



February 10, 2025

TO: Members of the House Health and Government Operations Committee

SUBJECT: Support HB724: Commission on Abandoned and Neglected Maryland Cemeteries - Establishment

Good afternoon. My name is Mark Edwards, and I am a member of the Maryland Cemetery Legislative Advocates (MCLA) and a member of the Board of Directors of Montgomery Preservation, Inc. Before I retired 3 years ago, I worked for over 46 years in the heritage preservation and cultural resource management field, including 18 years at the Maryland Historical Trust. I reside in Silver Spring, Montgomery County, Maryland.

Following the 2024 Maryland General Assembly session, advocates involved with cemeteries began meeting to share information about problems and challenges, review existing law, and to agree upon priorities for legislative changes to propose to the 2025 General Assembly. The working group includes individuals active in cemetery preservation, care, and maintenance as well as descendants, genealogists, and nonprofit organizations. These initiatives follow the survey and study requested by the Joint Chairmen and reported to the Maryland General Assembly on June 30, 2022. See the *Report on Historic African American Cemeteries to the Chairmen of the Senate Budget and Taxation Committee and House Appropriations Committee* submitted on June 30, 2022, by the Maryland Commission on African American History & Culture and the Maryland Historical Trust.

Currently, there are no laws in Maryland that focus on the care needed to assist and protect abandoned and neglected cemeteries. Passage of HB724 would result in a newly-established Abandoned and Neglected Cemeteries Commission to address current challenges. New duties would have a number of important benefits to our citizens:

- Foster ownership by families, persons in interest, and community groups resulting in improved maintenance of abandoned and neglected cemeteries, thereby enhancing safety by correcting and removing environmental hazards, such as collapsed vaults, sunken graves, dead trees, foliage overgrowth, etc.
- Protect our history, heritage and cultural beliefs regarding the sanctity of cemeteries and graves.
- Prevent developers from destroying and covering over abandoned and neglected cemeteries at will and without compensation.

Negative consequences of the failure to enact this proposed legislation include:

- Without oversight, these abandoned cemeteries will remain public safety hazards and eyesores.
- Unclear or disputed ownership and attendant lack of accountability will continue to result in cemeteries being unmanaged and unmaintained, leaving families, persons in interest, and communities in limbo.

- Valuable community education and engagement efforts will be thwarted because issues of ownership of abandoned and neglected cemeteries will thwart efforts to reclaim, rehabilitate, and research these vital irreplaceable places for the benefit of all Maryland citizens.
- Abandoned and neglected cemeteries will continue to be an unaddressed issue that will negatively impact families, persons of interest, members of descendant communities, and the communities in which they are situated.
- Significant lessons from our heritage and past – uniquely understood through cemeteries and burial grounds – will remain unknown or lost forever.
- The social and cultural ethical standards and beliefs of our society will continue to be violated. Simply put, our deceased to continue to be disrespected.

For these reasons, I request that you support HB724. Thank you for your consideration of my request.

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