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Testimony of Assistant House Majority Leader Rachel Talbot Ross presenting

LD 183, An Act To Establish Juneteenth as a Paid State Holiday

Before the Joint Standing Committee on State and Local Government

Senator Baldacci, Representative Matlack and esteemed members of the Joint Standing Committee on State and Local Government, I am Rachel Talbot Ross. I represent House District 40 and serve as assistant House majority leader. Thank you for the opportunity to come before you to present **LD 183, An Act To Establish Juneteenth as a Paid State Holiday**.

Juneteenth is an American holiday, not one for only the descendants of enslaved people to observe. It has been recognized since 1866 but remains unfamiliar to many. And Juneteenth has meaning and relevance in our state of Maine that is both unique to our shared history and also representative of America's story more broadly.

The Juneteenth holiday was established to honor and recognize the day of freedom for those who were enslaved. Maine owes its statehood to slavery as a result of the Missouri Compromise. In 1820, a compromise was reached within the federal government to allow two new states into the Union without upsetting the balance of slave and free states in our nation, an issue that was becoming more problematic as the question of abolition grew in popularity. Over two hundred years ago, Maine entered the Union as a free state while Missouri entered the Union as a slave state. Our ability to become a state of our own, separate from Massachusetts, completely rested on the question of slavery.

The story of Juneteenth begins on June 19, 1865, when Union Major General Gordon Granger arrived in Galveston, Texas, and announced freedom for all enslaved peoples. "In accordance with a proclamation from the Executive of the United States, all slaves are free," Granger read to the crowd. Juneteenth was celebrated as early as the next year, 1866.

Granger's announcement in 1865 came a full two years after the Emancipation Proclamation was made. That meant the enslaved people of Galveston remained in slavery long after freedom had officially been granted to them. Despite President Lincoln's executive action, slavery did not end right away, but rather liberation occurred with the forward movement of the Union army. The Juneteenth holiday celebrates all emancipation from slavery, not just this one day in Texas, but the freedom of all those ever enslaved over the course of U.S. history.

Maine is not immune to this, but instead had its own experience with slavery. Enslaved people were in Maine from the time of our earliest European settlers. First, the native peoples of the place we now call Maine were enslaved. The first enslaved African people were brought to Massachusetts as early as 1637 and the institution quickly spread to Maine, then a district of Massachusetts. Author Patricia Wall found documentation of at least 500 enslaved people in the Kittery area in the 17th and 18th centuries. People of African and Indigenous or mixed ancestry were enslaved in Maine for mostly economic reasons – one or two enslaved people could perform the work of their enslaver, therefore freeing him or her up to do other work. Enslaved Africans in Maine worked within homes, on farms, in fisheries, in sawmills, and on ships. They helped to build our state.

Again, it is important to remember that Maine was long a district of Massachusetts. So when Massachusetts adopted its first state constitution in 1780, the document also applied to the district of Maine. That constitution still allowed slavery within the state, and therefore within Maine. But between 1781 and 1783, enslaved people in Massachusetts began to sue for their own freedom before the state's courts, and many were successful. The Supreme Judicial Court heard a series of cases considering the legality of slavery in light of the state's constitution and effectively abolished slavery through the decision reached in the Quock Walker case in 1781.

That ruling applied to Maine as well, but it did not take effect immediately. The news took time to spread, especially into rural Maine. The 1790 census lists individuals still enslaved in Maine.

Maine is far from Texas, where the last enslaved people in North America were notified of their freedom. But Maine already had its own long history of slavery, and enslaved people here—like those in Texas—had experienced the same delay before learning of their emancipation.

The Juneteenth holiday does not celebrate one day in just one place, but instead it recognizes the harsh experiences of all those who were enslaved. The mothers, fathers, children and siblings who toiled in Maine's soil and built Maine's economy without enjoying their own freedom. These experiences are documented in our church records, in Court cases and in the records of our own Maine State Archives.

This is a part of history for all our communities and it is time that we recognize it completely. I believe a paid state holiday elevates the visibility of the holiday and therefore the reason for its existence. Through this holiday, we can teach about and discuss Maine's history with slavery and its lasting effects on our culture and communities. We can uncover this history that has been forgotten. And finally, we can honor our past as we also move forward.

I thank you for your consideration and am available to answer any questions.