

Testimony Submitted By: Stephanie H. Gilbert

Date of Submission: January 29, 2024

In Re: ***Written Statement for Testimony in Support of Senate Bill 105***

***Burial Sites of Enslaved Persons – Protection and Access 3
(Emancipation for the Maryland Deceased Enslaved Act)***

Bill submitted by: Senator Ellis

Requested: November 1, 2023

Introduced and read first time: January 10, 2024

Background:

Through fourteen years of extensive and collaborative research, which includes the support of the descendants of the enslavers of my ancestors in Maryland, we have identified the site of our family's enslavement, their births, deaths and burials.

While some of our ancestors escaped bondage, and others were sold away, we know that most remained enslaved by these members of Maryland's Founding Families for at least 5 generations of ours, and theirs.

When the man who would later become Maryland's 45th governor, Edwin Warfield, wrote to my 2nd great grandfather Oliver on October 15, 1896, he'd interviewed his family about their history of their enslaved members of Oliver's family, citing the names of Oliver's mother, grandmother and great grandmother, all enslaved on Richland Farm and Walnut Grove Plantations in Clarksville, Howard County, Maryland. (See exhibit A)

As members of the Governor's enslaving family had died on the property of Richland (also known as 'The Quarter Place because the slave quarters were on site) and the Walnut Grove manor home built by Revolutionary War Colonel Gassaway Watkins, the Governor's grandfather, each of them were buried on site, in an honorable family plot at a most prominent peak, visible today from Sheppard Lane.

When first visiting the adjacent plantations in 2010, the Watkins and Warfield plot, full of headstones with names I recognized from my research, was overgrown in a state of neglect. With bare hands, I pulled long grass and weeds from the base of headstones, reinserted a Daughters of the American Revolution flag holder, and said a prayer over the generations of family members whose very lives had been beneficially shaped by the enslavement of mine. I had little other tangible evidence of the history of my family, and no other appropriate memorial to our Maryland lineage and their noteworthy existence there.

Years later, on one of my regular and unceremonious visits, I noted that the above-mentioned family plot had been meticulously manicured, an informative plaque erected above a stone pillar, and a 35 foot tall flagpole established to hold a massive American flag. What a tribute!

I then learned that Boy Scout Troop 007 and Arlington National Cemetery's Society of the Honor Guard had organized an effort entitled 'Gassaway Watkins – Eagle Project', whereby an honor guard ceremony had been planned to follow a lengthy project to restore the grave of Colonel Watkins and his family members. See Exhibit B of my written testimony for the narrative composed by the Society of the Honor Guard, Arlington National Cemetery, inviting the public to honor the memory of Colonel Gassaway Watkins by visiting his grave.

My grandfather Oliver had been enslaved to Gassaway Watkins as his waiter until the age of 8 years old, when Gassaway died. Oliver's mother, Cynthia, has been enslaved to Gassaway as his cook. Cynthia's mother, Rachel, had been placed in charge of Gassaway's 'quarter place' and farm, known as Richland, where Gassaway had lived before building the manor home, Walnut Grove, a few hundred yards away on the same property. Rachel's mother, Celia, and countless other family members also worked the land, managed the home, hired themselves out in positions such as blacksmith and seamstress, and generally kept the affairs of Gassaway's domestic affairs in order such that Gassaway's family could focus on advancing themselves, in business, politics, medicine, and societal interests while income was continuously generated by the free labor force who bore not only their burdens, but also their bloodline.

Our family is struck by this generous commitment to preserve access to the grave of Colonel Watkins such that, according to the Society of the Honor Guard, the 'community can come together to be reunited with those that have served our country'. The letter from Arlington called it 'A perfect demonstration of Americans fulfilling their sacred promise to never ever forget those that have served'. The Watkins family plot is on property owned by private homeowner who is proud to acknowledge that her immigrant family 'wasn't even here' during the American Revolution, yet she yields in remembrance and honor of those who Americans commit as deserving of remembrance.

Yet, just adjacent to this prominent memorial is the well-maintained headquarters to both domestic and agricultural life on Walnut Gove and Richland. Here, oral history tells us that the enslaved people were buried near the slave quarters, which we know were located not far from the rear of the main home.

Richland's immediate past owner, Dan Standish, says he recollects seeing an aerial photo which included the standing slave quarters. The father of Dan's ex-wife, Melanie Dorsey, told Dan and Melanie that the 'slave quarters' still stood when he visited the farm as a boy. Dan Standish also recalls finding what appeared to be broken grave markers near what is now the gardeners' shed behind the home, where the quarters used to stand.

In May of 2023 I was contacted by Beth Burgess, Chief, Howard County Resource Conservation Division seeking confirmation of burials, as she'd been provided a copy of the letter I'd written to Ms. Kim, the new owner of Richland Farm.

Of course, being that the burials were that of enslaved people, I have no confirmation, just as I have no confirmation of their deaths, nor their births, nor their very existence (other than chattel records where they are documented as movable property). Yet, Maryland's General Assembly compensated William W. Watkins (a son of Gassaway) for the loss of his property when in 1867 he laid claim to the loss of 15 'slaves' following the civil war, and Maryland also compensated his brother, John, for the loss of 11 slaves.

It stands to reason that since this relatively wealthy enslaver was burying his own family members in a plot on his property, just yards from his manor home, his enslaved people would not have been transported offsite to be elsewhere buried. As such, we acknowledge the oral history and accept that remains of the enslaved people are, in fact, on site.

For 13 years, from 2010 to 2023, we were afforded access to the property for the purpose of communing with our ancestors and the land on which they lived, died, and were buried. These visits, which took place no more frequently than once or twice per year, were sanctioned by Melanie Dorsey and Dan Standish, the owners. If the owners were not present to welcome us for a more extended stay, the visits lasted no more than 30 minutes and included no more than 2-3 visitors at a time.

Yet, when Ms. Kim purchased the property in 2023, she emphatically ceased the visits, citing that there were plenty of places in the United States where we could connect with the history of slavery in America.

Ms. Kim knowingly and willingly purchased a property which was notably related to the history of slavery. A simple online search of Richland Farm would have yielded dozens of articles and publications about its history, inclusive of the enslaved people and current-day research about the same. Richland Farm also had its own online Wiki page which includes a detailed history of the enslaved people. Yet, Ms. Kim purchased Richland with

the intention of closing the door on this poignant past and asking us to move on without the unparalleled value of access to the physical site of such history, the preserved farm and quarter place.

Conclusion

With legislation in place, such as that proposed by Senate Bill 105, property owners would participate in a satisfying, healing and simple form of reparations: to offer a balm those in descendant communities who choose to honor their ancestors through the ancient and widely accepted ritual of memorial visitation.

We, descendants of Oliver Cromwell Gilbert and his ancestors, all formerly enslaved in Maryland, ask that due consideration be given to stabilizing a fracture in the foundation on which we, Americans, collectively build our future. Allow us, the descendants of the enslaved – all of us, to honor our past with the reverence and dignity that that is afforded our American counterparts. Support our desire to build a sense of pride and purpose in our communities by erecting bridges to a past worthy of tactile and tangible recognition.

Exhibit A



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Exhibit B

Richard Azarro and the Boy Scout Troop 007 which has continued the efforts begun last year to remember Gassaway Watkins, a patriot who served in the Revolutionary War and the War of 1812. His home was Walnut Grove near Clarksville, Howard County. He is buried there in the family burial grounds. Many patriotic organizations and the community came together last July for a remembrance ceremony. I encourage everyone to join in this event at 11:00 AM on Memorial Day, Monday, May 28.

*James Schaub
President*

*Greetings,
Boy Scout Troop 007 is in the final planning for the flag pole dedication ceremony at the Colonel Gassaway Watkins gravesite, Clarksville, Maryland and invite everyone to attend the ceremony:*

*LOCATION: 5192 Sheppard Lane, Ellicott City, Howard County, Maryland
DATE/TIME: 11:00 AM, May 28, 2018*

*We will start with a procession from Col. Gassaway's house to the family gravesite (150 yards). The flag pole dedication ceremony will be yet another chapter in the inspiring story of patriotism being passed to the next generation. This Eagle Scout initiative is an especially good example of how **a community can come together to be reunited with those that have served our Country in time of war or armed conflict.** The Society of the Honor Guard, Tomb of the Unknown Soldier supports this exemplary effort by the Boy Scouts as part of our preparation for the Centennial of the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, Arlington National Cemetery. This is a story of leadership; of patriotism; and a **perfect demonstration of Americans fulfilling their sacred promise to never ever forget those that have served and sacrificed** so that our freedoms would long endure. By placing the American Flag **(35 ft. flag pole, solar lit) at the gravesite of Col. Gassaway Watkins** (a place of prominence in Howard County), we have the opportunity to remind and inspire all, that we continue to support America, with "our lives, our fortunes and our sacred honor". That American Flag will be the "Electric Cord" connecting us to every patriot grave.*

*Looking forward to seeing you there,
Richard A. Azzaro
Society of the Honor Guard, Tomb of the Unknown Soldier*