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HOUSE BILL 1099 – HISTORIC AFRICAN AMERICAN CEMETERIES

The Coalition to Protect Maryland Burial Sites strongly supports HB 1099. Our organization formed in 1992 when a horrific situation in Howard County awakened us to how grim is the plight of too many cemeteries in our state.

The black presence in Maryland has always been large and significant. For nearly 400 years, burials have been in family plots, churchyards, and community cemeteries. Unfortunately, many families no longer own their land, congregations have moved elsewhere, and even larger sites have been neglected. African American cemeteries are over-represented in the numbers of abandoned and unmaintained sites today. By “unmaintained” is meant substantial overgrowth of vegetation such as weeds and dead trees, sunken gravesites, missing and broken markers, damaged fencing, lack of access, excess trash, and evidence of disrespect and vandalism.

These fragile sites can be found in every Maryland county and city, although only about half of these jurisdictions have inventories and even fewer actively protect cemeteries from disappearing in the name of progress. Based on available information, I estimate that African American burial sites comprise about 1/3 of the known cemeteries in Maryland and that about 1/2 of those are lost or in poor condition. A high percentage lacks ownership information, basic maintenance, burial documentation, or public attention when nearby changes are proposed.

Identification is vital, as is the study period that this bill authorizes. It will encourage surveys where they do not currently exist, provide the opportunity to obtain statistics on the numbers of needy and abandoned sites in each jurisdiction and, I predict, bring out hundreds of descendants and volunteers to assist in this effort. Individuals and groups will step up, as many are doing to support this legislation.

You may ask about other states. Several recognize cemeteries as the valuable historic resources they are, and a few offer assistance. Thus far I’ve only found Virginia to have a specific grant fund for African American Cemeteries and Graves; it too has a historically large black population. It’s time for Maryland to do the same. Long-term preservation of these sites will serve to help right a history of injustice for the benefit of future generations.

On the following pages are photographs of African American burial sites showing pictorially the need for this legislation. Thank you for your consideration.

Eileen McGuckian, president

Coalition to Protect Maryland Burial Sites, Inc.

A Sampling of African American Cemeteries in Maryland



Mount Auburn Cemetery, Baltimore



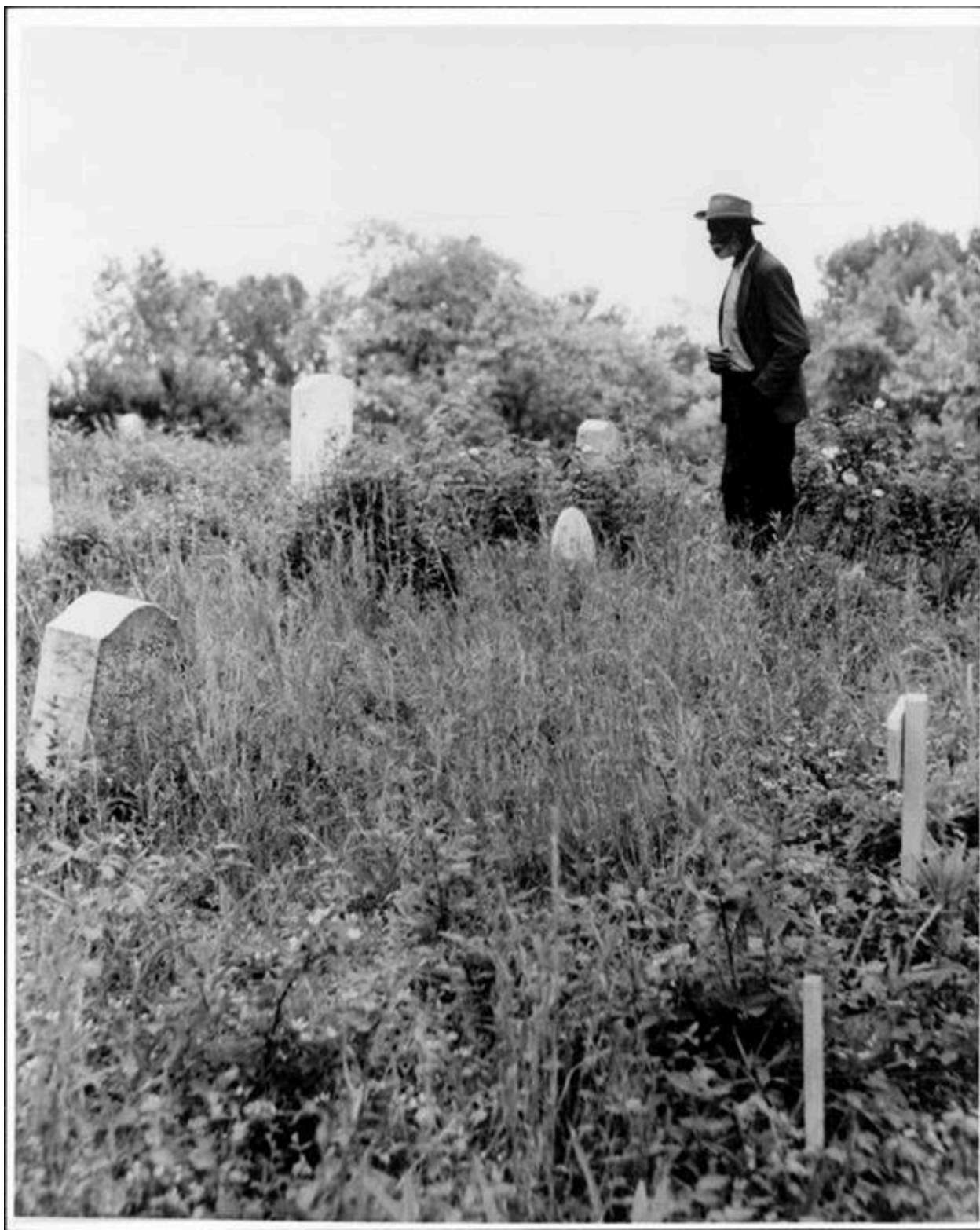
Morningstar Cemetery, Cabin John



Asbury African M.E. Cemetery, Middletown

St. James Church Cemetery, Gravel Hill, Havre de Grace





Brewer Hill Cemetery, Annapolis

Courtesy of Commissioner Elinor Thompson, MD Commission on African American History and Culture



Halfway African American Cemetery, Hagerstown (before and after)