

7-17-00
LEITH'S ISLAND
SAVED AMERICAS
TREASURES

**FIRST LADY HILLARY RODHAM CLINTON
REMARKS AT ELLIS ISLAND FOR SAVE AMERICA'S TREASURES**

JULY 17, 2000

Thank you so much. Thank you. I cannot imagine a more beautiful place to be on a day like today that we are able to enjoy our time here together and think about the importance of this island in the life of America, and as Frank just finished telling us, in the lives of so many families.

I remember well when I was here last spring for the Ellis Island awards ceremony. I was able to tour and see so much of the restoration that's been done on this side and then today I've just had a brief survey trip around to see what needs to be done. And I can see and understand very well why in 1997 the National Trust for Historic Preservation put Ellis Island on its list of America's 11 Most Endangered Historic Places. Well, today we are taking another big step forward in making this island of history one of the best cared for places in America. And all of you here and so many others have made that possible.

All of us owe a great debt of gratitude to Dick Moe, and to Bobbie Greene, and everyone who works at the Trust for helping us to save these pieces of our heritage and for inspiring so many Americans to do likewise. I'd also like to thank Bob Stanton, and Diane Dayson, and Cynthia Garrett, and all the extraordinary staff at the National Park Service for your stewardship of our most cherished national treasures.

I'm delighted that City Council Member Kathryn Freed, whose district includes Ellis Island, could join us here today. And I want to thank Senator Bob Graham for his dedication to this site and to the National Park Service. I'd been working for about eighteen months on Save America's Treasures when Bob called me one day and told me of his great interest in Ellis Island. And he's been a friend to historic preservation and particularly to the Park Service. And I know that Adele Graham, who is here with us as well today, has worked very hard as well, in fact has earned an award from the National Trust. So I know how important this day is to you as well, and I see sitting next to Adele my friend Gerry Ferraro who I am glad to see, here with us.

Senator Lautenberg has long been known as an effective key legislator, and he truly led the fight in Congress for the money needed from the federal government to save these structures. We could not have done it without Frank, and I'm not sure we know what we're going to do when Frank is no longer in the Senate. But we expect him to continue, and I know he will, his commitment to Ellis Island. His emotional and personal dedication is going to carry him through long beyond his official service in the Senate. And we know that we will continue to have Nita Lowey as a member of the House Appropriations Committee who worked so effectively with Frank to obtain the funding for these stabilization projects. So to Bob Graham, and to Frank Lautenberg and to Nita Lowey, we are very grateful indeed.

I also want to thank Joe Moran and Circle Line for helping to bring so many here this afternoon – and Jesse Green and Neil Braunstein for entertaining so well with their music while

everyone was gathering. Thank you very much. I also know there are members of the Save America's Treasures Committee who could be with us today, and I want to thank each one of them for helping us preserve this site as well as so many others across the country. And I'm particularly delighted that we have students from the Lexington School for the Deaf in Queens with us today who are working with the Park everyday to make sure Ellis Island is available for all young people in the future. And I'd like to ask the students from the Lexington School for the Deaf in Queens to please stand. Thank you very much.

Now, as we were listening to Frank Lautenberg, I was thinking about a project that we have just started as part of the White House Millennium Council's ongoing work to honor the past and imagine the future, and that's a project called My History is America's History Project. And I want to thank the National Endowment for the Humanities and Genealogy.com for encouraging us all to learn about our heritage as Frank was describing in very personal terms.

You know, I think about the millions and millions of people who came here and the courage it took to make the decision to leave a familiar place. Some were driven out, some were fleeing for their lives with their few possessions carried and put on their backs, clinging to children. Others made the decision that there was a better life and they would go find it. And when the ferry pulled into the harbor and everyone disembarked to begin walking through these hallowed grounds, I thought about all of those people. We've seen the pictures, we've heard the stories, and I can imagine what it must have been like for the very first person to pass through Ellis Island. Her name was Annie Moore. She was 15 years old and on January 1, 1892, she came with her family in pursuit of a new life. In honor of her place in history, the New York authorities at the immigration station gave her a \$10 gold piece.

Almost a hundred years later, her daughter, then in her 80's, came from Arizona for the opening of the genealogical center, and presented a symbolic \$10 bill to kick off the fundraising campaign. I am very pleased that Annie Moore's great grandson, Ed Wood, is here today, along with his wife Barbara. And Ed, would you please stand in honor of your brave great grandmother who led the long line of immigrants who passed through this island on the way to freedom and citizenship.

This is my 41st Save America's Treasure's visit in the last two years. And as Dick said, this is a public-private partnership that we started in 1998 as part of the White House Millennium Council. We were looking for new ways to honor the past and imagine the future as we entered this new 21st century. And we knew that there were so many places around America that define us as a people, and yet were -- and continue to be -- in danger of being forgotten or have fallen into disrepair.

In the last few years, many of us in this audience, along with Dick, have traveled all over the country by bus, and by train, and by plane, and by foot to save the stories of America. We've been to diverse places like the pueblo of Acoma in New Mexico. The Breed Street Shul in Los Angeles. The home of Irish immigrant and labor leader Kate Mullany in Troy, New York. The Star Spangled Banner and its restoration at the Smithsonian. The Chess Records Office and

Studio in Chicago. The Louis Armstrong Archives in Queens. And the site of the first women's rights convention in Seneca Falls, New York.

Through Save America's Treasures, we already have dedicated \$60 million in federal grants and almost \$50 million in private donations to historic sites and collections. And I am pleased that our latest round of federal grants just announced honors our immigrant past by working to save Angel Island Immigration Station in California, the Lower East Side Tenement Museum in New York City, and, of course, Ellis Island.

When the two million people come through the museum here each year, I'm told that many just stare with tears in their eyes, as they think about their family members who arrived in the great hall, scared and excited, hearing languages they had never heard before, seeing foods they had never eaten. 355 babies were born here. Many immigrants were cared for in these hospitals by health care professionals of the Marine Hospital Service, the precursor to the Public Health Service. And most eventually left through the Ferry Building to my right, ending one journey, and beginning another.

Bob Hope once explained what it was like to arrive here with his mother and brothers at the age of five. He said, "It was early morning. I was wearing knickers and a cap, and it was cold. My nose was running. And I remember looking up at my mother after we passed through inspection. We smiled and hugged each other because we had achieved this great thing, this rite of passage."

When we save Ellis Island, we save the memories of all the immigrants throughout our history who have built America with their hearts, minds, and hands. I know that there are some here today who came through Ellis Island themselves. And I'd like to recognize them. Bridget McMenamin came from Ireland in 1952, sponsored by her aunt. George Nestor was a ten-year-old from Greece when he came and he later served our country with medal-winning distinction in World War II helping to liberate Europe. His sacrifices enabled Alex Falk to come from Kiev at the age of 16 with his mother and step-father, and Fred Cannizzaro came from Italy at age five with his father and younger sister, and Nella Jaffee came here as a young mother with her husband and six-week old son. I'd like to ask Bridget, and George, Alex, Fred and Nella all please to stand.

Now, when Nella's family arrived, her husband just happened to cough right at the moment of inspection. So he was placed in the hospital for observation, and they stayed two weeks. Nella still has what's left of the blanket they gave her to protect her baby son, and she has generously agreed to donate it to the museum. Nella, do you want to stand and just show that to everyone? That's what's left of it, it looks like a very well-loved baby blanket. Thank you, Nella.

Because when we save Ellis Island, we save far more than a place. We save memories, we save baby blankets, we save the powerful idea that from our diversity comes our greatest strength. We save a symbol of freedom that beckons to people the world over who are willing to risk their lives to breathe free, to worship as they choose, and to build a better future for themselves and their children.

We are a nation of immigrants, many of whom trace our heritage to this very spot. But whether we entered at Ellis Island or before that at Castle Clinton, or Angel Island, whether we came by choice or coercion or necessity, whether we are first generation or 12th generation Americans, all of us are connected by a thread of history that we must preserve and pass on. Ellis Island is being restored today because so many of you understand that. And there was a time not very long ago when this historic island looked like it would be abandoned for the ages.

But starting in 1965, President Johnson took the first steps to protect Ellis Island by placing it under the care of the National Park Service. In 1982, the Statue of Liberty-Ellis Island Foundation was created and began to raise \$500 million to start preserving Ellis Island and to restore the Statue of Liberty in time for its 100th anniversary in 1986. This effort is the largest private historic restoration in U.S. history. After the Main Building was restored, the Immigration Museum opened in 1990. And I want to thank Foundation president Steve Briganti, chairman William May and the other trustees who are here today for continuing their work.

Last year, we gave a Save America's Treasures grant of almost \$1.2 million to restore the Ferry Building, where immigrants who had passed their inspection waited to catch a ferry to Manhattan and begin life in America. I want to thank Governor Whitman, the New Jersey state legislature, and the Save Ellis Island! Foundation, chaired by Finn Casperson, for providing all the funds to match the federal grant.

But, as the work got under way, it was clear that more money was needed. So I am very pleased to announce today that the Millennium Committee to Save America's Treasures not only met, but exceeded our goal by raising an additional \$430,000 to save the inside of the Ferry Building. And I want to thank everyone whose generosity made that possible, including major gifts from Sven Lindblad and the Traveler's Conservation Foundation, and the Discovery Channel and its president Judith McHale. Important contributions also came in from so many others—Ruth Usem, Iris Martin, Claudine Bacher, Patti Kenner, Betsy Cohn, Hannah Kamin, Rosalind Robbins, and Keith Ferrazzi. I'd like all the individuals and organizations who've contributed to this effort to please stand so we can say thank you to you all.

I am also pleased to announce a new Save America's Treasures grant of \$500,000 to help restore the Hospital Laundry and Outbuilding, where many of the support services for the large hospital complex were housed. Once again, New Jersey and the Save Ellis Island! Foundation are demonstrating their strong commitment, providing matching funds to preserve the entire building.

Now, when you walk around Ellis Island, it is painfully obvious that far more buildings need a lot more help – including the 29 buildings on the south side. So I want to thank the members of Congress here, as well as the state and private funders, for ensuring that these historic buildings will finally be stabilized and, one day, open and useful again.

With the commitments we make today, we are promising the American people that Ellis Island will never become a casualty of our indifference or our inaction. We cannot afford to lose this important part of our collective memory.

When I was here last spring, it was shortly after Frank Lautenberg and I had been to Fort Dix to welcome the first group of Kosovar refugees from the war that was then going on. I'll never forget the Army General in charge who told me that as he stood on the tarmac as the planes pulled in, and as the people began to disembark, and he saw babies and children and old women in headscarves coming off that plane, he was reminded of his own grandmother who came from Ukraine. And he said that he thought to himself, "This is their Ellis Island." Ellis Island has that kind of grip on our imagination.

And because like the men and women who came here seeking a better life, we are not alone in time, nor have we yet had a chance to give up on our responsibilities. Our responsibilities to people who continue to seek freedom everywhere. We have a real opportunity to encourage all of our children and grandchildren to understand these stories.

I'm told that American students have already raised \$7 million to restore the island by holding bake sales, and car washes, and walk-a-thons, and jog-a-thons, and read-a-thons and even one group sold a quilt. A student from Rhode Island said it best: "If you feel strongly about your country, you should support anything that represents it." And I know that we have some students from one of the schools and camps and groups that has been learning about Ellis Island and focusing on Ellis Island, and I'm delighted that they could be here with us.

After all, if one stops and thinks about the gifts we have to give to our children, the greatest ones may not be the tangible items, but the intangible values that define us as a people. So, I hope that, as we celebrate the stabilization and the eventual reopening of the buildings on this island, we will also celebrate what it really represents. Our commitment to respect each other, and treasure our diversity. I hope we will pass on our values of freedom and justice, that we will learn from the mistakes of the past and forever resist those who would scapegoat immigrants, demonize those who are different, or deny the rights and responsibilities of America to those who continue to come to our shores legally. And I hope we pass on our fundamental belief that all our families had when they arrived in this country, the belief that every generation can do better than the last.

And if we do that, we will not only honor the past that was made in such great measure here on Ellis Island. We will not just imagine the future. We will help create a future worthy of all the people who came here and made that courageous journey through this "Golden Door," risking their lives to create the country we are so proud of today.

Thank you, and God bless them, and God bless all of us.

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