

Town of Port Deposit

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TESTIMONY HOUSE BILL 1184 – PORT OF DEPOSIT STATE PARK

February 28, 2025

To: Chair Delegate Korman and Members of the House Environment & Transportation Committee

From: Town of Port Deposit Administrator Vicky Rinkerman representing:
Mayor Wayne Tome, Jr. Councilman Dan Berlin
Deputy Mayor Kevin Brown Councilman Tom Knight
Councilman Dan Berlin Councilwoman Randa Thiele

Subject: In Favor of HB 1184

This testimony is submitted from the Town of Port Deposit. The elected officials and our community strongly support House Bill 1184, which refines the size and scope of the Port of Deposit State Historical Park to 12 to 19 acres and delays transfer until 2026. The original Great Maryland Outdoors Act legislation was intended to recognize and celebrate African American history and take advantage of land preservation opportunities throughout the State of Maryland. The Town of Port Deposit opposed adding the original amendment to create the 125 to 150 acre Port of Deposit State Park; however, the town supports the original intent of this legislation and remains committed to preserving and honoring the significant African American history in our community.

There are two distinct historical narratives central to Port Deposit's identity that are within the proposed park area of the Bainbridge property.

Distinct Historical Narratives:

Snow Hill Archeological Site	Tome School For Boys
First Free African American Community that thrived from 1840's to 1900.	Founded by Jacob Tome in 1894 as college preparatory school for affluent boys.
Free Black merchants and laborers established community on leased land located in the downtown business district coming into town on South Main Street.	Between 1898 to 1902 granite buildings were constructed on the 200' bluff above South Main Street. Buildings were later used by the U.S. Naval Base until 1976.
Significant Black history that will require extensive research to discover the exact location of the community and research of the families that lived there and their contributions to the town and community.	Significant history available related to this campus on the cliff that share the contributions made by Jacob Tome and the U.S. Bainbridge Naval Training Center to the Town of Port Deposit.

Bainbridge Property and Conservation Area:

Port Deposit holds zoning authority over the Bainbridge property because it is within town limits. When the State of Maryland took ownership of the property, the Maryland Historic Trust created an Archaeological and Historic Preservation Easement for the Snow Hill Free Black Archaeological Site and the Tome School Historic District that has been recorded in the deeds and shall be perpetual in duration.

This property is within the Chesapeake Bay Critical Area as a Resource Conservation Area. This designation is the most restrictive of the critical area designations that mandates preservation of natural resources, and this property is protected by State law from development. This area of the Bainbridge property will be subdivided from the commercial development on the rest of the property and will be zoned OS – Park, Recreation and Open Space District. The conservation district north of the Tome School campus on the bluff shall remain a forested conservation area.

Focused Preservation and Future Collaboration:

House Bill 1184 down-sizes the proposed State park from 125 to 150 acres to a manageable 12 to 19 acres, allowing the Department of Natural Resources (DNR) and the Maryland Historic Trust to prioritize and focus on the Snow Hill history. Snow Hill was a Free Black Community that thrived in Port Deposit from the 1840's to 1900 - a legacy that must be properly preserved and interpreted. Additionally, there is an opportunity for DNR to broaden the historical scope of the Snow Hill park area by adding the history of the Underground Railroad and Freeman Hall, a segregated school within town limits.

The Town of Port Deposit believes that the DNR is best positioned to lead, recognize, and honor the historical significance of Snow Hill by using their resources and commitment to preserving the state's diverse history. The State and DNR's involvement would elevate Snow Hill's role in the State of Maryland's cultural and historical narrative, ensuring that its contributions to our collective heritage are acknowledged, and that the legacy of the struggles and achievements of our African American community are preserved for future generations.

Encouragement of Future Collaboration:

This is a win-win solution to manage state and town resources effectively and efficiently: the Maryland DNR can leverage its expertise and resources to elevate Snow Hill's role in the state's cultural and historical African American narrative, while the Town and BDC utilize strategic partnerships and local resources to advance restoration and preservation efforts on the Tome School Campus to develop and promote historic, cultural, educational and recreational opportunities for both sites. This collaborative approach incorporates the site into broader plans for historic restoration, heritage tourism, conservation and recreational development, all of which are included in the town's concept plan. A copy is included with this testimony.

The majority of our State Delegation-two Senators and five of our six Delegates, Cecil County officials, and Town officials are in favor of HB 1184 and support the amendment plan to downsize the State park. We respectfully urge your favorable consideration of House Bill 1184 and appreciate your time and attention to this important matter.

Respectfully,
Town of Port Deposit



TOWN OF PORT DEPOSIT HISTORIC TOME SCHOOL AND SNOW HILL SITES DRAFT CONCEPT RESTORATION PLAN

INTRODUCTION

On the granite bluff above South Main Street in Port Deposit is the former Tome School for Boys commissioned by Jacob Tome and built between 1898 to 1900. The Tome School campus was included with a larger 1200-acre site known as the Bainbridge United States Naval Training Center that operated from 1942 to 1976. Adjacent to this property along Route 222 on the south end of town, is the archeological site of Snow Hill, a free African American community that flourished from 1860 to 1900.

The Tome School campus, Snow Hill Archaeological Site, and Bainbridge Naval Training Center are deeply significant and vital to the history and culture of Port Deposit. The Town recognizes the importance of preserving and interpreting the rich historical and archaeological heritage of these sites. By providing public access, the community will benefit from enhanced educational opportunities, a deeper appreciation of local history, and the assurance that these invaluable cultural resources are protected and celebrated for future generations.

The Town of Port Deposit has proactively accomplished significant progress toward the phased-in renovations of the natural beauty, cultural, and historical heritage of these historic sites. The Town has pursued and implemented initiatives aligned with the following plans:

- Lower Susquehanna Heritage Greenway Plan for recreational trails and heritage tourism;
- Sustainable Community Plan;
- Comprehensive Plan;
- Master Waterfront Plan for Marina Park improvements and Main Street connections;
- Hopkins Quarry Park Master Plan; and
- Concept Restoration Plan for Tome School Campus and Snow Hill Site
- Maryland Historical Trust Easement

Our alliance with the Bainbridge Development Corporation, Maryland Historical Trust, and other cultural and educational organizations enables the Town to build on these achievements and pursue the historic restoration of this property through grant programs and diverse collaboration with recreational and cultural organizations. Our united vision for this property will benefit Maryland, Cecil County, and the Town, by expanding historic, cultural, and recreational opportunities.

Another important partner is the Lower Susquehanna Heritage Area and Greenway (LSHG), which encompasses the towns of Port Deposit, Perryville, and Havre de Grace. This regional initiative seeks to enhance connectivity, cultural recognition, and environmental conservation through trails, waterways, and historic preservation. LSHG is working towards designation as a National Chesapeake Gateway Community, which would provide global recognition and strengthen links between our communities and the broader Chesapeake Bay region.

TOME SCHOOL CAMPUS

The Tome School for Boys campus is a nationally recognized historic site, listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1984 and protected through Maryland Historical Trust Easement for its architectural significance. Located within the Town of Port Deposit Sustainable Community boundary, the site features remarkable granite structures in various states of decay, with some buildings lost to fire. Given its rich history and cultural importance, a thoughtful and sustainable design approach to restore and reuse remaining structures is essential to preserve and revitalize the campus. Additionally, vital to the significance of this site will be the restoration of the Frederick Law Olmsted Italian Garden in the center of the campus and providing a proper Veteran's Memorial for the Bainbridge Naval Training Center.

Design Objectives

Preservation & Restoration

- Designate zoning on the site as Open Space.
- Stabilize and restore salvageable historic structures to retain their architectural integrity.
- Conduct structural assessments to determine the feasibility of rehabilitating key buildings.
- Use historically accurate materials and techniques to maintain authenticity.

Adaptive Reuse & Community Integration

- Transform preserved buildings into community assets such as museums (Bainbridge Museum and Paw Paw Museum, Port Deposit), cultural centers, or educational facilities.
- Incorporate cultural assets, artist spaces, and event venues.
- Develop interpretive spaces highlighting the history of the Tome School, Port Deposit, and its architectural significance.

Public Access & Recreational Enhancements

- Restore the Frederick Law Olmsted Italian Garden.
- Establish a Veteran's Memorial to recognize the Bainbridge Naval Training Center and include engraved bricks recognizing Veterans from all branches of service.
- Establish a network of walking trails and scenic overlooks that connect the campus to the Susquehanna River waterfront and surrounding historical sites.
- Create outdoor gathering spaces, such as an amphitheater or public plaza, for events and educational programs.
- Incorporate sustainable landscaping with native plantings to enhance environmental resilience.

Historic Interpretation & Educational Opportunities

- Develop an interpretive center with exhibits detailing the history of the Tome School, Snow Hill, Freeman Hall, waterfront, and other history, including Bainbridge Museum and its impact on the community.
- Partner with BDC, PD Heritage Corporation, MHT, LSHG, CCU, local VFW's and American Legions, local schools, universities, and other organizations to create educational programming and research opportunities.
- Utilize digital technology, such as augmented reality (AR) tours, to bring the site's history to life.

Sustainability & Smart Growth

- Implement green infrastructure, including stormwater management systems, to protect the site's natural environment.
- Encourage energy-efficient rehabilitation practices to reduce the carbon footprint of restored buildings.
- Promote eco-friendly transportation options, such as walking trails and bike paths.

Conclusion

Revitalizing the Tome School for Boys campus presents a unique opportunity to blend historic preservation with sustainable development, ensuring the site remains an enduring cultural and educational landmark. By integrating thoughtful design strategies, the campus can serve as a dynamic community resource, honoring its legacy while fostering new cultural, educational, and recreational opportunities for Port Deposit and beyond.

SNOW HILL ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITE

The Snow Hill Archaeological Site is a significant historical landmark in Port Deposit, Maryland, representing a free African American community that thrived between 1840's to 1900. This site offers an invaluable opportunity to uncover, document, and celebrate the rich heritage of African American resilience, culture, and contributions to the region. The town will partner Maryland Historical Trust, Bainbridge Development Corporation, and other cultural and educational organizations for comprehensive research and design and to properly define, preserve, and interpret this historically significant site. Since MHT has an easement on the property, they will take the lead on the historic restoration.

Research & Site Assessment

To ensure an informed and responsible approach to the site's development, extensive research and archaeological investigations must be conducted:

- Define Site Boundaries and designate zoning on the site as Open Space.
- Conduct historical research using maps, land records, and archival documents to establish the original extent of the community.
- Use ground-penetrating radar (GPR) and other archaeological survey methods to locate and define structural foundations, roadways, and other key features.

Inventory of Historic Structures & Artifacts

- Research to add additional historical African American history pertaining to the Underground Railroad and Freeman Hall, a segregated school located within town limits that operated until the mid-1960's.
- Identify, document, and preserve remaining foundations, buildings, and significant cultural artifacts.
- Establish a cataloging system for artifacts uncovered during excavations.
- Partner with MHT, universities, and historical organizations to conduct detailed field studies.

Community Outreach & Oral Histories

- Engage with local descendants and historians to collect oral histories, family records, and photographs.
- Organize public meetings and workshops to involve the community in the preservation process.
- Develop a digital archive of collected stories, images, and historical documents.

Design Concept & Site Development

Following the completion of research and assessment, a thoughtful site design will be developed, focusing on historic preservation, accessibility, and public engagement.

Restoration & Interpretation

- Preserve and stabilize remaining structures, ensuring historical accuracy in any restoration efforts.
- Install interpretive signage and interactive exhibits to highlight the community's history, daily life, and contributions.
- Design historical displays, artifacts, and multimedia presentations.

Public Access & Educational Experiences

- Establish walking trails with historical markers detailing the significance of key areas.
- Design guided and self-guided tour programs using augmented reality (AR) or mobile applications to enhance visitor experiences.
- Create an outdoor classroom or cultural pavilion for school field trips, lectures, and community gatherings.

Memorial & Cultural Recognition

- Develop a heritage memorial to honor the legacy of Snow Hill's African American residents.
- Incorporate artwork, sculptures, or storytelling installations that reflect the community's experiences and impact.
- Organize annual heritage events, reenactments, or cultural festivals to celebrate and educate the public about Snow Hill's history.

Sustainability & Site Preservation

- Implement eco-friendly site management practices to protect the archaeological integrity of the land.
- Create walkways, native plant landscaping, and erosion control measures to ensure site longevity.
- Partner with historical preservation organizations to secure funding and grants for long-term conservation efforts.

Conclusion

The Snow Hill Archaeological Site represents a powerful story of freedom, resilience, and community. Through careful research, preservation, and thoughtful design, the site can serve as an enduring educational and cultural resource, fostering deeper understanding and appreciation for African American heritage in Port Deposit and beyond. By engaging the public and ensuring responsible site stewardship, Snow Hill's legacy will be preserved and celebrated for future generations.

ENHANCING GROWTH AND CONNECTIVITY IN PORT DEPOSIT

The Town of Port Deposit is experiencing unprecedented growth, driven by potential annexation proposals for residential development that could add 400 to 450 new homes within town limits. Additionally, Cecil County has approved a concept plan for Granite Cliffs, which will introduce 525 new homes just outside the town.

At the same time, successful economic growth on a portion of the Bainbridge property is transforming the town's economic landscape. With two commercial buildings and two building pad sites completed in Phase I, and concept approval for Phase II, the town's financial outlook has improved, allowing greater financial resources to support the historic restoration of the Tome School Campus and Snow Hill Archeological Site, as well as other key recreational and cultural projects for this site and throughout town.

The Town of Port Deposit has the advantage of greater autonomy in approving and managing projects, agreements, memorandum of understanding, etc. tailored to meet community, historical, economic and recreational needs.

Downtown improvement projects include:

- MHT grant, \$30,000 to restore the historic Tome Steps and re-establish the pedestrian connection from South Main Street to the Tome School Campus and Snow Hill;
- MDOT Main Street Storm Drain Improvements and Streetscape Project - \$11,000,000 for new storm drains and culverts on Main Street to reduce flooding, repair and restore existing historic granite sidewalks, repair or replace existing concrete sidewalks, improve ADA compliance, increase public sidewalk space, improve pedestrian safety and access to Main Street, and use traffic control measures at pedestrian crossings to reduce speeding on Main Street.
- Marina Park SHA TAP Grant, \$750,000 for park improvements to include, a new boat launch, establishing new soft landing access for human-powered boats and living shoreline, reducing vehicle and pedestrian circulation conflicts between boating, playground, fishing, and waterfront promenade, repair/restore concrete bulkhead for fishing, install driveway and parking for Visitor Center, etc.
- Hopkins Quarry Park Master Plan, \$50,000 from ARPA funds to develop a phased-in master adventure park on 67 acres off North Main Street. This property was once a granite quarry. The plan includes a rock climbing wall, zip line, giant slide, bicycle pump track, hiking trail, multi-use court area, picnic area, pavilion and playgrounds, and connections via hiking and bike trails from Marina Park and Tome School on S. Main Street to Hopkins Quarry along the waterfront, Main Street and the granite bluff.

SUMMARY

The Town of Port Deposit is dedicated to preserving and celebrating its rich historical legacy by recognizing the cultural significance of the Tome School Campus, Snow Hill, and the Bainbridge Naval Training Center. These landmarks are integral to connecting with the historic downtown waterfront and the broader community. Our vision is to restore these historic sites as dynamic spaces for learning, culture, community engagement, and recreation, ensuring they remain valuable assets.

To achieve this, we are committed to building strategic partnerships that support preservation and adaptive reuse. The feasibility of this initiative is reinforced by successful collaborations with established organizations that share our vision, i.e. Bainbridge Development Corporation, Maryland Historical Trust, Lower Susquehanna Heritage Greenway, Port Deposit Heritage Corporation, etc. By working together, the town can create a sustainable framework that enhances public access, education, and cultural vitality while restoring and preserving our history and "our story" to share with future generations.