the Honorable Alcee L. Hastings
The Importance of H.R. 1239
The National Underground Railroad Network to Freedom Reauthorization Act**

**Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests, and Public Lands
Committee on Natural Resources
United States House of Representatives**

May 15, 2007

Chairman Grijalva, Ranking Member Bishop and members of the Subcommittee, thank you for inviting me here today to testify before you.

I join you today to discuss H.R. 1239, The National Underground Railroad Network to Freedom Reauthorization Act, which I introduced with my friend Congressman Michael Castle of Delaware and a bipartisan coalition of 26 original cosponsors. This vital legislation now has a coalition of more than 50 cosponsors, including Chairman Grijalva. I thank him for his support.

Mr. Chairman, I am confident that so many of my colleagues have joined me in prioritizing this legislation because of the unifying narrative embodied by the historical legacy of the Underground Railroad. The sacrifice at the risk of death made by conductors and travelers of the Underground Railroad was an unprecedented contribution to the abolition of slavery. Standing in opposition to the degrading institution of slavery, resources and shelter for escaping slaves was offered by many concerned Americans. The contributors to this network included the members of the Society of Religious Friends, commonly referred to as the Quakers, as well as other concerned individuals. Thus, the Underground Railroad was one of the first synergistic partnerships that fostered the development of the thriving multicultural society that is the United States of America.

In 1997, I joined my friend, former Representative Louis Stokes and 70 other colleagues, as original cosponsors of the National Underground Railroad Network to Freedom Act of 1998. This bill eventually garnered significant bipartisan support from a coalition of 150 cosponsors and was moved by this committee after which it passed in the House of Representatives under suspension of the rules with only two dissenting votes. Swift

passage through the Senate led this legislation to become Public Law 105-203 on July 21, 1998.

The swift consideration of the establishing legislation and its vast co-sponsorship, including Republican and Democratic congressional leadership, spoke then as it does now to the necessity of the National Underground Railroad Network to Freedom. Indeed, once Congress establishes a phenomenal program such as this, it should be ready to take the necessary action to ensure its perpetuity.

While there is not a site within the 23rd Congressional District of Florida, the District which I represent, there are many sites in my great state. These include the Southeast Archeological Center of Tallahassee, The Family Heritage Museum of Bradenton, Bill Baggs Cape Florida State Park of Key Biscayne, and the Fort Jefferson site administered in Homestead. As Co-Chairman of Florida's Congressional Delegation, I am proud that this bill will ensure the continued preservation of these sites.

Interest in the history of the Underground Railroad has continued to increase in recent years. The Network to Freedom has grown to 300 sites in 28 states and the District of Columbia since its inception in 1998. More opportunities than ever are now available for families throughout the nation to engage in interpretive learning experiences related to the significant triumph of the Underground Railroad.

Realize, the potential for even more opportunities exists. In 1990, Congress directed the National Park Service to study how to best interpret and commemorate the Underground Railroad through the establishment of the Underground Railroad Advisory Committee (Public Law 101-628). In the final report issued by the Underground Railroad Advisory Committee in 1995, 380 sites and structures in 29 states, Canada, Mexico, and the Caribbean islands, under state and local government stewardship, or privately owned, were identified to have important direct association with the Underground Railroad. Of that number, 42 were identified as having potential for designation as national historic landmarks. Many of these sites are now a part of the Network to Freedom. However, the valuable history of those sites not included may be lost without designation and incorporation in the Network to Freedom.

It is crucial that we do not settle for preserving only a portion of our history. The current legislation pending before you today reflects an authorization for a modest funding increase that would bolster the capacity of the Network to Freedom so that the National Parks Service can continue its valuable work. Unfortunately, the March 2007 National Underground Network to Freedom Core Operations Report illuminates the challenges currently facing this program. One specific passage observes:

The unique organizational structure of the Network to Freedom program, the difficulty of documenting Underground Railroad sites, and the challenges of working with financially starved partners in underserved communities, all add layers of complexity for program staff not found in tradition units or programs of the National Park System.

This report also demonstrates that while costs for maintaining the Network to Freedom increase by 3.9 percent each year, funding for the program decreases by 1.01 percent each year. If the current trend continues, core projections estimate a 79.58 percent shortfall by 2011. Recent funding reductions have led to significant staffing losses that would be further exacerbated by greater funding shortfalls.

I urge the Subcommittee to report this legislation favorably in order to prevent the National Underground Railroad Network to Freedom Program from diminishing to the point that it would be unable to fulfill its congressionally mandated duty.

Our bill will help the Network to Freedom continue to facilitate partnerships and assist in interpreting and commemorating the historical network of buildings, interpretive centers, museums, geographic areas and routes that associated with the movement to resist slavery. As the largest steward of this history, it is important that the National Park Service is authorized to receive the support that it needs to continue this important mission.

This is not just black history. It is American history. This is our past and we must be faithful stewards of it. We cannot let our history be forgotten.

I thank you again for the opportunity to appear before you and look forward to your questions.