

119TH CONGRESS
1ST SESSION

H. R. 1704

To amend title 54, United States Code, to establish within the National Park Service the National Freedom Settlements Preservation Program, and for other purposes.

IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

FEBRUARY 27, 2025

Ms. KAMLAGER-DOVE (for herself, Mr. SOTO, Mr. JACKSON of Illinois, Mrs. McIVER, Mrs. BEATTY, Mrs. WATSON COLEMAN, and Ms. BROWN) introduced the following bill; which was referred to the Committee on Natural Resources

A BILL

To amend title 54, United States Code, to establish within the National Park Service the National Freedom Settlements Preservation Program, and for other purposes.

1 *Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representa-*
2 *tives of the United States of America in Congress assembled,*

3 **SECTION 1. SHORT TITLE.**

4 This Act may be cited as the “Revitalizing and Em-
5 powering Freedom Settlements Through Opportunity, Re-
6 silience, and Education Act” or the “RESTORE Act”.

7 **SEC. 2. FINDINGS.**

8 Congress finds the following:

1 (1) After the Civil War, over 1,200 Freedmen's
2 Settlements and Black Towns were established
3 throughout the United States before and after
4 emancipation, with at least 200 towns established by
5 formerly enslaved individuals between 1866 and
6 1930, creating safe, self-sustaining, and thriving
7 communities away from racial violence and economic
8 discrimination.

9 (2) Following the end of slavery, many African-
10 American families who strived for land and housing
11 security established their homes in Black Towns.
12 These towns, founded and governed by recently-
13 emancipated African-American people across the
14 country, were known as Freedmen's Settlements,
15 Freedom Colonies, or Black Towns.

16 (3) African Americans were often denied access
17 to necessary public systems, such as education,
18 housing, and neighborhood infrastructure. Across
19 many areas of the United States, African-American
20 people were barred from utilizing these services be-
21 cause of local segregating laws.

22 (4) Freedmen's Settlements were established
23 around the provision of community services, often
24 structured around schools and churches, as Black

1 residents came together to fulfill necessary resources
2 they had been previously denied.

3 (5) Despite these communities being an exam-
4 ple of African-American communities' self-sufficiency
5 amidst a discriminatory society, they were still ter-
6 rorized by violent, White supremacist groups which
7 initially excluded them from White systems.

8 (6) Due to harsh circumstances which included
9 violent attacks, exclusion from water and sanitation
10 systems, as well as urban planning to remove Black
11 Towns from railroads, many Freedmen's Settle-
12 ments, which are predominantly in rural areas, are
13 underdeveloped and lack accessibility due to many
14 systemic challenges.

15 (7) Freedmen's Settlements have been dis-
16 proportionately impacted by economic and commu-
17 nity underdevelopment, but have the potential to be-
18 come thriving communities with proper support and
19 investment that honors their rich history, meets the
20 current needs of their residents, and uplifts commu-
21 nity resilience and sustainable development.

22 (8) Many of these Freedmen's Settlements and
23 Black Towns were destroyed by southern domestic
24 terrorists, or otherwise became impoverished by cen-
25 turies of public and private divestment. This in-

1 cludes uncompensated enslaved labor, failed Recon-
2 struction, and the unmet Freedmen’s Bureau’s
3 postemancipation promises to transition people who
4 were formerly enslaved into the American economy,
5 Jim Crow laws, economic and housing discrimination
6 through redlining, public housing, and transpor-
7 tation policies, and environmental racism. Some
8 towns withstood systemic racism and racial violence,
9 and serve as examples of community resilience.

10 (9) It is difficult to fully quantify and under-
11 stand the history and current status of all the
12 Freedmen’s Settlements in the United States due to
13 lack of research and investment in analyzing, pre-
14 serving, and supporting these historic settlements,
15 towns, and communities, with a large part of this
16 history held by the descendants of the founders and
17 residents.

18 (10) A lack of accurate information is typical of
19 African-American history following the Civil War,
20 due to disenfranchisement of African Americans
21 from predominantly White, institution-based docu-
22 mentation.

23 (11) Freedmen’s Settlements were often—

24 (A) poorly recorded;

1 (B) excluded from historical maps and
2 databases;

3 (C) recognized only through oral traditions
4 and community memory; and

5 (D) suffered from the negative con-
6 sequences of systemic racism, such as the cal-
7 culated exclusion from crucial infrastructure
8 like water systems or railroads.

9 (12) Recognizing and providing resources for
10 Freedman's Settlements through Federal identifica-
11 tion, designation of historic status, comprehensive
12 documentation, funding, and physical commemora-
13 tion would lead to greater equity and investment in
14 historically disadvantaged communities that have
15 faced centuries of racism, discrimination, environ-
16 mental and climate injustices, and violence.

17 (13) A handful of former Freedmen's Settle-
18 ments have received State or local designation for
19 their historic status, offering them an opportunity
20 for preservation and public acknowledgment, such as
21 the Freedmen's Town Historic District in Houston,
22 Texas.

23 (14) There is an ongoing call, gaining much
24 traction today, to preserve and document the history
25 of Freedmen's Settlements, leading to projects such

1 as the Texas Freedom Colonies Project, the Map-
2 ping Blackness Project, as well as the Freedmen's
3 Bureau Search Portal created by the National Mu-
4 seum of African-American History and Culture,
5 among others.

6 (15) The presence and location of historic
7 Freedmen's Settlements should be recorded. There
8 should be coordinated national, State, local, and
9 Tribal efforts to preserve and restore Freedmen's
10 Settlements.

11 (16) Freedmen's Settlements are an integral
12 component of the heritage of the United States, and
13 their preservation and revitalization crucial for the
14 communities themselves as well as a more complete
15 understanding of American history and the ongoing
16 struggle for racial equity. Establishing a program to
17 recognize previously underserved Freedmen's Settle-
18 ments would help communities identify and record
19 these settlements, preserve local history, and better
20 inform development decisions and community plan-
21 ning.

22 (17) By investing in the preservation of Free-
23 dom Settlements, which include Freedmen's Settle-
24 ments, Freedom Colonies, and Black Towns, the
25 United States has an opportunity to honor the leg-

1 acy of self-determination and community-building
 2 that these settlements represent, while also creating
 3 models for sustainable, equitable community develop-
 4 ment that can inform broader efforts to address his-
 5 torical inequities and build stronger, more inclusive
 6 communities across the Nation.

7 **SEC. 3. NATIONAL FREEDOM SETTLEMENTS PRESERVA-**
 8 **TION PROGRAM.**

9 Division B of subtitle III of title 54, United States
 10 Code, is amended by adding at the end the following:

11 **“CHAPTER 3092—NATIONAL FREEDOM**
 12 **SETTLEMENTS PRESERVATION PROGRAM**

“309201. Definitions.

“309202. Purpose.

“309203. National Freedom Settlements Preservation Program.

“309204. Authority to award grants.

“309205. Freedom Settlements Study.

“309206. Registry.

“309207. Private Property Protection.

“309208. Cooperative agreements and memoranda of understanding.

“309209. Freedom Settlements Advisory Committee.

13 **“§ 309201. Definitions**

14 “In this chapter:

15 “(1) **ADVISORY COMMITTEE.**—The term ‘Advi-
 16 sory Committee’ means the Freedom Settlements
 17 Advisory Committee established under section
 18 309209.

19 “(2) **FREEDOM SETTLEMENT.**—The term
 20 ‘Freedom Settlement’ means a community estab-
 21 lished by formerly enslaved African Americans fol-

1 lowing emancipation (also commonly referred to as
2 ‘Freedmen’s Settlements’, ‘Freedom Colonies’, or
3 ‘Black Towns’).

4 “(3) PROGRAM.—The term ‘Program’ means
5 the National Freedom Settlements Preservation Pro-
6 gram established under section 309204.

7 “(4) STUDY.—The term ‘Study’ means the
8 study required under section 309205.

9 **“§ 309202. Purpose**

10 “The purpose of this chapter is to—

11 “(1) recognize the importance of Freedom Set-
12 tlements, including communities established by for-
13 merly enslaved people, free African Americans, and
14 their descendants, the sacrifices made by those who
15 used the Underground Railroad in search of free-
16 dom, equality, and material security, and the vision
17 of Settlements founders; and

18 “(2) authorize the Secretary of the Interior to
19 coordinate and facilitate Federal and non-Federal
20 activities to identify, research, record, preserve, com-
21 memorate, honor, and interpret the history of Free-
22 dom Settlements, their significance as a crucial ele-
23 ment in the evolution of African-American history,
24 and their relevance in fostering the spirit of racial
25 justice and wealth equality.

1 **“§ 309203. National Freedom Settlements Preserva-**
2 **tion Program**

3 “(a) IN GENERAL.—The Secretary shall establish
4 within the Service a program to be known as the ‘National
5 Freedom Settlements Preservation Program’.

6 “(b) DUTIES OF SECRETARY.—In carrying out the
7 Program, the Secretary shall develop a program for the
8 provision of grants in accordance with section 309204(a),
9 in consultation with—

10 “(1) organizations, experts, and community
11 leaders who serve African-American communities;

12 “(2) organizations involved with Freedom Set-
13 tlements; and

14 “(3) residents and descendants of residents of
15 Freedom Settlements.

16 “(c) DONATIONS.—The Secretary may accept dona-
17 tions of funds, services, or property for the purposes of
18 carrying out this chapter.

19 “(d) CONSENT OF PRIVATE PROPERTY OWNER RE-
20 QUIRED.—Freedom Settlements may only be considered
21 for a grant under the Program—

22 “(1) with the consent of the owner of the appli-
23 cable property; and

24 “(2) at the request of an individual, landowner,
25 private or nonprofit organization, State, Tribal, or
26 local government, or other entity.

1 “(e) SCOPE.—The Secretary may consider the fol-
2 lowing for inclusion in the Program:

3 “(1) All units and programs of the National
4 Park Service determined by the Secretary to pertain
5 to Freedom Settlements.

6 “(2) Historic properties pertaining to Freedom
7 Settlements.

8 “(3) Other governmental and nongovernmental
9 facilities and programs of an educational, research,
10 or interpretive nature that are directly related to
11 Freedom Settlements.

12 **“§ 309204. Authority to award grants**

13 “(a) IN GENERAL.—In carrying out the Program, the
14 Secretary may award grants to eligible entities described
15 in subsection (b)(1) for—

16 “(1) the identification of Freedom Settlements
17 that may qualify for the Program;

18 “(2) cultural and heritage preservation, restora-
19 tion, and tourism program development of Freedom
20 Settlements;

21 “(3) related research and documentation of
22 Freedom Settlements;

23 “(4) capacity-building to operate and maintain
24 recognized Freedom Settlement sites; and

1 “(5) educational programming about Freedom
2 Settlement history.

3 “(b) APPLICATIONS.—

4 “(1) ELIGIBLE ENTITIES.—Each of the fol-
5 lowing entities are eligible for a grant under the
6 Program:

7 “(A) A property owner of a property asso-
8 ciated with Freedom Settlements.

9 “(B) Tribal, State, or local governments.

10 “(C) Community organizations that have
11 demonstrated local leadership and a commit-
12 ment to community development.

13 “(2) SUBMISSION.—To be eligible for a grant
14 under this section, an eligible entity shall submit to
15 the Secretary an application at such time, in such
16 manner, and containing such information as the Sec-
17 retary may require.

18 “(c) AUTHORIZATION OF APPROPRIATIONS.—There
19 are authorized to be appropriated to the Secretary to carry
20 out this section \$3,000,000 for each of fiscal years 2026
21 through 2031.

22 **“§ 309205. Freedom Settlements Study**

23 “(a) STUDY.—The Secretary shall conduct a study
24 to identify key sites that—

1 “(1) illustrate the period in American history
2 when formerly enslaved African Americans estab-
3 lished Freedom Settlements to provide their commu-
4 nities with education, security, and belonging which
5 were previously denied under slavery and discrimina-
6 tory laws; and

7 “(2) may be suitable for inclusion in the Pro-
8 gram.

9 “(b) CONSULTATION.—The Study shall be conducted
10 with public involvement and in consultation with—

11 “(1) the Advisory Committee;

12 “(2) State and local officials;

13 “(3) educational institutions; and

14 “(4) other interested organizations and individ-
15 uals.

16 **“§ 309206. Registry**

17 “The Secretary shall maintain and regularly update
18 a comprehensive registry of Freedom Settlements, as they
19 are identified and verified through the research and docu-
20 mentation process outlined in this chapter, including but
21 not limited to historically documented settlements engaged
22 in preservation efforts, such as—

23 “(1) Nicodemus, Kansas;

24 “(2) Africatown, Alabama;

25 “(3) Mound Bayou, Mississippi;

- 1 “(4) Eatonville, Florida;
- 2 “(5) Boley, Oklahoma;
- 3 “(6) Hobson City, Alabama;
- 4 “(7) Allensworth, California;
- 5 “(8) Freedmen’s Town Historic District, Hous-
- 6 ton, Texas;
- 7 “(9) Independence Heights, Texas;
- 8 “(10) Mossville, Louisiana;
- 9 “(11) Oberlin Village, North Carolina;
- 10 “(12) Kinloch, Missouri;
- 11 “(13) New Philadelphia, Illinois;
- 12 “(14) Rosewood, Florida;
- 13 “(15) Weeksville, New York;
- 14 “(16) Freedman’s Village, Arlington, Virginia;
- 15 “(17) Sandy Ground, New York;
- 16 “(18) Princeville, North Carolina;
- 17 “(19) Greenwood District (Black Wall Street),
- 18 Tulsa, Oklahoma; and
- 19 “(20) Freedmen’s Town, Dallas, Texas.

20 **“§ 309207. Private Property Protection**

21 “Nothing in this chapter—

22 “(1) authorizes the Secretary to require or af-

23 fect the management or use of private property with-

24 out the written consent of the owner of the private

25 property; or

1 “(2) prohibits the Secretary from providing
2 land management guidance or requirements relating
3 to private property as a condition of a grant pro-
4 vided to the owner of the private property under this
5 chapter.

6 **“§ 309208. Cooperative agreements and memoranda**
7 **of understanding**

8 “The Secretary may enter into cooperative agree-
9 ments and memoranda of understanding with, and provide
10 technical assistance to, the heads of other Federal agen-
11 cies, States, units of local government, Tribal govern-
12 ments, regional governmental bodies, African American-
13 serving groups, residents and descendants of residents of
14 Freedom Settlements, scholars of this specific history, and
15 nonprofit organizations such as the Chisholm Legacy
16 Project, Ubuntu Climate, and the Texas Freedom Colonies
17 Project, educational institutions, and private entities—

18 “(1) to achieve the purposes of this chapter;

19 “(2) to facilitate cooperation with the Advisory
20 Committee; and

21 “(3) to ensure effective coordination of the Fed-
22 eral elements and non-Federal elements provided a
23 grant or other assistance under the Program with
24 System units and programs of the Service.

1 **“§ 309209. Freedom Settlements Advisory Committee**

2 “(a) IN GENERAL.—In carrying out the Study under
3 section 309205, the Secretary shall establish a committee
4 to be known as the ‘Freedom Settlements Advisory Com-
5 mittee’ to assist with the Study.

6 “(b) COMPOSITION.—The Advisory Committee shall
7 be composed of members, appointed by the Secretary,
8 who—

9 “(1) are residents or descendants of residents
10 of Freedom Settlements;

11 “(2) have demonstrated expertise in—

12 “(A) African-American history; or

13 “(B) Reconstruction or Jim Crow era his-
14 tory; or

15 “(3) are community leaders and advocates for
16 African-American community heritage, preservation,
17 and development.”.

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