

STATEMENT OF VICTOR KNOX, ASSOCIATE DIRECTOR, PARK PLANNING, FACILITIES, AND LANDS, NATIONAL PARK SERVICE, DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR, BEFORE THE SUBCOMMITTEE ON PUBLIC LANDS AND ENVIRONMENTAL REGULATION OF THE HOUSE COMMITTEE ON NATURAL RESOURCES, CONCERNING H.R. 1192, A BILL TO REDESIGNATE MAMMOTH PEAK IN YOSEMITE NATIONAL PARK AS “MOUNT JESSIE BENTON FRÉMONT”.

February 26, 2014

Mr. Chairman and members of the subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you to present the views of the Department of the Interior on H.R. 1192, a bill to redesignate Mammoth Peak in Yosemite National Park as “Mount Jessie Benton Frémont.”

The Department opposes this bill. The National Park Service generally discourages the commemorative naming of landscape features in national parks. In cases where commemorative naming is proposed, there should be a compelling justification for the recognition and a strong, direct association between the landscape feature and the person being commemorated. This principle is reflected in National Park Service Management Policies 2006, and in the Principles, Policies, and Procedures of the U.S. Board of Geographic Names. While Jesse Benton Frémont was among the early supporters of protecting Yosemite Valley, there is no evidence of her having a connection to Mammoth Peak.

Jesse Benton Frémont, born on May 31, 1824, was the daughter of U.S. Senator Thomas Hart Benton of Missouri, a leading proponent of the nation’s westward expansion and Manifest Destiny. Ms. Benton was a gifted writer and was educated at Georgetown Seminary where she became fluent in French and Spanish. At age fifteen she met John C. Frémont, an American military officer, explorer and later, politician. They both dreamed of exploring the west, and eloped and married on October 19, 1841.

Jessie Benton Frémont used her writing skill to transform John C. Frémont's travel and exploration descriptions into popular narratives that were used by pioneers to guide their route west. In 1849, she traveled to California to join her husband at their Mariposa ranch, later returning to the East Coast to actively support her husband’s unsuccessful 1856 presidential campaign.

Mrs. Frémont returned to California in 1858, where she became more familiar with the Sierra Nevada and realized the need to protect these lands from extractive industries such as mining and logging. She sought popular support to federally protect Yosemite Valley and the Mariposa Grove of Giant Sequoias from resource exploitation and private development.

This advocacy eventually lead to the “Yosemite Grant,” President Abraham Lincoln’s landmark legislation that set aside Yosemite Valley and Mariposa Grove to California as a protected area. The Yosemite Grant became the seed of the National Park System, and eventually led to the establishment of Yosemite National Park on Oct 1, 1890.

To be permanently commemorated in a national park is a high honor, affording a degree of recognition that implies national importance. For that reason, NPS policy generally discourages the use of commemorative works, including the commemorative naming of landscape features. Further, the U.S. Board of Geographic Names, the federal body responsible for uniform geographic name usage throughout the federal government, does not encourage or initiate changes in domestic geographic names except in rare cases. U.S. Board of Geographic Names policy also discourages the commemorative naming of features within federally designated wilderness.

Mammoth Peak, 12,117 feet, is in a federally designated wilderness area at the northern end of the Kuna Crest in Yosemite National Park. The peak is visible from Tioga Road and provides summit views of the eastern Sierra Mountains and Mono Lake region. There is no trail to the summit, and the peak is only accessible by off-trail, non-technical climbing.

Though Jessie Benton Frémont was an important figure in the advocacy for and establishment of the Yosemite Grant, there is no direct or long-term association between her work and Mammoth Peak, which is located in a federally designated wilderness area. For these reasons, the Department opposes the renaming of Mammoth Peak.

Mr. Chairman, this concludes my statement and I will be happy to answer any questions that members of the committee may have.