**Testimony of Janice Selinger**

**On New Jersey’s preparations for the 250th Anniversary of the American Revolution**

**New Jersey Senate**

**Committee on State Government, Wagering, Tourism & Historic Preservation**

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I am Janice Selinger, Executive Director of Crossroads of the American Revolution National Heritage Area. Crossroads was established by an act of Congress in 2006 as one of 49 National Heritage Areas across the country. We’re unique among that group in that we focus exclusively on the impact of the American Revolution on our landscape and the people who lived here during the war.

New Jersey can tell that story the way no other state can… because this was, literally, the crossroads where Patriot and British forces clashed more often than anyplace else. Communities around the state deeply felt the impact of war … in major battles and in small skirmishes… with many New Jerseyans losing homes, farms and property. It is vital that New Jersey tells this story and capitalizes on our unique status during the 250th anniversary of the American Revolution, from 2024-2033. We are thrilled that our legislators understand this and overwhelmingly approved legislation establishing a public/private partnership focused on this important task.

Rather than create a new commission to lead planning for the anniversary, New Jersey is making the most of existing structures both inside and outside of state government. The public/private partnership includes two existing organizations that are uniquely qualified to take on this effort — the NJ Historical Commission and the non-profit organization responsible for the maintenance and administration of a national heritage area dedicated to the history of the American Revolution in New Jersey.

We at Crossroads see the power of partnerships like this every day, and we’re honored to lend our experience and talents to this once-in-a-generation opportunity. We connect and tell the Revolutionary story with the help of more than 130 allied organizations around the state – we call them our heritage partners. Through those partnerships and our heritage tourism communications and outreach work, we have helped build a stronger awareness of New Jersey’s Revolutionary heritage and have helped drive visitorship to the state’s many sites related to the fight for our nation’s independence.

With additional focus through a multi-million dollar capital campaign, a mini-grant program, site visitor readiness and needed upgrades, New Jersey will be well prepared to take its place among the leading states telling the nation’s Revolutionary story.

We have a strong foundation to build on. Communities around New Jersey already capitalize on local Revolutionary history to celebrate our shared heritage and draw new audiences. For example, Patriots Week here in the Trenton area… includes reenactments of the two Battles of Trenton and a host of events that combine history and the arts to celebrate the 10 days that turned the tide of the war. The annual reenactment of the Battle of Monmouth draws thousands of people every year at the site where history was made. New Brunswick is among many communities that host readings of the Declaration of Independence… with the bonus of reenacting just a small portion of the nation’s first Independence Day celebration ordered by General Washington on the banks of the Raritan River in 1778.

Just as important are the opportunities visitors will have to experience Revolutionary New Jersey year-round. As an example, Crossroads uses our website and social media to promote hundreds of events and open houses held by historic sites around the state, inviting visitors to discover the people who lived here during the Revolution and experience a little bit of 18th century life in New Jersey. Those include places like the Whitall House in Gloucester County… that tells the story of a Quaker family whose farm became a Continental fort and battlefield … and the Dey Mansion in Passaic County … where Washington headquartered. Both are among the sites that combine Revolutionary history with 21st century fun, like concerts and movies, to attract new audiences. And with that, they offer the chance for visitors to consider the choices they might have made, had they lived here during that difficult time.

It’s that personal connection that makes New Jersey’s Revolutionary story so powerful. War was real here, and it affected communities in many ways. Crossroads shares those stories on our website through 14 storylines that connect sites and people through themes that relate the grassroots impact of troop movements, battles and military policy. On an even more personal level, we share the stories of Revolutionary Neighbors — a diverse group of more than 60 everyday 18th century New Jerseyans. The state’s population was not totally behind independence, and our Neighbors’ stories reflect the impact of their decisions, whether to support independence, stay loyal to the Crown or be neutral. Thousands of school children statewide have discovered their personal connection to the Revolution through this program, which is endorsed by the New Jersey Education Association.

The public/private partnership offers New Jersey a unique opportunity to raise awareness of its seminal role in the War for Independence. Not only does this make sense for community pride and as an educational and tourism effort… but it’s a sound, long-term investment in New Jersey’s economy.

The facts bear it out. In 2012, the NJ Historic Trust sponsored a study that revealed that heritage tourism in the state generated nearly 11 million visits in 2012, resulting in $2.8 billion in visitor spending… representing nearly 8 percent of the GDP impact of the entire New Jersey tourism industry. That included $1.5 billion in labor income, supporting nearly 38,000 total jobs.

Crossroads conducted a baseline economic study in 2016, focusing specifically on New Jersey’s Revolutionary heritage tourism potential. That study determined that Crossroads generates $166.6 million in economic impact, supporting 1729 jobs and generating over $10.3 million in tax revenue.

With the excitement of the coming anniversary and support from the state government and business communities, there’s potential for so much more… provided we hit the ground running.

2026 may seem far off, but work needs to be done now to position New Jersey to make the most of the attention we can gain through the 250th. We expect the competition for the heritage tourist’s attention to be fierce during the 250th celebration, and we don’t want New Jersey to miss out. A comprehensive inventory of the state’s Revolutionary-era historical sites will reveal areas where potential site improvements should be made. Just as important, interviews with historic site staff, volunteers and management will uncover needs for visitor services training, including story telling skills to engage guests and encourage them to recommend New Jersey to their friends. The findings of the inventory will guide ongoing efforts to prepare these sites to meet visitor needs and offer a compelling experience.

In addition, a consultant will need to study the potential and location for a statewide Revolutionary visitor center as a gateway encouraging travelers to explore other New Jersey sites to discover more.

The potential is huge for the Revolution to become one of New Jersey’s biggest tourism draws, with a fresh, innovative message that attracts visitors of all ages. We are excited to work with the State Division of Travel and Tourism to do just that.

Crossroads is already helping sites prepare to present more authentic representations of 18th century life. Our ongoing workshops for historical interpreters are helping publicly-and privately-owned sites improve their Revolutionary era costuming and the crafts and trades they demonstrate.

We appreciate the forward thinking of our legislature to make sure that New Jersey has enough time and resources to address the 250th appropriately, and we look forward to finding ways to secure additional funding and needed assistance for state-run historic sites. As you no doubt are familiar, they are doing their best to tell New Jersey’s remarkable history despite years-long deferred maintenance needs.

For example, just a short walk from here, the Trenton Battle Monument marks the start of the December 1776 battle that turned the tide of the American Revolution. However, it’s closed due to a broken elevator and lacks modern signage that tells the story of the site and the battle into context for visitors.

The Battle Monument is just one of more than a dozen state-owned sites that await maintenance and restoration to welcome visitors. Unfortunately, this challenge is not limited to the state park system. Scores of sites operated by local governments and not-for-profit groups… also need improvements to welcome a new generation of visitors with high expectations. For example, the Benjamin Temple house in Ewing is among many sites that have unique stories to tell… but lacks enough staff to welcome visitors more than a few times a month.

With the approach of the 250th anniversary… and growing public interest in our nation’s founding … investing in these treasured resources will reap strong returns for the state’s economy, now and in the long term.

That said, we recognize that government can’t fund it all. New Jersey’s corporate citizens have a tremendous opportunity to support our Revolutionary heritage and invest in the long-term sustainability of our historic sites… whether they’re publicly owned or in the hands of heritage groups. We’re optimistic they’ll respond enthusiastically.

At Crossroads, we’re honored that many members of our board of trustees are New Jersey business and civic leaders. Their enthusiasm for history… combined with their business acumen and public affairs expertise … has been invaluable to us as we’ve taken on ambitious projects to promote the state’s Revolutionary-era heritage.

For example, some of New Jersey’s corporate citizens have already joined us on first steps by sponsoring Crossroads-branded signage at Revolutionary-era sites. Marked with the six-pointed star featured in our logo, these signs will make it easy for travelers to identify sites that help tell the story of the Revolution in New Jersey. You may have noticed the Crossroads star on the interpretive marker just outside the Old Barracks gate today. With the generosity of businesses and foundations, we are working to extend this branded signage statewide.

It’s a good – and necessary – start, and opportunities to do more are endless. Early work will be done setting up an advisory council of corporate and community leaders to focus on fundraising from businesses and civic minded individuals and foundations to support the 250th. A planning subcommittee -- of representatives from the state’s Revolutionary War historical sites, educators, tourism industry leaders, legacy groups and others -- will be an essential element to work on coordinating commemorative events.

Thank you for the opportunity to offer Crossroads’ perspective on the planning for New Jersey’s commemoration of the nation’s 250th anniversary. We look forward to working with the New Jersey Historical Commission and all interested parties to make the anniversary a success.