



Catoctin Furnace Historical Society, Inc.

12610 Catoctin Furnace Road
Thurmont, Maryland 21788

Name: Elizabeth Anderson Comer, President

Organization: Catoctin Furnace Historical Society, Inc.

Issue: SB0980/HB1327

Position: Favorable

Date: February 24, 2025

Senate Budget and Taxation Committee, March 4, 2025

House Environment and Transportation, March 5, 2025

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Anderson Comer

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I am writing to affirm how important Maryland Heritage Areas Authority (MHAA) grants have been to the Catoctin Furnace Historical Society's (CFHS) contributions to the restoration, preservation and interpretation of DNR properties associated with the Catoctin Furnace Historic Site and the larger Cunningham Falls State Park. MHAA's grant funds to DNR through CFHS have been crucially impactful, helping DNR to advance its mission to lead "the state toward a resilient future by using data, partnerships, and an innovative spirit to improve ecological, social, and economic outcomes for all communities."

CFHS has benefited from more than \$616,000 in MHAA grant funds. While these funds principally represent large project grants, some smaller mini-grants sourced in MHAA block grants are also included in this total. Of those funds, \$303,100 has been devoted directly to three DNR owned facilities: restoration of the DNR-owned ironworker dwelling that we operate as the Museum of the Ironworker, stabilization of the ruins of the Ironmaster's Mansion, and interpretive media specific to these DNR-owned properties in Cunningham Falls State Park. As you are aware, MHAA grant funds must be matched with non-state funds, so these MHAA funds at Catoctin Furnace have leveraged hundreds of thousands of dollars of funds from private foundations, corporate donors/sponsors, and the federal government, including two NPS Semi quincennial grants. Additionally, considerable in-kind support in the form of donated, goods, services, expertise, and volunteer hours leveraged by the investment of MHAA funds and the resultant investment in DNR properties catalyzed by MHAA funds, is staggering.

Even those MHAA grants that focused on Catoctin Furnace Historic District properties that aren't DNR holdings such as the Collier's Log House, the Carty-Miller House, the F.W. Fraley Store, and the Forgerman's House (all significant properties associated with the historic Furnace community) have been critically impactful. Those MHAA investments have made a positive difference to the State Park, bringing new visitors and awareness to DNR through preservation and programming, resulting in unprecedented numbers of visitors (as evidenced by the DNR furnace parking lot car count which has risen over 3,000 % since the time MHAA-funded projects began in the area).

Most recently, CFHS acquired the African American cemetery for the enslaved skilled furnace ironworkers with your assistance. DNR staff are working diligently with CFHS to transfer ownership

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to DNR this summer. While the significant land acquisition funds came from another state source, the path that brought us to this point was made possible by MHAA investment in groundbreaking forensic research that has now identified an otherwise long departed and lost descendant community. We are currently seeking \$100,000 in FY26 MHAA funds to extend the African American Cemetery Interpretive Trail across the newly acquired land (soon DNR property), an accessible walk that previously had to stop abruptly at the DNR/private property boundary 360 feet short of the cemetery. Also included in this pending grant proposal is a Cemetery Preservation Plan which will be invaluable to DNR for site management. Descendants linked to enslaved furnace laborers by our MHAA-funded work are visiting from around the globe and have formed a Descendants friends' group that is now planning a second reunion in the area. More than heritage tourism economic impact, which is considerable, we are changing lives and cultivating a new, diverse and inclusive generation to be the future stewards of DNR properties like those associated with Catoctin Furnace. Agnes Summers, a Washington County resident and a DNA connected direct descendant of a Catoctin enslaved individual, has confided that her entire life view has been changed because she now knows she is the proud descendant of a skilled ironworker, not "just an unskilled slave."

MHAA grants are a win for Maryland DNR and Catoctin is just one example of this amazing partnership and synergy. Many MHAA-funded projects have benefited State Parks and other DNR programs, either with funding directly to the state entity or via an affiliated nonprofit such as CFHS. It is our understanding that MHAA even paved the way for state employee time to count as matching funds, even though other state sources of match are ineligible. And, as an added bonus for any busy manager, DNR does not have to administer MHAA funding or account for the overall program that supports such critical work for DNR and therefore all Marylanders!

I sincerely hope that you are able to support SB0980/HB1327, which, as I understand, will have no immediate or mandated change to the MHAA budget. However, it will set the stage for continued work on behalf of DNR resources in the future at Catoctin Furnace and around the state. When it subsequently makes fiscal sense for the Governor to allow a greater share of property transfer tax revenues to fund MHAA, the state will be poised to embrace even more impactful, place-based projects, to the benefit of DNR properties to be enjoyed by all Marylanders.

Thank you for your kind attention and consideration. It is very much appreciated.

Sincerely,

Elizabeth A. Comer, President

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