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Committee on Appropriations and Financial Affairs
132nd Maine Legislature
100 State House Station
Augusta, ME 04333

Dear Senator Rotundo, Representative Gattine, and Honorable Members of the Committee on Committee on Appropriations and Financial Affairs:

Maine Preservation is a statewide nonprofit organization dedicated to promoting and preserving historic places, buildings, downtowns, and neighborhoods—strengthening the cultural and economic vitality of Maine communities.

I write to express strong support for L.D. 761¹ “An Act to Support the Maintenance, Preservation and Promotion of State Historic Sites.” In just the past three years, we added three state-owned historic sites to our annual list of Maine’s Most Endangered Historic Places: Fort George in Castine, the Colburn House State Historic Site in Pittston, and Eagle Island off the coast of Harpswell.

Maine’s Bureau of Parks and Lands acknowledges that the 15+ state-owned historic sites scattered across eight counties suffer from deferred maintenance and attention with an estimated \$100+ million backlog. While the \$18 million allocated through L.D. 762 would only begin to support needed preservation and public access upgrades, it is a step in the right direction that shows the State of Maine takes its stewardship of these irreplaceable places seriously.

Fort George is a Revolutionary-era fortification with national significance tied to the failed Penobscot Expedition aimed at retaking the region from British forces. The five-acre site is owned by the Maine Bureau of Parks and Land, but the Town of Castine is legally responsible for maintenance and management via a decades-old agreement. Conflicting priorities and deferred maintenance have snowballed into a severe lack of interpretation, public programming, and diminished public interest in the site. Fort George has the potential to be a considerable draw for tourism, especially as we near the 250th anniversary of the American Revolution.

The Colburn House State Historic Site similarly traces its significance to the Revolutionary War as the origin of Benedict Arnold’s failed expedition to seize Quebec from the British.



Public access to the 18th century house ended in 2019 because of unsafe conditions, including an unstable foundation, mold growth, and flaking lead paint. A recent federal grant will allow repairs to the house's foundation and structure but still falls significantly short of making it safe for public access.

Renowned Arctic explorer Robert E. Peary Sr.'s home on Eagle Island, a National Historic Landmark and State Historic Site follows the same discouraging trend. Eagle Island has been closed since 2021 after the discovery of mold and a mounting list of needed repairs. The pair of January 2024 storms made matters worse, destroying the site's pier and moorings, undercutting sea walls, and jeopardizing the east bastion of Peary's home. It is expected that storm recovery funds will support construction of a new pier, but public access remains significantly curtailed. As a result, entrance fees will not be realized and the local tourist economy built around visitation will continue to decline.

Previous investments into state-owned historic sites have proven catalytic, especially Maine's incredible collection of coastal fortifications. The same year we included Fort Knox on our endangered list, the Friends of Fort Knox successfully garnered a \$1 million bond to repair the roof of the historic fortification, leveraging over \$300,000 in additional private donations. More than 25 years later, the Fort Knox Historic Site & Penobscot Narrows Bridge & Observatory is considered among the state's top attractions.

L.D. 762 not only aims to protect important cultural resources, but it would also enhance visitor experience of these sites through safer public access, improved wayfinding, and more robust interpretive materials. Maine Preservation supports passage of L.D. 762 so that the buildings and sites integral to the shared heritage identity of Mainers can persist.

Sincerely,

Tara Kelly
Executive Director