



June 15, 2023

The Honorable Donald S. Beyer, Jr.
1119 Longworth House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Congressman Beyer,

Since our creation in 1919, the non-partisan National Parks Conservation Association (NPCA) along with our 1.6 million members and supporters, including nearly 38,000 in the Commonwealth of Virginia, has worked to protect and enhance our country's national parks for present and future generations.

On behalf of NPCA, I'm writing to express our very strong support of the joint resolution introduced to redesignate the Robert E. Lee Memorial in Arlington National Cemetery as Arlington House National Historic Site. Removing Lee's name will make the site more inclusive and further recognize the intertwined lives of the estate's white and Black families.

Arlington House was built between 1802 and 1818 by enslaved Blacks at the direction of first lady Martha Washington's grandson, Lt. George Washington Parke Custis. The Greek Revival structure's design is attributed to George Hadfield, who earlier had worked on the U.S. Capitol building. Enslaved people cleared and leveled the building site, harvested the timber for Arlington House's floors and supports, and made by hand the building's bricks that they later covered with cement in a faux finish process to resemble marble and sandstone. They also built the mansion's accompanying slave quarters.

Nearly 100 enslaved African Americans lived and labored on the 1,100-acre estate in the 1800s before the Civil War, maintaining the house and working the corn and wheat fields. The first enslaved people arrived with Custis, who inherited them from his grandmother, Martha Washington. Custis' will when he died in October 1857 indicated all slaves should be freed within five years, yet several of them attested to Custis telling them they would be freed immediately upon his death. Lee, as executor, determined the estate was in too much financial trouble to let them go. To help pay off the estate's debts, Lee forced the enslaved people to grow additional crops and also hired some out to other plantations. He finally freed them in December 1862.

For generations, visitors to Arlington House did not hear the stories of enslaved African Americans. However, during a three-year, multi-million-dollar rehabilitation the National Park Service connected with six enslaved African American families, restored and acquired new artifacts, and made an unexpected archaeological discovery in the slave quarters. As a result, visitors to Arlington House since its June 2021 reopening see new exhibits about the lives of African Americans on the property and are introduced to

a more complete history of the 19th-century house, its people, and the impacts of slavery.

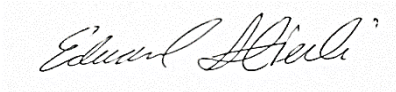
Congress and President Calvin Coolidge designated Arlington House as a national memorial to Robert E. Lee in 1925 to honor his role in promoting peace and reunion after the Civil War. By then, Lee had earned respect from the North and South for his reconciliation efforts. Thirty years later, a joint resolution of Congress in 1955 designated the home as the Custis-Lee Mansion.

In 1972, Congress passed a law changing the name to Arlington House, The Robert E. Lee Memorial. Keeping the Lee name for this federally owned property is problematic because Robert E. Lee owned and sold enslaved people, helping to enhance his financial circumstances, and then he resigned his military commission to fight for an armed insurrectionist group.

The Joint Resolution to redesignate The Robert E. Lee Memorial to Arlington House National Historic Site will help to open the site to more accurate and just interpretation of the history of the enslaved people who labored at Arlington House and the people who owned them. It will broaden the narrative that has been primarily focused on one individual and reflects the National Park Service's commitment to telling stories inclusive of multiple historical perspectives that can inspire people of all backgrounds.

We urge Congress to act on this resolution in the timeliest manner possible.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Edward Stierli". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, stylized initial "E".

Edward Stierli
Mid-Atlantic Senior Regional Director