Honorable David Bernhardt  
Secretary of the Interior  
U.S. Department of Agriculture  
1849 C Street, NW  
Washington, DC  20240

August 27, 2020

Re:  
Letter of Support for Moffat County Colorado–National Garden of American Heroes  
Nomination of Sargent Johnson – first black American to receive the Congressional Medal of Honor

Dear Secretary Bernhardt:

It is with a great deal of pride that the Colorado Wool Growers Association (CWGA) supports Moffat County’s 453 acre Loudy-Simpson Park as the location for our nation’s next national treasure, The National Garden of American Heroes!

While offering a great location to honor our nation’s history and heroes, Moffat County is in the process of transitioning from its role as a major player in fossil fuels (coal) into a new, and still unknown economy. This leaves the door wide open for Moffat County to focus its resources and future on providing a safe and welcoming home for The National Garden of American Heroes; and will provide the opportunity for every American to experience good, down-home western hospitality.

Our country is born from the blood of the brave Americans that fought before us and for us, and every state has its share of unsung heroes. We consider it a great honor, to put forth the name of Sargent Johnson to be included in the National Garden of American Heroes. Because of his brave and heroic efforts at the Battle of Milk Creek (Moffat County), Sargent Johnson was the first black American to receive the Congressional Medal of Honor (see attached article).

Now more than ever the United States of America needs to embrace and learn from our history, our victories and mistakes, to strengthen our nation and keep America Great!!

Respectfully,

Bonnie Brown  
Executive Director
Meeker Colorado and the White River Valley

Rio Blanco County Historical Society
Meeker, Colorado

Visit the White River Museum website
The Northern Ute Tribe of today.

Rio Blanco County Historical Society "Between Fences" photography contest accepting entries now through December 20, 2010. The Smithsonian traveling exhibit "Between Fences" is here from December 11, 2010 until February 26, 2011. This is one of only 6 in the state where the traveling exhibit will be displayed. Winners of the photography contest will be announced after the new year and will be on display at Fawn Creek Gallery, 6th & Main St. in Meeker. Mark your calendar to attend the official opening of the exhibit on December 11th.

"The Last Major Indian Uprising"

THE MEEKER MASSACRE AND THE BATTLE OF MILK CREEK

The rush to Colorado began in the turbulent days of the Kansas.Nebraska Territory preceding the Civil War. After finding gold at Cherry Creek (present day Denver) miners moved on to establish the legendary mining towns of Central City and Blackhawk.

In the 1870's during the economic depression following the Civil War, white miners and settlers in covered wagons, on horseback, and on foot, encouraged by the Homestead Act, and drawn by news of mineral wealth, again followed the long trails to gold in the Colorado mountains. By now the Union Pacific Railroad was completed and others were penetrating the Front Range of Colorado.

Miners rushed west over the high passes where they created other legendary mining towns in the areas of Summit County, Leadville and Silverton. These mining successes heavily penetrated Ute territory. The Ute Indians, who considered the whole of Colorado their home for generations, resented their diminishing hunting ground and the white men resented and distrusted the Indian.
Colorado Statehood came in 1876. Newspapers of the day demanded the removal of Utes off of land that could be mined, farmed or ranched. The attitude of many Coloradans, at the time, was, "The only good Ute was a dead Ute".

Into this mix of tensions was injected Nathan C. Meeker who sought and was appointed Indian Agent at the White River Indian Reserve in 1878. His actions were to precipitate a cultural and military explosion.

Meeker was an idealist who owned a store in Ohio and he was also a newspaper farming reporter. Later Meeker moved to New York City where he worked for Horace Greeley on the New York Tribune. Meeker asked Greeley for his help in starting a utopian colony. They conceived of the Union Colony (present day Greeley, Colorado) which was to be located in the eastern foothills of the Rocky Mountains. Though the project was ultimately a success, Meeker believed he had failed and that he owed Greeley's heirs money. He managed to obtain the job as Indian Agent at the White River Ute Reserve (Reservation) in an effort to pay off the debt. His contact with Indians had been minimal and when he finally did meet the Ute people he did not listen to his wards, nor was he sensitive to their long established cultural patterns.

Meeker, unwisely, in retrospect, brought his wife Arvilla, daughter Josephine, his young master farmer, Shadrach Price, Flora Ellen Price and their two children Johnny and May plus other working men from the Union Colony to help set up the agency and begin the farming at Powell Park.

He had moved the agency 11 miles down the White River to Powell Park which is three miles west of present day Meeker. Both the move and Meeker's ideas were unpopular with the Indians since they pastured their large herds of ponies in the lush meadows of Powell Park and proved their worth by racing their ponies and hunting for their families; just as the Ute women job was to gather native plants, do some gardening, feed their families and move their camp.

At the time, White River Ute leaders were Johnson (Canalla or Canavish), Douglas (Quinquent), Colorow, a Comanche and Jack (Nicaagat), who was leader of the younger men. Chief Ouray, famous as the government appointed leader and chief of all the Ute tribes in Colorado, believed in ultimate peace and compromise with the Federal Government; a belief based on his visit to Washington D.C. after the Civil War and his having viewed 200,000 American troops camped around Washington. Ouray was, in fact, only leader of the Uncompahgre Ute Tribe near present day Delta. His views of coexistence were not accepted by many other Ute tribal leaders, although they tried to avoid arguing with him as he was both intelligent and tough.

To gain some understanding of Meeker's problems would involve knowing that at the time Meeker was appointed, the Bureau of Indian Affairs adapted a strict policy that included the provision that if adult Indian males did not participate in agricultural efforts, their food, given to them by the government, would be withheld. The Utes did not believe Meeker as they knew this mandate was not in their treaty. There began a complete lack of trust on the part of the White River Utes who believed Meeker was not telling the truth regarding such policies. Although, Meeker induced the Indians to help his men build an irrigation ditch, which is still being used in Powell Park today; this did not mean the Utes wanted to farm, furthermore it has been related that Meeker paid the Utes for this work.

Meeker's imperative was to teach the Utes to become self-sufficient farmers. When the Utes would not stay on the reservation and farm, but instead continued following their age old lifestyle of extended hunts, Meeker tried to get them to stay on the reservation and work; at first in a kindly way and as that failed he applied more pressure.

He threatened to have the troops from Ft. Fred Steele at Rawlins, Wyoming come put the Utes in chains and take them away to the Indian Territories in Oklahoma. A threat he did not have the authority to make. The Utes did not believe that he had the authority to do this and Meeker was widely accused of lying to them in this regard.

The newly formed State of Colorado and the Federal Government did not have coordination regarding the situation at the White River Agency. Meeker had advised the
Major Tipton Thornburg, at Fort Steele, and the Bureau of Indian Affairs that he would need military presence to achieve the policy of strict agriculture work. His request was ignored. However, the citizens of northwest Colorado, when requested from the state, received military support from US Army units headquartered at Ft. Garland. These soldiers reported to a different chain of command from those at Fort Steele where Agent Meeker, by policy, sought support.

Citizens from around Beyer's Canyon near present day Kremmling, Colorado complained of the White River Utes being off the reserve and causing problems. Meeker asked Major Thornburg, commandant of Ft. Fred Steele. to investigate and Thornburg found little cause to be alarmed. However, it must be noted that Thornburg in a letter to Gen. George Crook, commander of the Dept. of the Platte at Omaha Barracks stated he had never received any orders, from his superior, to cause the Indians to remain on the reservation at the request of the agent, but that he was ready to send his men if ordered to do so.

The Governor of Colorado asked for military presence from Fort Garland. At his request a cavalry unit of Buffalo Soldiers, under Captain Dodge, were stationed at Troublesome Creek, east of present day Kremmling, Colorado; in the summer of 1879.

In the late summer of 1879, the situation began to come unraveled. Meeker, believing the ponies to be the major problem had conceived the idea of plowing up the Ute racetrack. At this point there is a lot of conjecture about what happened that precipitated the following events. One story is that upon hearing about his idea Jane, Arvilla's housekeeper, confronted him about plowing up her land. The frustrated Meeker argued with her and told her that the land did not belong to the Utes and they could lose it if they didn't obey him, which, of course, he realized, immediately, had been a serious mistake. Another story relates that Jane turned her back and walked away, which was frustrating to the agent. Yet another account, according to Josie Meeker, Mr. Meeker built Jane a house and dug her well in compensation for the land. Whichever is true, Shaman Johnson came to Meeker furious about Meeker's statement to Jane and/or the plowing of the racetrack; the two argued. Some stories related that Meeker, told Johnson he would need to kill half the ponies, while he, Meeker, would have Shadrach Price plow up the Indian race track. The fact is Meeker did indeed have Mr. Price start plowing until one of the Indians shot over his head. Another version is that Johnson and Meeker started arguing about the irrigation ditch, the plowing and the ponies; whatever the argument was about; there was shouting, according to Meeker's wife Arvilla's account, but she made no mention of Meeker being accosted. Meeker said Johnson shoved him against the wall of the agency and then over the itching rail, where he sustained injury. The Ute Indians say this never happened. This argument appears to be the final insult as far as the Indians were concerned, as their ponies were their wealth and they believed the reservation was theirs.

The Utes, were further upset because Meeker sent a telegram to Washington D.C. and they could not get Meeker to tell them the content of the message. Meeker's telegram read, "I HAVE BEEN ASSAULTED BY LEADING CHIEF, JOHNSON, FORCED OUT OF MY HOUSE AND INJURED BADLY, BUT WAS RESCUED BY EMPLOYEES. IT IS NOW REVEALED THAT JOHNSON ORIGINATED ALL THE TROUBLE STATED IN LETTER SEPT. 8. HIS SON SHOT AT PLOWMAN AND OPPOSITION TO PLOWING IS WIDE, PLOWING STOPS: LIFE OF SELF, FAMILY AND EMPLOYEES NOT SAFE: WANT PROTECTION IMMEDIATELY: HAVE ASKED GOVERNOR PITKIN TO CONFER WITH GENERAL POPE. N. C. MEEKER, INDIAN AGENT.

Employee, Fred Shepard, had written a letter to his mother, which had been picked up just before the outbreak of hostilities which said, "IN REGARDS TO MY GETTING OUT OF HERE SOON, I HAVE NOT FELT AS IF I WAS IN ANY DANGER SO FAR AS MY LIFE IS CONCERNED SINCE I HAVE BEEN HERE ANY MORE THAN EVER I DID IN
YOUR DOOR-YARD. I DON'T BLAME THE UTE FOR NOT WANTING HIS GROUND PLOWED UP. IT IS A SPLENDID PLACE FOR PONIES AND THERE IS BETTER FARMING LAND, AND JUST AS NEAR. RIGHT WEST OF THIS FIELD, BUT IT IS COVERED IN SAGE BRUSH. DOUGLAS SAYS HE WILL HAVE THE BOYS (The Ute Indians) CLEAR THE SAGE BRUSH IF N. C. (Nathan Cook Meeker) WILL ONLY LET THE GRASS ALONE. BUT, N. C. IS STUBBORN AND WON'T HAVE IT THAT WAY AND WANTS THE SOLDIERS TO CARRY OUT HIS PLANS. DON'T KNOW HOW IT WILL TURN OUT, BUT YOU CAN BET IF THEY TOUCH ANYBODY IT WILL BE THE AGENT FIRST." (Mr. Shepard died in the conflict).

The subsequent action of the government in sending Major Thornburg and his troops from Ft. Steele only upset the Indians further, as they did not want soldiers on their reservation. The soldiers did not want to be on the reservation anymore than the Indians wanted them there; after all, this was after the Little Big Horn and the Sand Creek Massacre; but orders were orders.

Jack and some of his men met Thornburg at Fortification Creek and asked what he was going to do. All Thornburg could tell them was that he had to assess the situation before he could answer. Jack again met Thornburg at near Peck's Trading Post (at present Craig, Colorado) and Thornburg, when pressed for information, could only give the same answer. Around this time the Utes started having war dances in the evening at the agency.

Meeker had certainly been right when he asked Thornburg to investigate and even close Peck's Trading Post because as there was little or no coordination between the Indian Service and the military; no one was policing Peck's store where Jack bought 10,000 rounds of ammunition for rifles better than those carried by the U.S. Army. Jack bought these at the same time the soldiers were camped on the Yampa River, in the same valley as Peck's Trading Post. Thornburg unwisely had not shown interest in Meeker's request when it was made to him earlier in the summer. Meeker just as unwisely refused to meet Thornburg at edge of the reservation, but in that desperate day, history records him to have said that to leave the Powell Park site would have left it to likely looting by the Indians.

On September 29, 1879 an unfortunate meeting between soldiers and the Utes at the crest of a ridge just after they crossed Milk Creek into the reservation was sparked into a battle by a single gun shot; by which group is unknown. Major Thornburg was killed while the soldiers were fighting their way back to the circling mule wagons near Milk River (Creek). Trenches were hurriedly dug and the soldiers were then pinned down. The Indians were killing horses to keep the soldiers from getting away and the soldiers were piling those dead horses between themselves and the bullets. There was a harrowing tale for the men and for the help who arrived in the form of Captain Doane and his few buffalo soldiers; days later.

When the Buffalo Soldiers arrived they walked their horses through the Indians and brought more food and ammunition to the entrenched soldiers. It is speculated that the reason for their being able to come in so easily was because they were about the same size as a forward scouting party and the Indians were probably checking to see if there were more troops behind them. Among the Buffalo Soldiers was Sgt. Johnson who took the dangerous task of getting water from Milk Creek. Sgt. Johnson is the first black man to receive the Congressional Medal of Honor. There were 11 men in that company who received Medals of Honor for saving each others lives.

Joe Rankin, the scout, left the circle of wagons in the night and rode an epic 158.7 miles north to Fort Steel in twenty eight and a half hours; only changing horses twice! He was carrying a message from Capt. Payne which included this statement, "...AFTER A DESPERATE FIGHT SINCE 12:00 A.M. WE HOLD OUR POSITION AT THIS HOUR". These men were truly in a terrible position and worked hard to keep each other alive. Col. Wesley Merritt from Fort D.A. Russell gathered troops by train and started south to come to the rescue. His march was such that it was used as an example for years to come at West Point.

On the same day as the battle the Utes had attacked the agency. Meeker ignored warnings from Tom and Billy Morgan, ranchers who raced horses with the Utes, and...
warnings from the Indians themselves; Meeker had signed a death warrant for the 11 men at the agency including himself. The Ute burning of the agency, and the capture of the women and children was also an excruciating travail. It is assumed that it was Ouray's sister, Susan who sent a rider to Ouray to get help.

Chipeta, Ouray's wife, sent riders to find Ouray who was hunting on Grand Mesa and sent the news to the Los Pinos Agency. Ouray, in turn, sent Mr. Joseph W. Brady to Colorow and Jack at Milk Creek to stop them from fighting. On October 8, Brady got there right at the time Merritt and his troops arrived to rescue the trapped men. Merritt sent the men back to their various forts and then rested at Milk Creek where he built up his troops to over a thousand men.

A week later, Merritt went over Yellow Jacket Pass and into Powell Park for the first time. Needless to say, the White River Agency was a smoldering ruin and the men's bodies were still on the ground. Merritt and his men buried the men and then were ordered not to chase the Indians any further, but to stay in the vicinity.

Interior Secretary Schurz had Merritt stop at Powell Park instead of pursuing the fleeing Utes and at the same time set "General" Adams, a special Agent of the Secretary, the task of rescuing the captives. Adams two companions were Captain Cline, who had served as scout for the Army of the Potomac and Mr. Sherman, Chief Clerk of the Los Pinos Agency. The White River Utes were not happy about giving up the women and kept Adams in debate until Susan broke into the tent and convinced the braves their safest path was to send the captives home. Mrs. Meeker said, "We owe much to the wife of Johnson. She is Ouray's sister and like him she has a kind heart." The women were finally freed after 23 days of harrowing captivity.

Col. Merrit (later General Merrit) and his men spent the winter of 1879-1880 in tents and built the cantonment (a temporary camp), at the site were Meeker now stands, in the spring of 1880. The camp was called "Camp on the White River".

The log buildings which now house the White River Museum and one private dwelling were the officer's quarters, housing two officer's families in each building. The area where the Rio Blanco County Courthouse and the Meeker Elementary School now stand was the parade ground. Across the parade ground facing the log buildings were the soldier's adobe barracks which is now the downtown portion of the town. Take note of the long narrow buildings such as the Meeker Drug Store as it is on the land of one of those long narrow barracks.

The extensive collection, in the White River Museum, has been donated over a number of years by the people who pioneered this valley after the Utes were removed to Utah following Ouray's death. The rest of the collection in the other museum building, called The Garrison, has also been donated and pertains to artifacts about the Milk Creek Battle and the Meeker Massacre.