

## **TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN—STAIR PRESERVATION LETTER OF SUPPORT—3/5/2026**

Stair climbing has become a fun part of Hot Springs culture. No longer simply a way to get to home, work or school, our staircases are part of an unofficial outdoor fitness center centered around our five outdoor staircases and the Freedom Trail. The combination of historic buildings, a peaceful, misty river and challenging staircases makes this an inviting, relaxing and *free* fitness 'venue'.

Most any morning you can see fitness regulars at the Battle Mountain Staircase. One woman climbs 15 times, 5 days a week after doing her morning calisthenics at home. Another climbs 20 times, several days a week. Many people include 1 or more staircases in their morning walks, which usually includes the winding Freedom Trail and perhaps one or more steep Hot Springs hills. Benches along riverwalk and staircases become 'equipment' for pushups, dips and step-ups. Tourists enjoy exploring the stairs, for exercise, nature and discovery.

One of the most common questions Challenge Dakota gets these days from tourists and locals is 'what is going to happen to the stairs?' Two staircases are completely closed (Chapel Charge and Castle Crunch) due to concrete breakdown. In recent years, repairs have not even lasted through one winter season. The flagstone staircase (Museum Mash) is still usable, but the breakdown continues. It is a beautiful staircase, but it is looking old and battered as the sandstone stairs continue to crack and break apart, in large part because of weeds, poor construction and the pressures of winter.

### **CHALLENGE DAKOTA**

Challenge Dakota is a 501(c)(3) with the mission to promote active events and preserve our historic staircases. Our two annual stair climbing events raise thousands of dollars for local charity. These events have inspired people to incorporate steps in daily and weekly exercise routines or simply to pursue fitness. Our events also appear to have impacted the community interest in maintaining and preserving the staircases.

We got started quite by accident. On September 11, 2014, 11 people gathered at 6:46 a.m. to climb the Battle Mountain Grand Staircase as a commemoration of the 2001 attacks on our nation. Every year since, the community has gathered to climb those steps on September 11<sup>th</sup>. Fifteen times up and down the 141-step stairway is a little more than once up and down a World Trade Tower.

Young and old climb. Disabled people climb. Some run. Most walk. Some climb once. Some climb fifteen times—any number of flights is acceptable. The record is 162 flights, set by 15-year-old Adam DuBois. That was an astonishing feat of determination for such a young man. Prior record holders were all over 40 years old.

On Memorial Day, 2015, we held our first stair-climbing *race*, which is now an annual event, known as Stars, Stripes & Steps. Again, people of all ages run, walk or stroll one of three course options. The 5K race includes 657 steps up steep staircases—much more challenging than a typical 5K. The views are better than most races, too!

Climbers come from all around the region, although most are local. Each event attracts around 100 participants. Of course, they are joined by many volunteers and supporters as well. Tourists stop out of curiosity and stay to climb. One couple stopped by the 9/11 Challenge

while passing through town, decided to climb that day and has returned almost every year since to climb on 9/11; they plan to retire in Hot Springs. One young man drives from Kyle twice a year for our events. Especially gratifying is the number of families that turn out to climb together at both of our events. Infants and toddlers are carried on mom's and dad's backs and toddlers even do some of the stair climbing on their own!

## **COMMUNITY**

Challenge Dakota's mission has strong support from generous sponsors and volunteers and, of course, enthusiastic event participants.

Our race kit, established in large part with grants from First Interstate Foundation, is routinely used by other events, including the Firecracker Race and the SHREC race. The kit has things like a professional race clock, a sound system, tables and chairs and lights. It has also been loaned for use at other types of community events.

Stars, Stripes & Steps raises several thousand dollars annually for the Hot Springs Boys and Girls Club. The Club kids design and decorate our finisher medals and place awards. We generally provide several free race admissions to Club kids and to clients in the VA's treatment program.

For the 9/11 Grand Stair Challenge, an anonymous donor donates a dollar for every flight a participant climbs, usually matching that gift with a donation to one or more mostly local charities.

The Mammoth Site sets up their Science zone and Mini Mammoth Golf at Stars, Stripes & Steps. Black Hills Special Services sometimes brings clients to cheer runners at the Finish Line. On 9/11, the Evans Apartments provide power, rain back up and restrooms and their tenants tolerate the noise from 6:00 A.M. and into the evening.

The Veterans Administration staff is supportive of both events. Stars, Stripes & Steps not only includes their staircase; the runners also wind through the VA campus.

The VA has been very involved in the 9/11 Grand Stair Challenge. They bring fire trucks to the event and set up a fire bell for climbers to ring each time they reach the top. In 2025, VA employees surprised us by posting a 9/11 flag on a makeshift flagpole at the top of the stairs.

## **STAIR PRESERVATION**

We have made major repairs to the beleaguered flagstone steps (Museum Mash) and less extensive repairs to Chapel Charge and Castle Crunch. Stone Mason Uriah Luallin donated his time to repair the two latter staircases, and we hired him (at a very low cost) to repair the flagstone steps when they had been closed due to huge breaks about ten years ago.

We are pleased that the City of Hot Springs is working on a plan to repair the staircases. We have raised almost \$6,000 to help with stair preservation, but we recognize that this will not make a dent in the cost of the staircase replacement/repair projects. We are willing to consider contributing funds towards that end, but we might better serve the effort by committing to supporting prevention and maintenance efforts after replacement.

We are working on a proposal to create interpretive signs for the staircases, to assure locals and tourists alike that our staircases are a priority. These signs would include the names of the staircases (what people called them back when they were commonly used to get to school or work) and the names we have used during twelve years of stair climbing events. Ideally, they would also describe current efforts to raise restoration funds. We would also like to improve the appearance of the top and bottom of the 'closed' staircases—probably just cosmetics for now. We plan to bring a proposal to the Historic Preservation Commission and City of Hot Springs and consult with Keep Hot Springs Beautiful toward that effort.

Eventually we would like to initiate an 'adopt-a-staircase' program. Adopters would be responsible to weed, pick up litter, inspect staircases for problem areas and alert the City to cracks or other issues. They would be encouraged to consider landscaping or other beautification projects as well.

We hope to create a handout with a map of the staircases, suggested walking tours, perhaps mural locations and historic sites found along the walking routes, perhaps teaming up with the Volksmarch organization. Maps could include routes of varying difficulty and could extend out to Chautauqua Park using the dirt trail.

Below are staircase Race Names, locations, and number of steps. We are going to do some research to determine the names of the staircases in the early years of their use:

**Goddard Grind** (because Mrs. Goddard left the money that helped rebuild them...) - 123 steps – ascends from River Street, next to Polished Salon, up to Pioneer Museum

**Museum Mash** (flagstone staircase) – 109 steps, ascends from corner of Chicago and Jennings, up to Pioneer Museum

**Castle Crunch** - 128 steps, ascends from Jennings (by firehouse and old bath house) up to Castle Manor

**Chapel Charge** - 156 steps, ascends from Minnekahta Avenue and the river, up the hill past the Episcopal Church

**Battle Mountain Grand Staircase** - 141 steps, ascends from National Street cul de sac (between Goldenwest and Evans Apartments) to VA grounds. The VA owns and maintains this staircase

**Grandstone Windmill Wobble** – 87 steps, private staircase, outside city limits; we use this for our half marathon. The landowner, in response in part to our races, improved, named and signed his staircase. This staircase has 87 steps.

## **IN CONCLUSION**

Challenge Dakota extends our whole-hearted support to the efforts of the City of Hot Springs to obtain funding to bring our staircases back to a safe standard, allowing them to re-open to the public for the enjoyment of the community and visitors to Hot Springs. We stand ready to partner in this effort.

Respectfully submitted,

CHALLENGE DAKOTA STAIR PRESERVATION COMMITTEE

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