

**Statement by Representative John E. Peterson on the
Oil Region National Heritage Act
before the Subcommittee on National Parks and Public Lands
September 16, 2003**

In 1858, Colonel Edwin Drake was sent by a group of New England investors to Titusville, Pennsylvania to see if there was any hope for drilling oil. Drake had no experience to fit him for his task. A man forty years of age, he had spent his life as a clerk and a railway conductor. It was months before Drake succeeded in getting together the tools, engine, and rigging necessary to bore his well, and he had difficulty in getting a driller who knew how to manipulate them. However, in August of 1859-- with the odds against him-- Drake proceeded to hand-dig the well that marked the first commercial oil drilling in history.

Oil had been recognized as a potentially significant substance long before Drake's well called the attention of the world to this corner of Northwestern Pennsylvania. Many accounts of the valleys of the Allegheny and its tributaries tell of springs and streams whose surfaces were covered with a thick oily substance. Indeed, the Oil Creek valley was so-named even before Drake's discovery. Drake's primary contribution to the industry was in drilling the first well for the express use of producing oil. This discovery of oil sparked a mad rush to the area between Titusville and Oil City, with whole towns and hundreds of new oil wells quickly appearing. Commercial drilling quickly spread to other parts of the country and eventually throughout the world.

In 1994, the area that has been called the "valley that changed the world" was officially designated a State Heritage Park by the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. Currently, there are six separate national historic districts located within the State Heritage Park boundary. H.R. 1862--the Oil Region National Heritage Act-- would unite these districts and coordinate a federal-state partnership so vital to preserving and promoting this region. Indeed, it is now time to recognize the national significance of this great region by designating the Oil Region a National Heritage Area.

National Heritage Areas link all of the many historic sites, facilities, and related tours and educational programs of the community. They are places where historic, natural, cultural, and recreational resources combine to form a nationally distinctive landscape that tells the story of its residents. Through the establishment of the Oil Region National Heritage Area, we are allowing this story to be told through the maintenance of exhibits and the restoration of buildings, the development of educational and recreational opportunities, and-- most importantly, an increase in public awareness about the impact that this region has had on the world.

The Oil Region of northwestern Pennsylvania is rich in cultural traditions, natural and scenic beauty, historic communities including many Victorian mansions, and recreational opportunities. Oil fueled the industrial revolution and modernized America's transportation industry. It is vital that we preserve and enhance the heritage of areas such as this that have had such an impact on our nation and the world at large.

HR 1862 would add a great deal to the region, both economically and culturally, with minimal federal government involvement. An enhanced partnership with the federal government will

greatly assist the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, volunteer organizations, and private businesses in promoting the heritage of the region and stimulating economic development.

This bill bars use of federal funds for the acquisition of real property. Moreover, federal funds cannot be used to pay more than 50% of an activity's total cost. HR 1862 would not take control away from the community but would instead enhance local objectives while relying on the knowledge and expertise of the Department of the Interior in preserving national historic areas.

Today it is clear that Pennsylvania is no longer a major contributor to U.S. oil production. Oil Creek now runs clear. Hillsides that once were oil-soaked before the boom now exist as mature oak forests. Nevertheless, this region's role in kicking off the global industry is extremely notable. All major oil companies have their roots here, including Sunoco, Standard Oil, and Texaco; and the discovery of commercial drilling in this area has added millions upon millions of dollars to the wealth of the United States.

There is no doubt that the region has much heritage to share and to celebrate. But there is still much work to be done if the story of this great region is to be fully appreciated. A cooperative effort of resources to preserve the area and fully promote its economic development is needed. This bill strives to ensure that the story of this Oil Region lives on.