

STATEMENT OF MICHAEL A. CALDWELL, NATIONAL PARK SERVICE, U.S. DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR, BEFORE THE SENATE ENERGY & NATURAL RESOURCES SUBCOMMITTEE ON NATIONAL PARKS CONCERNING S. 527, A BILL TO ESTABLISH THE AFRICAN BURIAL GROUND INTERNATIONAL MEMORIAL MUSEUM AND EDUCATIONAL CENTER IN NEW YORK, NEW YORK, 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. 527, a bill to establish the African Burial Ground International Memorial Museum and Education Center in New York, New York, and for other purposes.

The Department recognizes the importance of the African Burial Ground and supports increasing public understanding of the injustice of slavery in the United States, and the National Park Service (NPS) addresses these themes and concepts in the present visitor facility of the African Burial Ground National Monument (Monument). However, as described in this statement, we do not support this bill as introduced without first completing fuller analysis. The Department would recommend, if the Committee moves forward with this legislation, that the bill be amended instead to authorize a study of the plan and feasibility of a memorial museum and education center adjacent to the Monument.

S. 527 would establish at the African Burial Ground National Monument, a memorial museum, and educational center to be known as the "African Burial Ground International Memorial Museum and Educational Center" (Museum) to serve as a permanent living memorial to the enslaved who are buried at the African Burial Ground and to other enslaved Africans and African Americans. The Museum would examine the African cultural traditions brought to the United States by the enslaved and explore in-depth the institution of slavery in the United States and other parts of the world. Many of these themes and concepts are already embraced and presented by the Monument in its present visitor facility. In the absence of a study that specifically explores the plan for, and feasibility of, the Museum, we have little information about how the Museum is meant to relate to the Monument.

The site encompassed by the Monument is among the oldest, and is the largest known urban burial site of enslaved and free Africans in the United States. The site is one of the most significant archeological discoveries in the 20th century – with an estimated 15,000 burials. The Monument provides the opportunity to study, contemplate, and discuss the history and implications of the African Diaspora and redefines and makes accessible to all the history and contributions of Africans in the building of the Americas.

The Monument consists of designed urban space that encompasses a plaza, sculptural elements and seven burial mounds, the location of the re-interred remains from the burial ground. A large 24-foot granite sculpture resembles the prow of a ship and symbolically references the journey

from and back home to Africa. Passing through the threshold of the “ship,” one encounters a large map depicting the African Diaspora. A spiral ramp provides access back out to the street level past carved symbols from many of the world’s religions and African cultural groups.

The visitor center for the Monument, located on the first floor of the Ted Weiss Federal Building at 290 Broadway, opened in February 2010. The visitor center exhibits are divided into four main topics. The central theme speaks to the experiences, rituals, and customs of the people who used the burial ground. A second area explores the science behind the analysis of the buried remains. A third exhibit area addresses the nature of slavery and the lives of those enslaved. The fourth area examines the activism throughout the New York community that brought the burial ground to the attention of the world and led to its preservation.

This bill would direct the Secretary of the Interior (Secretary) to acquire or lease property for the Museum that is located adjacent to the Monument or in any other area of the National Historic Landmark, and to plan, design, and construct the Museum at that location. The Monument would be expanded to incorporate the Museum property, which would likely double the size of the Monument and require the acquisition or lease of property in a very expensive and complex real estate market. Given ample opportunities for programmatic relationships with the institutions named in this bill, the need for the acquisition of land and the development of a costly new facility is not clear.

The bill directs an association between the Museum and the National Museum of African American History and Culture (NMAAHC) in Washington, DC. It is not clear how the Museum would relate to or be distinguished from the NMAAHC. The bill provides broad outlines of subjects that the NMAAHC already includes in their exhibits. This direction has the potential for overlap between the two sites and may be redundant in the representation of certain subjects.

While the Department understands that a memorial museum at the site of the Monument was first recommended by a Federal steering committee in 1992, there has been no comprehensive study of the proposal that addresses the purpose, need, feasibility, or cost to establish and operate an associated museum or a study that evaluates alternatives for such a facility.

If the Committee decides to pursue amending the bill to provide for a feasibility study, rather than establishment, of the Museum, we would be happy to work with the Committee on language that ensures that the study addresses the issues outlined in this statement.

Chairman King, this concludes my statement. I would be pleased to answer any questions you or other members of the subcommittee may have.