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**Testimony of
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**Before the
Subcommittee on Federal Lands,
House Committee on Natural Resources**

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H.R. 4467, the Vicksburg National Military Park Boundary Modification Act

Chairman Tiffany, Ranking Member Neguse, and Members of the Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to present testimony today. My name is Bess Averett, and I serve as the Executive Director of the Friends of Vicksburg National Military Park and Campaign. I am here in strong support of H.R. 4467, the *Vicksburg National Military Park Boundary Modification Act*.

The Friends of Vicksburg National Military Park and Campaign is the official philanthropic partner to the park. We are a nonprofit organization dedicated to preserving and enhancing Vicksburg National Military Park while ensuring that its stories are shared with future generations. Our members, supporters, and partners are united in the belief that this place is a cornerstone of America's story and a vital educational, cultural, and economic resource for Mississippi and the nation.

New Vicksburg Civil War Visitors Center

This legislation is critical to a project centered around the construction of a new visitors center for the Vicksburg National Military Park. The existing visitors center, built in the 1960s, was designed for a different era. While it has served faithfully, it is now far too small, outdated, and inadequate to meet the needs of the nearly half a million visitors who come each year. The current center, situated on core battlefield land, not only disrupts the historic landscape but also poses an ongoing maintenance burden for the National Park Service. Our visitors deserve more than what the current facility can provide—they deserve a gateway to fully understand the Vicksburg Campaign and its enduring significance.

The new partnership visitors center will be a state-of-the-art facility, telling a more complete story of the Civil War, from the pre-war era through Reconstruction. It will provide immersive museum experiences, highlight unique artifacts, and connect visitors to the larger region of the Vicksburg Campaign, while also offering classroom and event space, archival and research facilities, and an

event lawn designed for living history programs. For Mississippi's most visited cultural site, this project is not just a want—it is a necessity.

The Friends organization is proud to be part of the unique public-private partnership leading this effort, alongside the State of Mississippi and the National Park Service. The funding for this project is being provided primarily by the State of Mississippi and private supporters, thereby relieving the National Park Service of significant operational burdens and enabling the agency to allocate its resources more effectively toward stewardship of the Park. Together, we are working to ensure that the new facility will both honor the past and serve as a cultural and economic engine for the future.

Critical Legislation

The Vicksburg National Military Park includes approximately 2500 acres. H.R. 4467 makes two practical boundary modifications affecting approximately 10 acres in two parcels that are essential to the success of this project. The first tract provides for a vital connector road and pedestrian bridge across a ravine, linking the new visitors center directly to the park tour road. Importantly, the State of Mississippi has committed to assume all expenses for the construction and long-term maintenance of this road and bridge, ensuring that the operational burden does not fall on the National Park Service.

The second modification addresses the existing Mississippi Welcome Center, which sits on the bluff overlooking the Mississippi River adjacent to park property and Interstate 20. A portion of that facility currently lies within park boundaries. This legislation clarifies ownership by transferring the tract to the state, thereby ensuring that Mississippi will assume all maintenance responsibilities for the building and the bluff on which it sits.

This legislation has broad bipartisan support, with the full Mississippi congressional delegation, the State of Mississippi, local leadership, and private partners—including the Friends of Vicksburg National Military Park and Campaign and the American Battlefield Trust—united in their commitment to its passage.

Community Impact

Battlefields are living classrooms and vital to local economies. In Vicksburg, heritage tourism is a major economic driver, and the new visitor center will only strengthen that role. It will attract visitors who stay longer, explore more, and invest in local businesses.

For our community, this is also a matter of pride. Vicksburg National Military Park honors the sacrifices of all who served—Union and Confederate—and connects those stories to today's men and women in uniform. Preserving and interpreting these hallowed grounds is a service to veterans, to families, to students, and to the nation as a whole.

Conclusion

H.R. 4467 is a critical step toward making this vision a reality. It will allow the necessary land adjustments for the new visitors center and strengthen the long-term preservation and interpretation of Vicksburg National Military Park.

On behalf of the Friends of Vicksburg National Military Park and Campaign, I urge you to support this legislation. Together, we can ensure that the story of Vicksburg is told with the depth, dignity, and national importance it deserves.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify and for your commitment to protecting America's historic treasures.