

Testimony in favor of HB 1512, Historic African Cemeteries Preservation Fund

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My name is Tim Willard and I have been working for several years with the Bethesda African Cemetery Coalition to try to memorialize a burial ground that dates back to the years before the Civil War. This cemetery is of great historical importance since it served an African American community that existed for well over 100 years, from the years of enslavement right up to the modern civil rights era before the community was forced out by suburban development.

While I was doing research for this project I discovered the nationwide effort to recover, restore and memorialize historic African American cemeteries. Just one example was in Portsmouth, New Hampshire, where city construction workers found thirteen deteriorating wooden coffins from a colonial era slave cemetery during routine infrastructure upgrades. The people of Portsmouth understood the need to do right by those who had faced such enduring abuse in the past. They voted to close the street to vehicular traffic. An African Burying Ground Committee worked to devise a way to honor those buried, resulting in a memorial park running the length of the street, with sculptural pieces and historical information.

Virginia, where the first enslaved Africans were brought, has taken important steps toward preserving and memorializing these people. In Virginia, under the legislation approved in 2017, designated cemeteries can receive the cost of routine maintenance of a grave, monument, or marker for each grave that qualifies for funding. To date Virginia has awarded funds to 21 historic African cemeteries for their upkeep.

It is often forgotten that Maryland was a major slave state before the Civil War. In Montgomery County, the Eastern Shore and Southern Maryland the enslaved population ranged between a third and

a half of total population. What is more, by the mid 19th century, border states like Maryland and Virginia had become major slave breeding centers for the cotton states of the deep South.

Frederick Douglass, born a slave in Maryland, wrote in his autobiography that "I am from a slave-breeding state—where slaves are reared for the market as horses, sheep, and swine are." Charles McKay, a visitor from Scotland just before the Civil War, wrote that; "In states like Maryland slavery exists in its most repulsive form; for the owner, having no use for superabundant Negroes, seems to acknowledge no duties or responsibilities toward them, but breeds them as he would cattle, that he may sell them in the best market. ... The owners have little compunction in selling the wife without the husband, or both without the children, according to the caprice or wants of the purchaser." Women and girls who died as a result of this enforced breeding are buried in the African American cemeteries in Maryland.

This history cannot be lost to time. The men and women suffered under this regime and in so doing acted as a foundation of much of the nation's early wealth, must be remembered and honored. The strength and resilience of their descendants who preserved these burial grounds must be recorded.

For these reasons I urge this committee to favorably report HB 1512. We cannot change the past but we can give it the honor that it is due.