

Testimony for HB 602—Operational Funding for Historic Sotterley, Inc.

I am Nancy Easterling, the Executive Director for Historic Sotterley, Inc., located in St. Mary's County, Maryland, and am writing in support of HB 602. Sotterley is a 300 year old National Historic Landmark and historic museum site which interprets our complex, and often difficult, shared history. It offers a full range of programming to include education programs and field trips, tours, cultural events, recreational opportunities, a working farm that donates produce to our local community, our Common Ground Initiative supported by our Descendant community, and much more. Historic Sotterley is truly an exceptional educational and cultural resource for our community, our State, and our Nation.

Historic sites connect people to the past in a way no other museum can, especially places like Historic Sotterley because of its many original buildings including its 1830's Slave Cabin and Manor House dating back to 1703, as well as its incredible landscape overlooking the Patuxent River. Sotterley is also unique, however, in the way it tells its three century history. Sotterley has been dedicated to telling an honest and inclusive history of all those who lived and labored there, including those who were enslaved, and it has been committed to that path over two decades—far longer than almost any other plantation site in this country. Sotterley understands that we cannot truly understand our present without understanding our past, and that if we are able to acknowledge those realities, we can start to shape a better future together. Because of the interpretive advances that have taken place at Sotterley in the last decade, it has received two international designations: a Middle Passage Port Marker Site, and a UNESCO Slave Route Site of Memory.

Sotterley has an thriving and ever-growing Descendant community that welcomes people from all aspects of Sotterley's history. Descendants not only help us expand our knowledge of Sotterley's past through their research and family histories, but they serve in leadership roles, shaping Sotterley's present and its future. Sotterley Descendants serve on the Board of Trustees, serve on committees, take part in public programming such as its Common Ground Initiative, and more. They model for this State and Nation that people can come from very different backgrounds and still have constructive dialogues with honesty and respect.

Promoting equity on many fronts is at the heart of what Sotterley represents. From inclusive, STEAM focused programming for students, exceptional visitor programs that tell a holistic story of our shared past, and its Growing for Good Initiative which has donated over 90,000 lbs. of produce to those in need in Southern Maryland over the last eight years, at Sotterley we know that we can build a better community together.

While Sotterley has never waived in its dedication to improving how we serve our community and to advancing Sotterley's stories and mission, it has often been a challenge to do so. Historic Sotterley operates without an endowment, does not have governmental support outside of the grants it receives, and has to earn and raise the majority of its budget every year. Sotterley has long been dependent upon special events and earned income, and even without a pandemic, this has been a difficult way to support and advance its mission. This historic site is like no other in Maryland or truly anywhere in this nation, and it is an invaluable and irreplaceable resource. Support for HB 602 will give Sotterley the ability to expand its critically important mission by addressing such needs as restoration of historic structures, infrastructure upgrades to improve our operations, enhancing accessibility to the site, and expanding our impactful programming. By investing in Sotterley through this bill, the State of Maryland will invest in preserving and promoting an understanding of the realities of our shared history, and in Sotterley's commitment to bettering the lives of our citizens.