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## SPEECH BY MERYL STREEP

GIVEN AT NATIONAL WOMEN'S HISTORY MUSEUM'S

"OUR NATION'S DAUGHTERS" GALA IN WASHINGTON, DC ON SEPTEMBER 21, 2010

Hello friends,

It's a great honor for me to be here with you, stalwart supporters of an idea that has yet to become real: a National Women's History Museum that we can all see and touch and feel.

Of course, the virtual Museum, the online version of our dream, has been up and running for ten years and is quite compelling: a prize-winning collection of clickable experiences. I got lost in it yesterday, reading about all sorts of heroines and hotshots whose stories sit outside the education I received as a girl. Phyllis Wheatley, Belle Boyd, Deborah Sampson.

Many of you probably know her, but I had never heard of Deborah Sampson. Our first woman soldier, Deborah was 21 years old around the time of the Revolutionary War; disguised as a man, she enlisted in the Continental Army, taking her deceased brother's name. Early in her service, in a skirmish at Tarrytown, New York, she received a slash from a British sabre across her skull, and took a musket ball deep in her thigh.

Her comrades carried her 6 miles to a doctor, and she allowed him to treat her head wound; but she staggered off before they could cut away her trousers and reveal her secret. Back on the battlefield, she dug the musket ball out of her leg with a penknife, and handy with a needle, sewed it up.

Deborah went on to serve 18 months altogether, and was honorably discharged at West Point, an injured warrior, 23 years old. She went home to Massachusetts, put on a dress again, and married a hardscrabble farmer. She then did something no other Soldier in the Continental Army had done. She gave birth, three times, and adopted a fourth child, an orphan girl. Often destitute, she was embarrassed, but obliged, to ask her friend Paul Revere to intercede with the Governor to secure the pension to which she was entitled as a wounded veteran.

Over the years, Revere supported her efforts to secure the back pay and pension she was repeatedly denied; finally, at age 56, more than 30 years after her discharge, Washington complied. She died ten years later with a bum leg, and a letter thanking her for her service in her possession.

Our first female soldier and the first to take a bullet for her country. Do your sons and daughters know Debbie Sampson's name?

How about our first traitor, Benedict Arnold? Maybe this is why we need a National Women's History Museum...

Oh, but people say, why do you need a building? Why do you need a big brick and mortar monument that needs to be heated and staffed, a big expenditure in these terrible times when all the information is readily available in the great cyber-library in the sky?

Anyone who doubts the importance of a building, the deep, psychological, spiritual, symbolic meaning of a building, should come to my neighborhood. I live 7 blocks from what other people call Ground Zero, what we still call The World Trade Center.

I live not far from a mosque that has been offering up prayers 5 times a day for over 30 years here. I live 5 blocks from the strip club in the same neighborhood that offers pole dances (and other kinds of dances?), rather more often than 5 times a day, on what some people are now calling Sacred Ground.

Symbols matter. The reason everybody is so passionate about what will be built on the actual site of the Twin Towers is that symbols do matter; buildings and monuments stand for something in people's hearts.

From my window in lower Manhattan, I can turn my eyes from that site and see, out in the harbor, another powerful monument and museum, the magnificent Statue of Liberty.

There she stands, a woman, symbolizing freedom, fabricated in Paris in 1885, before any living woman in France or America was free to vote for her school board, the dogcatcher in her village, or the President of her Republic. This symbolic woman, standing for liberty, ironically not free herself, silently raises her hand, waiting to be called on, waiting for everybody to finally see her light.

She is a stirring symbol, as I consider her every day; her weight and placement at the portal of America signifies to strangers and citizens alike the ideals of welcome, opportunity and relief from the old oppressions.

Ground for a museum of women's history should've been broken almost a hundred years ago, when the ground-breaking legislation affirming the rights of women to be fully enfranchised citizens finally passed through a turgid and resistant Congress. Which brings me to the present day.

Do you know that a bill, sponsored by the bipartisan women of Congress, has been submitted every year for the past seven years for permission to approve the sale of Federal land for our Museum? And for each of those seven years it has been pushed aside, neglected. Not deemed important enough. Will we have to wait another hundred years to have this Museum? What is the hold-up?

Now let me be clear. This is not a petition for funding. We are asking for permission to give the government our money. Permission to purchase, with our own money, at fair market value, Federal land. Asking permission to pay.

This building will be built entirely by private funds, yours and mine ... All we ask, and I don't mind telling you, it rankles me (since we have every female Senator and Congressperson on board already) it really rankles me that we still must kneel and beg our brothers in Congress to please let us build a museum that honors the achievements of their own mothers and grandmothers.

All it will cost them is the caloric energy it takes to get their hands up in the air and say "Aye".

So let's, in the morning, put the first call of the day in to our representatives. If you happen to be married to your representative, don't wait 'til morning. Tell him tonight to get this thing done!

There is a suitable parcel of land on the Mall, a place of honor in an honored place. This site, which resides alongside other iconic symbols of our nation's greatness, is deserved by women like Deborah Sampson who paid down dearly for the country they loved, and permission is owed them by our earliest enfranchised citizens, who made their mothers and sisters wait, almost 300 years, for a place at the table.

We need two things tonight: Permission from Congress and cash from you.

We will get permission, because I cannot imagine those two Senators who have put "a hold" on our Museum have a stomach for war with the women of America.

And we will get the money to build this tribute. I have no doubt of that. I even have a plan! If each of the 500 of us here tonight can get 50 people (that's less than your Christmas card list), 50 women to put away one \$20 bill a week - that's less than \$3 a day- that's coffee money!, if we make that pledge: in ten years we'll have over \$ 250 million. More than a quarter of a Billion dollars! Museum built, endowed, staffed, and landscaped! And you, Original 500, would get a special parking pass, and an opportunity to show the kids around the Museum that Mommy built.

So again, why do we need the building? Because buildings are important, not only as symbols, but as gathering places, as inspirational spaces.

Museums are especially important in Washington, DC, seat of our national heritage, memorialized in marble and granite, glass, stone, and steel. But there is no Women's History Museum in Washington.

There is a Postal Museum, a Spy Museum, a Newseum, a Textile Museum, a Crime (and punishment) Museum, a Wax Museum, a National Bonsai Museum, and a building that is a Museum of-- Buildings.

Our studies tell us that 1.2 million visitors would come to our Museum the first year. I think that's wrong. I think it'd be double that.

Why? Because there is no Women's History Museum in Paris or London either! Or Cairo or Beijing or Tokyo, Toronto, Rio, Montevideo or Moscow! But there are women. All over this country, all over the world, there seem to be women. Really, almost everywhere you go, you see them.

And, as in my house, they are in charge of the travel arrangements. And I am quite sure, when they visit our Capital, after stopping in at the Lincoln Memorial, and thinking about what it would be like to climb the Washington Monument, they will make time, after lunch, for everyone to head on over for a visit to their own place in history.

And I have confidence that the whole family will feel, in that hall, the gratitude of neglected generations. And they will feel the awe that comes from breathing the cool air of respect for the aspirations and accomplishments of fully one half of humanity.