

# **JAMES K. POLK HOME SPECIAL RESOURCE STUDY CIVIC ENGAGEMENT SUMMARY**

**MAY 2021**

The National Park Service (NPS) initiated the special resource study (SRS) of the James K. Polk Home and adjacent property in Columbia, Tennessee, in 2019. In the initial steps of the process, the study team gathered information regarding the site and met with key stakeholders. In January 2021, the study team initiated a civic engagement process to inform the special resource study.

## **SUMMARY OF PUBLIC OUTREACH**

During the civic engagement process, the National Park Service solicited feedback from the public through a newsletter, the project website, and a virtual public meeting, which was advertised through a press release in local and regional media. The study team emailed notifications regarding the virtual public meeting and public comment period to the Tennessee Historical Society, Tennessee State Museum, State Historic Preservation Officer, Tennessee Historical Commission, and the President James K. Polk State Historic Site in North Carolina.

The James K. Polk Memorial Association (Association) posted announcements on Facebook and Instagram and sent email notifications to their members, local government, museum stakeholders, and Polk's America Lecture and Podcast Series distribution list. They also mailed approximately 600 hard copies of the newsletter in early March 2021 to members of the Association. The newsletter included an overview of the site, a description of the study, the criteria used in special resource studies, and an invitation to submit comments via the project website or mailed correspondence.

The official public comment period opened on Tuesday, January 19, 2021, and closed on Saturday, March 20, 2021. The study team hosted one virtual public meeting on January 28, 2021, via the Microsoft Teams Live platform. The meeting was held from 7:00 p.m. to 8:30 p.m. (ET). The goals of the meeting were to share information regarding the purpose and process for special resource studies, provide an overview of the criteria the National Park Service applies when conducting special resource studies, provide an overview of the site and current management, and seek feedback from the public.

A project website was created on the Planning, Environment, and Public Comment (PEPC) site (<http://parkplanning.nps.gov/polksrs>) to share project updates, share information regarding the virtual public meeting, and collect public comments.

## **PUBLIC INTEREST**

Approximately 23 people attended the virtual public meeting where members of the public were invited to submit comments to the PEPC website. During the public comment period, there were 56 comments submitted to the study team. Of these, 51 were submitted through PEPC, 4 were submitted during the virtual public meeting, and 1 was emailed to the study team. The correspondences submitted during the virtual public meeting and the emailed correspondence were entered into the PEPC website by NPS staff. Public comments were submitted from individuals in six

states and four unknown locations. The following table provides the distribution of public comments that were submitted directly to the PEPC website (table 1).

**Table 1. Geographic Distribution of Correspondences**

State	Percentage	Number of Correspondences
Tennessee	83.9%	47
Unknown ( <i>captured during virtual meeting</i> )	7.1%	4
Florida	1.8%	1
Illinois	1.8%	1
Maryland	1.8%	1
North Carolina	1.8%	1
Pennsylvania	1.8%	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>100.00%</b>	<b>56</b>

In addition to general public comments, the National Park Service received comments from two great, great, great nephews of James K Polk, as well as the following organizations:

- James K. Polk Memorial Association
- Heritage Bank & Trust
- Maury Regional Medical Center
- Workpress Collectives

The National Park Service received one letter from an official representative of

- Maury County Government

## **PUBLIC OPINIONS, PERCEPTIONS, AND VALUES**

The National Park Service sought feedback on the special resource study by asking the public to answer three questions. The questions were listed in the newsletter and during the virtual public meeting. The questions were:

1. What is your vision for preserving the James K. Polk Home, and how would you like to see the site managed? What types of activities and experiences do you want to see as part of the Polk Home's future?
2. What objects, buildings, remaining features, values, and stories do you believe are most important at this site and why?
3. Do you have any other ideas, comments, or concerns you would like to share with us, including your level of support for a potential NPS designation?

The following is a brief overview of the comments made by respondents, broken down by the four main topics in the scoping questions above.

## **Vision for Preserving the James K. Polk Home and Site Management**

General comments for preserving the site included support of similar management as to what is currently being done and maintaining the site for future generations to enjoy. Comments showed support for preserving the site and displayed great pride in sharing the home and resources with the local community and tourists.

The public comments demonstrated both support and opposition for a national park designation and also suggested a joint management option for preserving the site into the future.

## **Support for NPS Designation**

Approximately two-thirds of comments received were in support of NPS designation. The public cited great importance of the presidential site, and that it should be preserved and protected for the enjoyment of the public and future generations under NPS management. Supporters thought there would be additional stability to manage the site into perpetuity and noted that it is becoming increasingly difficult to secure adequate funding through grants and fundraising. Others noted that an NPS designation would bring credibility and visibility for the home as a historic site.

A few comments received mentioned that NPS designation could make the site more high profile and bring in additional tourism to the area. One comment noted that an NPS designation would play a big role in marketing the local community nationally while providing additional opportunities for federal employment.

Commenters who were supportive of NPS designation stated that without NPS management, the site would be lost or destroyed. Commenters noted the challenges in securing funding for operations, preservation, and programming, recruiting volunteers to keep the Association running, and a loss of support from the State of Tennessee to support the site. A stagnation of visitation and admissions were noted, and it was hoped by some commenters that being included as a unit in the national park system would increase the site's relevance.

Some commenters mentioned the National Park Service's experience and professionalism in managing other sites, developing educational programming, and finding traveling exhibits as a benefit to the Polk site in addition to the National Park Service being a secure funding source. Commenters wrote that park designation would bring visibility and credibility to the historically important site. Finally, many commenters who were in support of NPS designation and management frequently identified themselves as current or former Association board members.

Other commenters tentatively supported NPS designation and inclusion because of their understanding of Polk's national significance as well as the Association's financial constraints, but they would prefer that the Association continue managing the property. One commenter suggested a two- to three-year phased transition to achieve public and private support.

## **Opposition for NPS Designation**

Approximately one-third of comments received regarding designation were opposed to direct NPS management of the site. The public thought the site should be managed locally in Columbia within Maury County by the Association. Those opposed commented that the site is currently being managed effectively, with concerns of the site moving from local to national management.

The public expressed concerns regarding current special events and fundraising as being important aspects of the local community. Comments included hesitation that the federal government would change the site, taking away from the local feeling. Commenters stated that the members of the Association and volunteers were coming up with new ideas for interpretation and activities, and local fundraising was sufficient to protect the site and maintain programming. Commenters also felt that the site was uniquely personal and local (i.e., the site is operated by members of the community for the community). Many commenters in opposition to NPS designation mentioned the site does not need another level of bureaucracy, federal red tape, nor did these commenters trust the federal government.

One commenter noted that the site was not truly James K. Polk's home but the home of his father. Others, in their opposition, pointed to examples such as the Gordon House along the Natchez Trace Parkway, which shows deterioration, and the backlog of deferred maintenance within the National Park Service. There were also concerns expressed that the current Polk Home employees would lose their jobs if an NPS designation were made. Changes or limitations to operating hours, programming, educational focus, tours, and special events without local input were also causes of concern. State ownership of the site was suggested if the Association could no longer continue to preserve and operate the site.

A few commenters who were not supportive of the nomination stated that previous federal government shutdowns have hurt other NPS sites, and future radical shifts in NPS priorities and policy, as has been seen in the last few years, would hurt the Polk Home. Additional commenters were concerned about the personal politics of NPS employees impacting operations, interpretation at the site wandering into "*revisionism and political/cultural posturing*," the demonization of Polk along with other prominent past presidents, and the site becoming a target for "*radical revisionist insurrectionists*." An example of this last concern was Charles Pinckney National Historic Site. The commenter was also concerned about security at the Polk Home if it received NPS designation.

## **Affiliated Area**

About twenty comments mentioned a partnership approach between the local community and the National Park Service for long-term management. The comments identified a vision of a collaborative agreement with the National Park Service where management and operations of the site would remain the responsibility of the Association. As an affiliated area, comments received indicated it was important for the local community to retain control with financial and technical support from the National Park Service. Some comments suggested that if the designation occurred, a phased transition to the National Park Service would be ideal.

Suggestions for cooperative management between the National Park Service and the Association included retaining local control and programming with financial and technical assistance from the National Park Service, the Park Service supplying an advisor or member to the Association board, the properties being owned and operated by National Park Service but educational programming and volunteers being provided by the Association, and establishing a friends group relationship with the Association.

## **ACTIVITIES AND EXPERIENCES AT THE POLK HOME**

Educational opportunities and special events and programming were desired to continue if NPS designation occurred. These special events include: First Fridays, Bloodies and Biscuits during Mule Day, the Dark Horse Dinner, the Polk Memorial Ball, the Polk Luncheon, Spring Luncheon, Farm to Table Dinners, and garden parties. These special events were described as local traditions, and commenters hoped that these would remain and continue to be a source of funding. Local horticultural and social groups also want to continue using the gardens for social gatherings in support of the Polk Home.

Children's programming, summer camps, the Polk Academy, field trips, and school programs were also mentioned as desired to continue. Tours of the home and revolving exhibits at the Polk Presidential Hall were also highlighted as activities that commenters would like to see continue. Activities such as demonstrations of 1800s cooking, gardening, entertainment, daily life activities, lectures, and podcasts such as Polk's America were highlighted as important. The newly installed kitchen garden was mentioned as popular among visitors. Commenters suggested that representations of Mexican War soldiers were needed.

## **OBJECTS, BUILDINGS, FEATURES, VALUES AND STORIES MOST IMPORTANT AT THE SITE**

Commenters noted that the Polk home, the kitchen, and the Sisters' House were all important, with the homes being rare examples of Federal-style architecture. All of the properties, though less often the garden cottage, were noted as contributing to the educational experience at the site. The gardens were included in some comments for its educational importance, and in others, the beauty of the gardens was mentioned. Commenters expressed the desire that the property be kept whole. Polk Presidential Hall was included in some comments for its exhibit space and its enhancement of the educational experience. Polk Presidential Hall was identified in one comment as a space where the Association could continue to operate if a cooperative management decision with the National Park Service was made. The gift shop and bookstore were also highlighted as an important feature.

The museum collection regularly appeared as important in comments. The museum collection includes artifacts and papers that belonged to James K. and Sarah Polk, especially during their time in the White House; artifacts owned by the Association; and artifacts on loan from other museums and organizations. The collection and the display of the museum collection enhanced visitors' experience at the Polk Home. Commenters expressed their desire that the collections, from a variety of time periods associated with the Polk's and their lives in the Columbia community, continue to be interpreted rather than just the period between 1818–1824 when James K. Polk lived at the home. Within the larger community, commenters noted how the home was connected to the Civil War Trails, the Rattle and Snap plantation, and St. John's church, and other commenters noted that Sarah Polk made significant contributions to American culture that should also be interpreted at the site.

Some commenters noted that the educational experiences at the Polk Home provided important opportunities to reflect on history, the way of life, and how much has changed since James K. Polk was alive. Commenters note that the history presented at the Polk Home was inspiring, considering what President Polk was able to accomplish in one term as president. Commenters noted that the educational experiences also provided an opportunity to consider what was done wrong to ensure that those mistakes are not repeated. Some important themes and stories that were mentioned

included the debate around slavery; tariffs; national debt; banking reform; Manifest Destiny; westward expansion; the Mexican-American War; immigration; influential women; family; Polk's Scotch-Irish and Presbyterian heritage and democratic ideals; Polk's relationship with North Carolina, Texas, and Oregon; Polk's role in establishing the Smithsonian Institution, the Washington Monument, the United States (US) Naval Academy in Annapolis, and an independent US Treasury; Polk's health issues; and Polk's brief post-presidency. Also mentioned in the public comments was the interest in how different segments of society were impacted by the practices, thoughts, and actions during the time in which the Polk's lived.

A few commenters noted that the Polk Home and Polk's story was as important as President Andrew Jackson, though President Jackson tends to overshadow Polk in recognition of state history. Commenters stated that the general public has nowhere else to go to learn about President Polk.

## **CONCERNS OR OBSERVATIONS**

Additional comments received included general comments regarding the relocation of the tomb and considerations around the period of interpretation.

Some commenters mentioned the Polks' tomb in Nashville and plans to relocate the tomb to Columbia. Four commenters were in support of moving the tomb to Columbia, and four were not.

Miscellaneous concerns about NPS designation included increasing parking at the site to accommodate increased visitation. Other needs at the site included updating the restrooms, using the kitchen for educational purposes, and implementing a site plan developed by landscape architect, Ben Page. Two commenters expressed interest in the site being further developed as a presidential library, possibly in Polk Presidential Hall.

One commenter expressed a desire to see archeological excavations at the Polk Home and more information on the enslaved individuals who were at the Polk Home, including genealogical research. Commenters also noted that original historic buildings, fabrics, and objects were of primary importance, and the arrangement of the Polk Home was not period appropriate. These commenters questioned if the National Park Service would rearrange the site to its original form and noted that they did not support an empty house concept for the museum collection and Polk Home.