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Friends of the Parks' Statement on DuSable Park and Recognition for Jean Baptiste Point DuSable and his wife, Kitihawa

As support staff to the 30-plus year collective DuSable Park Coalition struggle to actualize DuSable Park, Friends of the Parks is most delighted that this public debate has greatly heightened the profile of Chicago's first non-native settler, Jean Baptiste Point DuSable, a Black Haitian man, and his wife, Kitihawa, of the Pottawotami tribe. As a parks organization, we have no formal position on the proposal to change the name of Lake Shore Drive to DuSable Drive. But whatever forms it may take, we believe that a tribute to the role of these people of color and the tribe that helped make possible the permanent settlement that became Chicago is long overdue.

Also long overdue is the recognition of and consultation with the activists and neighbors who have labored for years as DuSable Park boosters. These include leaders of the Haitian community; champions of the legacy of Chicago's first African-American mayor, Harold Washington; representatives of Chicago's Native American community; Streeterville residents and businesses; and various local museums. They have led advocacy, tracked progress, met with developers and aldermen, helped design a DuSable Park Framework Plan, led an annual commemoration and tour, and cast the vision for the DuSable Heritage Corridor as a key educational and tourist destination that is now being articulated as the mayor's vision. It has been Friends of the Parks' honor to help support this coalition behind the scenes over the years, so we know that it is these community leaders that have laid the foundation for what is now coming into wider view.

“Regardless of the outcome of City officials’ maneuvers and whether there is any seriousness to the proposal to rename Millennium Park for DuSable, what has been missing from the recent proposals has been the inclusion of the community groups that for decades have centered the effort to bring to fruition the late Mayor Harold Washington’s intent to establish DuSable Park,” said Juanita Irizarry, executive director of Friends of the Parks. **“While other efforts to honor DuSable can be complementary, there already is a strong sense of community ownership organized around a Chicago Park District owned-parcel named DuSable Park—a strategically located site at the confluence of the Chicago River and Lake Michigan where pollution clean-up recently has been completed en route to the development of the long-promised park near the site of DuSable’s settlement.”**

In line with our annual tradition that is part of advocating for DuSable Park, we and our fellow members of the DuSable Park Coalition are in the midst of planning for the DuSable Commemoration and Wreathing Ceremony which remembers the August day that Jean Baptiste Point DuSable died. Over the years, the commemoration has taken on even more meaning, serving as a reminder as to how long it has been since Harold Washington dedicated the still-undeveloped DuSable Park.

This year's event will take place on Saturday, August 21. Building on last year's enhanced program with a new collaboration with the Magnificent Mile Association and the Native American Chamber of Commerce, this year promises to be the biggest celebration yet. The full program is still in formation, but confirmed speakers include: Paul Montes, President of the DuSable Park Advisory Council; Faheem Majeed, Founder of the Floating Museum, and; Serge Pierre-Louis, Chair of the DuSable Park Coalition.

Friends of the Parks is a 45-year old non-profit park advocacy organization whose mission is to “inspire, equip, and mobilize a diverse Chicago to ensure an equitable park system for a healthy Chicago.”

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(Pictured left: "Founders" Floating Museum display. Pictured right: Dennis Downes (left) and Andrew Johnson (right) of the Native American Chamber of Commerce at last year's August DuSable Commemoration)