

November 16, 2016

The Honorable Sally Jewell  
Secretary of the Interior  
c/o Nikki Buffa, Deputy Chief of Staff  
US Department of the Interior  
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Washington DC 20240  
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Dear Secretary Jewell:

The American Historical Association, the largest professional organization serving historians in all fields and all professions, requests that you recommend to the White House the designation of a National Monument to Reconstruction in the Beaufort, South Carolina, area. This is the right time and place to incorporate the story of emancipation and Reconstruction into the National Park Service's key role in conveying the nation's history to millions of Americans. The crucial story of slavery's destruction, the emancipation of 4 million slaves, and the Reconstruction of the United States has never been adequately commemorated by the National Park Service.

Over the past two generations historians working from a wide variety of perspectives have reached a consensus that the transition to freedom was the central issue in Reconstruction. Different actors approached the challenge in different ways; in the interaction between enslaved people, arriving US soldiers, Treasury agents, and northern missionaries, each sought to define what freedom would mean and how it would be sustained.

Although emancipation and Reconstruction transformed communities across the South, Beaufort is the most appropriate site for this particular memorial. Events and people from the Beaufort area reflect the most important issues of the era: land, labor, education, politics, and fundamental questions posed by the destruction of slavery. Many of the first black Civil War soldiers enlisted in the US Army in the Beaufort area. Missionaries and former slaves built many of the first black schools there. The region witnessed many of the first efforts to distribute land to former slaves, and was the home of some of the era's most significant black politicians. Indeed, African American landownership and political influence endured there long after setbacks in other regions. The National Historic Landmark Theme Study on Reconstruction, written for the NPS by AHA members Kate Masur and Gregory Downs, judged that Beaufort "captures—perhaps better than any single location in the United States—the political, economic, organizational, and religious transformations of Reconstruction."

Many existing historic sites in the Beaufort region, including the town of Port Royal and St. Helena Island, demonstrate the transformative effect of emancipation and Reconstruction. At the Penn Center Historic District on St. Helena, the site of the former Penn School, freedpeople began attending classes in early 1862, before the Emancipation Proclamation. The Brick Baptist Church, constructed by slaves for planters, became a center of African American religious and community life. In Beaufort, the Robert Smalls House was the home of a slave who piloted a Confederate ship to US lines and served in two constitutional conventions and for five terms in the US Congress. At Camp Saxton, now the location of the US Naval Hospital in Port Royal, ex-slaves gathered to hear one of the first readings of the Emancipation Proclamation on January 1, 1863, and ex-slave Prince Rivers was among the speakers.

We understand that civic leaders in the Beaufort region not only endorse this proposal but have crafted operating agreements that grant authority to the National Park Service to administer a Reconstruction National Monument if the president were to use his authority under the Antiquities Act to designate one. Additionally, Congressmen Mark Sanford and James Clyburn co-sponsored a resolution to establish a National Monument to Reconstruction in the area.

In our nation's history, no era has been as little understood or as inadequately represented as Reconstruction. As the Civil War ended, Americans had the chance to remake their democracy and to expand their collective ideas about freedom and citizenship. Reconstruction was an era of immense creativity and open-endedness, one in which the fundamental premises of American society and government were up for grabs. It was a period of signal importance in African American history and—particularly in light of the addition of three constitutional amendments, the birth of public education in the South, and the dramatic expansion of the electorate—for the nation as a whole.

This is a historic opportunity to broaden our nation's understand of a crucial period and to render a fuller, more accurate portrayal of our nation's past. We appreciate your consideration and stand ready to assist in any way possible.

Sincerely yours,



Patrick Manning  
President



James Grossman  
Executive Director