

Testimony of  
Maurice A. Barboza, Founder & CEO  
Liberty Fund D.C.  
U.S. Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources  
Subcommittee on National Parks  
National Liberty Memorial Act, S. 2738  
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Chairman Udall, Senator Burr and members of the Subcommittee, thank you for inviting me to testify on S. 2738, the National Liberty Memorial Act. We commend the sponsors, Senator Chris Dodd and Senator Charles Grassley, for 25 years of fidelity. I am the founder and CEO of Liberty Fund D.C.<sup>1</sup> Our purpose is to create a memorial to the unique circumstances and aspirations of African American soldiers, sailors, patriots and freedom seekers of the Revolutionary War. Above all, these men and women strove to become “We the People” and to have children and grandchildren who are secure in their own skin and free to give of themselves to the union. What stirred the slave at sunrise could instruct Americans today.

In 1988, Congress approved, and President Reagan signed, a bill setting aside land on the Mall. Public Law 100-265, a prerequisite, declares the deeds of “preeminent historical and lasting significance.”<sup>2</sup> However, in 2005, two years after the moratorium was approved, the separate authorization of the sponsor expired and the site became unavailable.<sup>3</sup> Although, the memorial was not built, discoveries inspired by the exposure are meaningful and mounting. The long delay is revealing itself as a building block, instead of a missed opportunity. Emerson said, “liberty is slow fruit. It is never cheap. It is made difficult because freedom is the accomplishment and perfection of man.” Approval of S. 2738 would reaffirm the worthiness of the history. The National Park Service and the new organization could then identify potential sites in Area 1 – outside of the Reserve.

The Sons of the American Revolution estimates that as many as 10,000 African Americans fought for Independence. Serving largely in integrated units, they were killed, captured and wounded, from 1775 to 1783. Slaves and free persons volunteered in the hope of winning liberty and citizenship. Afterward, they lived exemplary lives, nurturing families and the tree of liberty. Some founded churches and self-help groups. These eventually spawned the Civil Rights Movement. Many were farmers and artisans; others became preachers and entrepreneurs. A few even voted. Tens of thousands of slaves were emboldened to run away or petition for liberty. Some bartered chains for muskets. These declarations of independence are foot-printed on roads, backwoods and newspaper ads seeking to apprehend them in their tracks.

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<sup>1</sup> This 501(c)(3) non-profit was incorporated in the District of Columbia in 2005.

<sup>2</sup> Public Law 100-265, March 1988, declares the history of these patriots to be of preeminence: “...slaves and free black persons who served as soldiers and sailors or provided civilian assistance during the American Revolution and to honor black men, women, and children who ran away from slavery or filed petitions with courts and legislatures seeking their freedom”.

<sup>3</sup> Black Revolutionary War Patriots Memorial, Public Law 99-558, October 1986.

Books and scholarship about their tenacity have blossomed since 1986. Records, and the spirits abiding within them, have been unshackled; they are free and discoverable. Last year, the names of over 5,000 were released, after 24 years. *Forgotten Patriots*<sup>4</sup> contains proof of their military service, residences and clues to spouses and children. Asa Snelling, Henry Bakeman and Sergeant Isaac Brown are among dozens of patriots reunited with their families. Absalom Martin, a North Carolina soldier, is one of them. Any one of your state's citizens could be a descendant of the 10,000. Heirs to this legacy could number in the millions. Hundreds more will discover their inheritance over the next decade. The coming together of ancestor and descendant liberates both. I have seen women organize commemorations to convey ancient recollections to the living. I have seen black and white families honor common ancestors and ancestors who knew one another. I have seen it bring grown men to tears.

In Connecticut, Venture Smith and his son, a Revolutionary War soldier, are celebrated annually by his family and community. Historians, anthropologists and genealogists will gather tomorrow in Hartford for the **Documenting Venture Smith Conference**. Citizens of Montrose, Iowa, celebrate the life of Cato Mead, a Connecticut soldier, who moved to Lee County and died there in 1846. Citizens of Savannah, Georgia and Haiti built a monument to Haitian soldiers who fought there with Gen. Pulaski in 1779. Oscar Marion was honored in the Capitol near his portrait with Gen. Marion. The National Park Service has identified 103 black soldiers at Bunker Hill.

In April 2010, the Cato Freedom Project at Hartwick College in New York will announce the **National Freedom Descendants Commission**. Students are writing papers, searching for descendants and traipsing through woodlands to discover graves and ancestral lands. The history is required reading in the grade schools of New Jersey. A traveling exhibit, "Oh Freedom!", commemorates the state's black patriots. A treasure map of the nation's birth and cherished principles is being redrawn. Americans of all races and points-of-view are finding common identity, common values, and common purpose.<sup>5</sup>

The day is coming when the spell cast over history by slavery and Jim Crow is broken. No longer will they warp the way an American sees himself and colors see one another. Lincoln cautioned, "a house divided against itself cannot stand." Imagine this future memorial as a lighthouse guiding us to where all citizens are bound beyond doubt as "We the people." In that aim is the preservation of liberty.

Contact:  
[mbarboza@libertyfunddc.org](mailto:mbarboza@libertyfunddc.org)  
703-299-0408

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<sup>4</sup> *Forgotten Patriots, African American and American Indian Patriots in the American Revolution*, Washington, D.C.: Daughters of the American Revolution, 2008 (Required by membership settlement agreement of Lena Santos Ferguson, May 1984).

<sup>5</sup> In March 1984, Congress approved Public Law 98-245 to encourage commemorative and educational activities to honor the black patriots. President Reagan signed the Act in a ceremony in the Oval Office. This precursor to the authority for the Black Revolutionary War Patriots Memorial offers thanks to descendants.