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Legislation would create women's history museum on National Mall

Submitted on October 1, 2009 - 4:52pm. [Emily Mullin](#)



Click on photo to enlarge or download: The planned site of the National Women's History Museum, at the corner of 12th Street and Independence Avenue SW. The National Women's History Museum was considering the Cotton Exchange at right, a now-vacant building that was once part the Agriculture Department, to be included in the museum's plans. SHFWire Photo by Emily Mullin

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WASHINGTON - A House bill that advanced last week would create a museum on the National Mall dedicated to the role women have played in American history.

The National Women's History Museum Act of 2009, or H.R. 1700, would give the Alexandria, Va.,-based National Women's History Museum a physical home at the corner of 12th Street and Independence Avenue SW, across the street from the Smithsonian Institution's Freer Gallery of Art. The site is now a parking lot.

Rep. Carolyn Maloney, D-N.Y., originally proposed the legislation in July 2008 and reintroduced a modified version of the bill this year. The House Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure approved the bill last week.

"This bill would provide women, comprising 53 percent of our population, a long-overdue home to hone their many contributions to building our country," Maloney said in a press release.

The National Women's History Museum was founded in 1996 but has no physical site for its museum. Its administrative office in Alexandria is home to a small exhibit, but the museum's main presence is on its [Web site](#), where it hosts 15 cyber exhibits used by libraries and school systems nationwide.

Joan Wages, the museum's president, said that much of women's history is still missing from textbooks.

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"The information needs to be retained and retrieved and put into such a format that the public can enjoy it, and that's what we intend to do in this museum," Wages said.

Plans call for the museum to focus on the achievements of women from suffragist Susan B. Anthony to Oprah Winfrey, Hattie Caraway, the first woman elected to the Senate, and Julie Taymor, the first woman to win a Tony Award as best director.

The first project the women's organization undertook 12 years ago, Wages said, was lobbying Congress to get a **statue** of three women's suffrage founders moved from the Capitol's crypt to its Rotunda. The statue has been in the Rotunda since 1997.

"We think it so perfectly demonstrates what has happened to women's history," Wages said. "It has been stored away in the dark in the crypt."

Wages said that, until recently, museums have been run primarily by male curators, which is one of the reasons women have not been well represented in museum exhibits

The **Sewall-Belmont House and Museum** on Capitol Hill is among the 36 women's organizations that is supporting the National Women's History Museum Act. Page Harrington, director of the women's suffrage museum, said she hopes the legislation moves forward.

"I think that once they have their physical presence on the Mall established, we'll be able to delve deeper into joint exhibits and programs," Harrington said.

Sen. Susan Collins, R-Maine, plans to introduce a companion bill in the Senate.

"Women have always played a critical role in the social, cultural, economic, and political life of our country," Collins said in a statement. "Yet, there is currently no national museum dedicated to the legacy of women's contributions."

Maloney and Collins said that fewer than 5 percent of the nation's 2,200 National Historic Landmarks are dedicated to women, and there are fewer than 50 public outdoor statues of American women in the country. Of the 211 statues in the U.S. Capitol, 10 are of female leaders.

"Such a museum would showcase the important contributions that women have made to our country and it could be done at virtually no cost to taxpayers," Collins said.

Wages said the museum would not likely be part of the Smithsonian museum system but would be an independent facility. The museum will seek private funds to build and operate the museum.

Wages said she expects Congress to vote on both versions of the bill by the end of the year.