

STATEMENT OF MICHAEL A. CALDWELL, ASSOCIATE DIRECTOR, PARK PLANNING, FACILITIES, AND LANDS, NATIONAL PARK SERVICE, U.S. DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR, BEFORE THE SENATE ENERGY AND NATURAL RESOURCES SUBCOMMITTEE ON NATIONAL PARKS CONCERNING S. 562, A BILL TO ESTABLISH THE EMMETT TILL AND MAMIE TILL-MOBLEY AND ROBERTS TEMPLE NATIONAL HISTORIC SITE, IN THE STATE OF ILLINOIS, AND FOR OTHER PURPOSES.

JUNE 21, 2023

Chairman King, Ranking Member Daines, and members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to present the Department of the Interior's views on S. 562, a bill to establish the Emmett Till and Mamie Till-Mobley and Roberts Temple National Historic Site, in the State of Illinois, and for other purposes.

The Department strongly supports S. 562's efforts to increase public understanding of the momentous impact that Emmett Till's funeral had on our Nation's awareness of the injustices suffered by African Americans. Congress could also consider authorizing a special resource study of the site of the funeral and associated Civil Rights sites in Illinois, which may help deepen Congress's understanding of the role this story and others played in the Civil Rights movement. If the Committee decides to move ahead with S. 562 as introduced, we would appreciate the opportunity to work with the Committee on amendments.

S. 562 would authorize the establishment of the Emmett Till and Mamie Till-Mobley and Roberts Temple National Historic Site after the Secretary of the Interior (Secretary) determines that an agreement entered into between the Secretary and the Roberts Temple Church of God in Christ (Roberts Temple) providing for public access to, and interpretation, operation, and maintenance of, the National Historic Site that is sufficient to constitute a manageable park unit. The bill provides for the boundary of the historic site to be established after enactment. In other respects, the bill contains provisions for administration of the site that is common for bills establishing new units of the National Park System.

In the summer of 1955, Emmett Till, a 14-year-old from the Chicago area, visited relatives in the Mississippi Delta. His mother, Mamie (née Carthan) Till-Mobley, had migrated from Mississippi to Chicago where Emmett was born. While visiting Money, Mississippi, Emmett Till bought candy from Carolyn Bryant, the young White woman behind the counter, at Bryant's Grocery Store. Eyewitnesses said Till whistled at Mrs. Bryant.

On August 28, 1955, Till was abducted from his great-uncle Moses (Mose) Wright's home in the middle of the night, tortured, and murdered by Bryant's husband, Roy Bryant, and his half-brother, J.W. Milam, in a seed barn. After Till's disappearance, Wright contacted the authorities, and Bryant and Milam were arrested and charged with kidnapping. Till's body was later found in the Tallahatchie River, and eventually returned to his family in Chicago.

According to sources, upwards of 50,000 people attended Emmett Till's funeral at the Roberts Temple. Though a grieving mother, Till-Mobley was attuned to the moment and the potentially galvanizing effect of choosing to hold an open-casket funeral and inviting the world to see her son's mutilated body. Photos of Till, taken shortly before his funeral, appeared in Jet Magazine, an African American weekly, and other African American publications, prompting a national outcry. Publication of these photos allowed an even wider audience to see the tragic and irreversible consequences of unchecked racism and violence. The mutilation and lynching of young Emmett Till shook the country and sparked the modern civil rights movement.

As the site of Emmett Till's funeral, Roberts Temple unquestionably has a place in our nation's history, as described by a Commission on Chicago Landmarks recommendation in 2005, and in other countless historical records.

The site has not yet been the subject of a special resource study, so Congress could consider authorizing such a study to provide further assessment of the national significance, as well as suitability, feasibility, and need for National Park Service management, the criteria for determining whether a site is appropriate for inclusion in the National Park System. A special resource study also includes a public involvement component.

If the Committee decides to move forward with S. 562 as a designation rather than a study, the Department would recommend several amendments, including: changing the name of the site to the "Emmett Till and Mamie Till-Mobley National Historic Site" to highlight the nationally significant story the site tells; focusing the purpose of the site on protecting and interpreting the Emmett Till and Mamie Till-Mobley story; and defining a boundary of the site by means of referencing a legislative map prior to enactment of the bill. We would be pleased to provide recommended amendments and a legislative map for these purposes.

Chairman King, this concludes my testimony. I am happy to answer any questions you or the members of the Subcommittee may have.