

Testimony of Elly Colmers Cowan
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Before the
House Appropriations Committee
February 24, 2021

Pertaining To: HB1099, Historic African American Cemeteries Preservation Fund and Study
Favorable

On behalf of the staff and Board of Directors of Preservation Maryland and our thousands of statewide supporters, I thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on the value of history and preservation in Maryland.

Preservation Maryland is the statewide voice for historic preservation that works to protect the best of Maryland. Since 1931, we have worked tirelessly to protect the places, stories and communities in Maryland that matter.

That is why we support HB1099 – Historic African American Cemeteries Preservation Fund and Study, which would create a grant fund administered by the Commission on African American History and Culture to support the preservation of historic African American Cemeteries and instructs the Department of Planning to convene concerned stakeholders to study the issues facing historic African American cemeteries and make recommendations to address those issues through regulations and legislation.

Historic cemeteries, like historic buildings and landscapes, provide critical connections between our past and future. Cemeteries literally contain the physical remnants – *human remains* – of our past. Cemeteries are evocative and powerful places that speak to descendants and casual visitors equally. Unfortunately, historic cemeteries face the threats of time, environment, development, and neglect. African American cemeteries and burial grounds face compounded and significantly greater threats due to a long history of systemic land use inequities leading to the loss of land ownership by descendants or the targeted demolition and development of historically African American communities, as well as, in some cases, the purposeful destruction of many of our state's African American burial grounds. The need for the preservation work that could be funded through HB1099 is very real and urgent, and that need touches every corner of the state.

The work that goes into the preservation of a cemetery is varied. It can range from mowing to erection of missing markers to historical research and digitization of records. Individual efforts, often led by small organizations and volunteers, are one of the most common ways that historic cemeteries are maintained and preserved. Additionally, there are still hidden and undocumented burial grounds – creating a challenge at the regional and statewide planning level. Unfortunately, many of the necessary activities that organizations looking to preserve an historic African American cemetery may need to do would not be eligible for the current African American Heritage Preservation Grant program because it is restricted to funding only capital projects, and cemetery preservation projects often have difficulty securing funding through the few other

preservation grant programs available. The new cemetery specific program established through HB1099 could ostensibly help fund those types of non-capital projects that fall outside the purview of existing programs.

To begin addressing the needs of historic African American cemeteries throughout Maryland, we must understand more about the current state of preservation of these vital resources, so the study required by HB1099 is an incredibly necessary step. The legislation directs the Department of Planning, with the input of descendent communities of historic African American cemeteries, as well as the Commission on African American History and Culture, the Maryland Historical Trust and statewide preservation groups, to study the issues currently facing historic African American cemeteries, including identifying types of preservation activities can currently be accomplished and what could be accomplished through changes to regulations or through legislative action. Preservation Maryland believes that recommendations resulting from this study would allow the regulations for the Historic African American Cemetery Preservation Fund to be written in such a way that the grants program is as affective as possible.

The urgency to protect historic African American burial sites is a nationwide issue and must be tackled at the federal, state, and local level. There is current federal legislation that would offer federal protection through the establishment of the African American Burial Grounds Network. The legislation instructs the Department of the Interior to conduct a comprehensive study of black burial grounds across the country. This study would lay the groundwork for the network, allowing experts to coordinate research efforts, create a nationwide database of African American cemeteries, and receive grant funding. On a state level, our neighbors to the South in Virginia have already established a program for the disbursement of funds for caring for historical African American cemeteries and graves. With HB1099, Maryland has the opportunity to work proactively to protect historic African American cemeteries and address a history of systemic neglect and often purposeful destruction of many of our state's African American burial grounds through a cemetery preservation grant fund and to establish the best way to go about that through a study.

We therefore strongly encourage a favorable report on HB1099.

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