

Testimony Before the U.S. House of Representatives
Committee on Natural Resources
Subcommittee on Federal Lands
Rep. Tom McClintock, Chairman
Rep. Colleen Hanabusa, Ranking Member

On the bill H.R. 6118 (Rep. David Rouzer, 7th/N. C.)

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Good morning. Chairman McClintock and Ranking Member Hanabusa, thank you sincerely for this opportunity to testify before the Subcommittee on Federal Lands on the merits of H.R. 6118. This is a rare professional honor and representative of well-earned recognition of the work by Wilmington and the State of North Carolina in keeping alive the historical spirit and legacy of our nation's World War II achievements.

Seventy-three years following the war's end, it's difficult realizing that nothing nationwide on this order, as proposed in the bill, has been undertaken. Apparently no one until Wilmington - strongly supported by government officials, organizations, and the community - ever stepped forward to encourage this simple solution to promote participation by all cities interested in preserving their WWII legacies.

Wilmington has pursued this quest as a "project" for 10 years seeking national recognition for our work. The federal government is the natural action catalyst, and congressional legislation is its means to that end. The Committee on Natural Resources is the appropriate forum.

Although Wilmington originated and spearheaded this project, the legislation is not for us alone. Passage would provide a useful platform for assuring that the accomplishments of America's WWII armed forces personnel - including those who lost their lives in service to our country - the home front and its workers, veterans, and families, will be remembered for their contributions to the war effort and victory.

On behalf of Wilmington, Southeastern North Carolina (SENC), and my State, I earnestly request you support passage of H.R. 6118 through the U.S. House of Representatives, in concert with the U.S. Senate, and on to the president for signature.

The Status of Our Project.

Buoyed by recent strong official and community endorsements, and constructive Capitol Hill conferences, optimism has increased for Wilmington's 10-year project seeking national designation as the first "American World War II Heritage City" by act of Congress. Or, in local vernacular, the "World War II City Project."

In June the North Carolina House of Representatives unanimously passed HB 970, a resolution supporting Wilmington's claim and urging Congress to pass designation legislation. Congressman

Rouzer broached the idea to me a year ago, and I carried this to the North Carolina General Assembly.

Congressman Rouzer, whose support has been instrumental in keeping alive this project, met with me twice this summer in Wilmington to discuss status and strategy.

In June I met in Washington with staff members of Wilmington's congressional delegation, Senators Richard Burr and Thom Tillis, and Congressman Rouzer, also to discuss status and strategy.

In May Wilmington Mayor Bill Saffo and New Hanover County Commissioners Chairman Woody White signed a joint letter to our congressional delegation urging the delegation to complete the project.

A *Wilmington StarNews* editorial in May refreshed readers with the area's contributions to the WWII war effort, the project's significance, and urged the delegation's decisive action.

Each of the foregoing parties have steadfastly supported WWII history preservation in Wilmington and Southeastern North Carolina, inspired by the World War II Wilmington Home Front Heritage Coalition, and accordingly earned community appreciation.

The History Behind the History

That stated, here's updating the WWII City Project noting how we got here.

First, the project seeking national recognition began in early 2008. Second, understanding the proposed legislation's language is essential. Since 2010, our congressional delegation introduced similar one-page bills which would: authorize a cabinet secretary to designate annually an "American WWII City"; specify two such qualifications criteria; and designate Wilmington as the first. Those earlier bills generated mixed successes and failures.

Legislative and media attention has concentrated primarily on the intent of H.R. 6118's criterion in Section 1 (c)(1): A city's war effort contribution. Like building atomic bombs, planes, tanks. Underplayed has been the equally important second criterion in Section 1 (c)(2) : How has a city preserved its wartime legacy? Like restoring WWII facilities, preservation organizations, recognizing veterans.

Congressman Rouzer's bill refines and strengthens earlier versions. It would direct the Secretary of the Interior to designate at least one city as an "American WWII Heritage City," establish the application process, delineate two criteria for designation, and would designate Wilmington, N. C., and its environs as the first.

Wilmington, in this context including Southeastern North Carolina, overwhelmingly exceeds both criteria.

Let's quickly summarize some of our area's major war effort highlights:

- Constructed 243 cargo ships for Navy and Maritime Commission,
- all five armed forces stationed here,
- a population that nearly tripled, straining infrastructure and living conditions,

- P-47 fighter training airfield,
- defense industries,
- two Medal of Honor recipients from the same high school,
- and numerous other decorations of valor earned, including a Navy carrier pilot with 3 Navy Crosses
- food and dairy producers,
- 3 German prisoner of war camps,
- men who fought for all services in every combat theater,
- a Tuskegee Airman,
- Atlantic Coast Line Railroad headquarters,
- German U-boat firing on a chemical plant,
- spies and saboteurs came ashore,
- vibrant state port,
- thousands of citizens who served in uniform,
- sadly, the 248 county-related service deaths,
- and more.

The Preservation Criterion

Astounding aptly describes our area accomplishments which actually started earnestly 20 years ago, continually spearheaded by volunteers working with governments and organizations. Perhaps Wilmington trails cities posting larger wartime production numbers, or utilizing paid staff and fund-raising resources. But we challenge cities to match our combined criteria qualifications. Who else possesses our driving “X-factors”: vision, passion, organization, hard work, public support, and results?

Of course, add the crown jewel. Since 1961, our beloved Battleship North Carolina, the most combat-decorated WWII battleship and the State’s memorial to North Carolinians who died in service, has been moored in Wilmington as a major national attraction.

This isn’t just about preserving Wilmington history. It’s *North Carolina* history. And, the bill certainly would expedite and extrapolate American history preservation. What would Wilmington gain? Or, other cities, too? Vast community pride, exposure to a huge national WWII audience, and WWII tourism destination promotion. Others can share such earned acclaim.

Here I must emphasize the vastness of the national appeal of WWII history, as depicted in TV documentaries, premier movies, multiple periodicals, a constant array of books on new subjects, and a stream of battlefield tours to Europe and the Pacific. As an author and military historian, whose primary field of study is the war, I know this full well. Of my 18 books, 7 are on WWII. I have given some 700 presentations and media interviews, written or been the principal source for some 300 articles, and have lead many of those global battlefield tours. Spreading the word on the success of this legislation will be easy.

Wilmington encourages nationwide WWII history preservation and welcomes other cities. Passage of this legislation opens the door for other like-minded cities that perhaps never realized their historic treasures, or how to honor them. Perhaps this legislation will motivate them out of long-dormant action. Wilmington will gladly assist them in getting started.

Once the president signs the legislation, let them also meet the criteria, organize, and justify as we

have. Our coattails are long. Yet, Wilmington deserves to be the first “by act of Congress.”

Understand this. Wilmington alone conceived the idea and has led all the groundwork, and is strengthened by our delegation’s determined support.

The idea began in 2008. Sixty-three years following the war, no one claimed to be “America’s WWII City.” Wilmington seized the opening, occupied the vacuum, and mobilized.

Although Wilmington City Council and New Hanover County Commissioners proclamations started the designation project, our quest actually traces to 1998 after I, a Wilmington native, returned home to live. Preservation-friendly Wilmington had championed its Civil War history, historic district, and museum homes. Meanwhile, officials mostly ignored WWII history and risked losing it. No community leadership emerged.

Suddenly Wilmington Shifted Gears

Realizing this, in 1998 the Lower Cape Fear Historical Society sponsored an end-of-century tribute to Wilmington’s WWII role called Wartime Wilmington Commemoration, 1999. Throughout SENC our team executed an 18-month schedule of 125 lectures, exhibits, and related events. Following enthusiastic community and media responses, and material uncovered, obviously we needed a permanent education and preservation organization.

Parlaying this success, in 2000 a local historian and I formed the World War II Wilmington Home Front Heritage Coalition. Operating as a 501(c)(3) non-political, all-volunteer preservation organization, its mission is to identify, preserve, and interpret the rich WWII history of Wilmington and SENC. Our first accomplishment was helping to save, renovate, and restore the WWII Hannah Block Historic USO/Community Arts Center, opened in December 1941, our WWII history hub and ultimate blending of history and the arts.

As the building’s de-facto preservationist, the Coalition has raised nearly \$100,000 for its maintenance and activities, including:

- WWII veterans meet-and-greet jamborees and USO-style dances;
- Exhibits, artifacts, and memorials to the 248 New Hanover County dead, its aviators, Medal of Honor recipients, outstanding Wilmington veterans; and the National WWII Memorial giclee;
- Rededicated the restored building with a “Star Spangled Weekend” in 2008;
- Celebrated the seventieth anniversary with elementary students through music, drama, and dance: “Christmas 1944 at the Wilmington USO”;
- Celebrated the seventy-fifth anniversary with the original musical play “Mrs. World War II Wilmington: We Fell in Love at the USO”;
- Commemorated the 2017 annual Pearl Harbor ceremony saluting Survivors (ages 99, 97, 95), plus twenty-five other WWII veterans - our 20th such Pearl Harbor commemoration.

Add these preservation accomplishments:

- Ergo, *New York Times*, WarHistoryOnline, Smithsonian.com, Federal Reserve Bank of Richmond’s *Region Focus Magazine*, and *Our State Magazine* articles promoting a WWII tourism destination;
- Named school and city park for two Medal of Honor recipients; erected their memorials at New

Hanover High School and the HBHUSO/CAC;

- WWII Remembered Group of veterans and home front workers meets monthly for twenty years;
- Erected markers, including for two German POW camps;
- Promote the U-boat attack, believed the only German assault on America;
- Published and distributed three editions (100,000 copies) of the “World War II Heritage Guide Map of Wilmington and Southeastern North Carolina”;
- Spreading the word. Since 1998, I’ve given many hundreds of presentations and media interviews, written two books, and have written or been a principal source for nearly 300 print articles.

To supplement this testimony, I have attached these documents which explain the wartime history of Wilmington and SENC, and highlight our preservation accomplishments, to further justify our position:

- World War II Wilmington and Southeastern North Carolina - Home Front - The War Effort
- World War II History Preservation Accomplishments (Partial) in Wilmington and Southeastern North Carolina
- World War II Sites, Memorials, Exhibits, Structures, Resources, and Attractions in Wilmington and Southeastern North Carolina

Solution: Congressional Legislation

Wilmington realized that national recognition required more than self-proclamations and sought our congressional delegation’s assistance.

The relationship began with a 2008 request to Senator Elizabeth Dole and later her successor, Senator Kay Hagen. But, our 7th District Congressman Mike McIntyre immediately and wholeheartedly participated. In 2010-11, McIntyre and I contacted national organizations including the National Trust for Historic Preservation; National USO; National Battle Monuments Commission; Smithsonian Institution; and National WWII Memorial organizers Senator Bob Dole and Tom Hanks. Several responded with: Swell idea, you probably deserve it, but we lack responsibility or authority.

Congressman McIntyre and I concurred: The president has the authority. So, we worked the legislative process with, and testified before, the House Committee on Veterans Affairs on the original bill. McIntyre’s 2012 bill passed the House. An identical one by Congressman Rouzer, his successor, passed in 2016. Both lapsed in the Senate. McIntyre’s dedication and leadership infused our effort. Rouzer enthusiastically continued in that role.

Senators Richard Burr and Thom Tillis also introduced bills since 2010, trying to attach them to veterans affairs and related bills, but received no traction.

Ideally, our bills are neither political nor partisan, nor request funds. But, our senators did not foresee various delaying actions. Such is nonsensical. Without the legislation, there’s no designation program. No law, no cities will participate. Where would that leave our history?

Daily I advocate for this project. All along, Wilmington mayors, city council and staff; county commissioners; community organizations; and two governors and state officials have provided support. Shouldn’t introducing such a benign measure like history preservation be easier to navigate

through Capitol Hill?

Burr, Tillis, and Rouzer are committed to the project. No doubting that. I won't give up. We are working together on a solution, and for this 115th Congress in the House of Representatives, it begins here today.

What's the alternative? Should American WWII history return to that vacuum and be ignored.? Would anyone else re-start and lead the project following 73 years of inaction?

On behalf of my home town and State, I request the Subcommittee on Federal Lands and the Committee on Natural Resources advance H.R., 6118 through a successful House vote, and ultimate agreement with the Senate.

Let me know what else I can do to assist the Committee or the Secretary of the Interior.

When Congress passes the legislation, the president should sign it into law on the Battleship North Carolina. Friends, as we say down South, *wouldn't that be Something*.

Thank you.