TESTIMONY for CONNECTICUT HUMANITIES

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My name is Maisa Tisdale. I am President of the Mary and Eliza Freeman Center for History and Community in Bridgeport. Founded as a grassroots historic preservation organization in 2009, we are now a 501(c)3. We own the historic Mary & Eliza Freeman Houses, built in 1848. I am here to support funding for CTHumanities.

The Freeman Houses, owned by sisters Mary & Eliza, are Connecticut’s oldest surviving African American homes; the only two original structures remaining from an antebellum settlement of free people of color, Little Liberia. This independent seafaring town was founded by free CT Blacks and Paugussetts around 1822 when this state and nation still had slavery. Research suggests that Little Liberia residents sought to establish a free city for people of color on Connecticut soil during slavery.

Little Liberia had a seaside resort hotel for wealthy Blacks (cited in a letter to Frederick Douglass), Bridgeport’s first free lending library, a school for colored children, businesses, and more. The sisters were accomplished business women. When Mary Freeman died, the only Bridgeporter of greater wealth was P.T. Barnum. The Houses are listed on the National Register of Historic Places for significance to Blacks and Women.

We’re creating a national African American historic site in the South End of Bridgeport - consisting of a museum and education center, digital research and humanities center, and housing. Our plans are designed to act as catalysts to community development.

Despite our best efforts, making this story known and raising funds has been hard. Then last summer, the National Trust for Historic Preservation named the Freeman Houses one of this nation’s “11 Most Endangered Historic Places.” After a competitive process, out of thousands of possible sites, the Trust determined that it was a national priority to preserve this Bridgeport site and story.

We had to demonstrate that we had support from relevant, statewide agencies. CTHumanities stepped up with a grant. They also told us about a special initiative by the Smithsonian’s African American Museum and supported our application. We were accepted. CTHumanities is not only helping us share our story, it’s making sure that we have the business skills needed to run a national site.
They reached out to us, staff came to Bridgeport to let us know that CTHumanities was committed to including the cultural narratives of African Americans, Native Americans, and industrial urban populations. Emerging nonprofits like ours face unique challenges that others don’t. CTHumanities made it clear that they viewed us as a resource, not a risk. And would help us problem solve to succeed despite tough odds.

I am pleased to support funding for CTHumanities. They are empowering us to educate and rebuild our community. With our bricks and mortar needs being met through a state Good to Great grant, we can turn our attention to telling the story of Little Liberia. CTHumanities is essential to this effort.

Thank you.