

SOCIETY FOR AMERICAN ARCHAEOLOGY

Office of Government Relations
2000 P Street, N.W.
Suite 305
Washington, DC 20036

Statement of the Society for American Archaeology
Before the Senate Select Committee on Indian Affairs
and
the Senate Committee on Rules and Administration

November 18, 1987

Mr. Chairman, the Society for American Archaeology is pleased to have been invited today to present this testimony today on S. 1722 and S. 1723.

S. 1722, the National American Indian Museum and Memorial Act

I. MUSEUM

The National American Indian Museum and Memorial Act would relocate the renowned Museum of the American Indian, Heye Foundation in Washington as part of the Smithsonian Institution. The Society for American Archaeology supports this proposal. Our central concern is less with the location of the collection than with the protection of and access to the materials. The Heye Foundation contains one of the foremost collections of Native American ethnographic and archaeological materials. The present facility in New York is unfortunately insufficient in curation, exhibit, research and security procedures needed to protect such valuable and irreplaceable artifacts. S. 1722 provides an excellent alternative.

The Society feels that relocation to the Smithsonian and construction of a new facility on the National Mall would be an excellent way to acknowledge the importance of the culture of Native Americans to our joint history. The Smithsonian Institution is our nation's premier museum institution. Placement on the Mall of a museum honoring Native Americans would be one way to provide appropriate recognition. The collections of the Smithsonian Institution would provide a fitting compliment to the OHeye Foundation museum.

Page 2

The result would be one of the most comprehensive opportunities to interpret and understand the history of the New World, from earliest arrival of prehistoric people to modern indigenous populations. The question is, therefore, more than just where to house the Heye Foundation collection; more broadly, it is how to best preserve, present and understand at least 10,000 years of unique culture history. If the decision is made to retain the Museum of the American Indian, Heye Foundation in New York, then the Society must express its deep concern for improvement of curation and research opportunity.

II. MEMORIAL

S. 1722 makes provisions for a memorial to honor and commemorate Native Americans. The museum would provide a place for the disposition of some skeletal remains now in the Smithsonian Institution. The Society recognizes the scientific importance of a large collection of skeletal materials which can provide vital information relevant to many problems. Skeletal remains allow various kinds of scientists to study human adaptation, human biology, disease history including paleopathology, human demography, nutritional and health problems. The range of experts and range of discoveries associated with human skeletal remains is large and well described by Dr. Robert McCormick Adams, Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution, in his statement of November 12 before these Committees.

The Society recognizes both the need for greater public knowledge of the achievements of physical anthropologists and archaeologists when their subject matter is human skeletal material. From our own experiences strong cases can be made for these achievements. One of our own best examples of the important use of human skeletal remains involves a prehistoric skeletal collection from Kansas of over 500 individuals which was used to establish the degree of chemical absorption in life that provides a baseline measure of subsequent pollution absorption in modern times. Since the measures of carcinogens and other harmful materials are in their infancy, historical measures are central and human remains are very significant. Therefore, there is every reason to be careful in appraising the uses and disposition of our established museum collections.

Page 3

We agree with the Smithsonian Institution's approach to dealing with human remains which includes identification of kin and return of appropriate remains. The major concern is that there be access to these collections for future scientific study. If the proposed memorial is symbolic, containing only those human remains with no scientific value, then the Society would not oppose it.

Lastly, we would like to point out an inconsistency in the language of S. 1722. At the beginning, in section 102 (11)(A), reference is made to materials not suitable for scientific inquiry. Title It makes no reference to scientific study of the remains.

S. 1723, the American Indian Regional Museum Act

The American Indian Regional Museum Act, S. 1723, offers an innovative and exciting opportunity to deal with many of the problems associated with museum collections, curation, and exhibition. The bill would provide a way to present Native American cultural materials to the people of the United States. It would bring the museum to the people.

This would allow for better public involvement, appreciation, enjoyment, and involvement in the unique history of the indigenous populations of North America. The Society for American Archaeology supports public outreach and education, training and interpretation -- which are all important elements in S. 1723.

One aspect of S. 1723 which the Society applauds is the opportunity to combine the existing Native American collections of the Smithsonian Institution with the extraordinary ethnological collections of the Heye Foundation. As discussed above, the compliment of two unique collections offers an opportunity to present a more complete picture to the residents of the United States of Native American life.

S. 1723 would allow for a partnership between the Smithsonian Institution, state, local, tribal and university museums. Destruction, damage and theft of archaeological and ethnological materials is rapidly increasing. S. 1723, through its public participation and appreciation elements, will help address these problems.

Page 4

The Society has several recommendations concerning S. 1723. First, there is the obvious opportunity for establishing a training program for Native Americans in museum curation and collections management. There is an opportunity for scholarly research into collections which would not otherwise be available to scholars and students not fortunate enough to be near Washington or New York. The Society feels that there is a strong need for research grants, scholarships and training geared specifically to these collections. The Society does not take a stand on the need for new museum buildings, but strongly agrees with an effort to cooperate with existing museums to host exhibits and to act as staging areas for traveling exhibits.

The Society feels that S. 1723 is farsighted and attempts to address a problem which has existed for decades. The Society for American Archaeology supports S. 1723.

Thank you for this opportunity to testify.