



February 12, 2025

TO: Members of the House Health and Government Operations Committee

SUBJECT: Support HB509: Maryland Inventory of Cemeteries and Burial Sites Workgroup - 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.

HB509 is intended to address a serious problem. Unlike 26 other states, Maryland does not have a systematized cemetery registration/ inventory system. Various local historical and genealogical groups, county governments, and three state agencies maintain limited information on a number of cemeteries statewide. In many instances, this approach has resulted in a haphazard system that impedes research on ancestors and preservation of their burial locations.

HB509 would create a state-led workgroup to study the need for a comprehensive Maryland Inventory of Cemeteries and Burial Sites, and recommend how the inventory and database would be designed, implemented, staffed, and funded. The goal is to produce a statewide system that will require comprehensive, standardized, and updated cemetery information to be collected and made accessible in at least one location. This group will examine how a broader system can take advantage of the work accomplished by genealogy and history-focused organizations over many decades.

The workgroup is designed to have representation from a broad array of individuals with varying areas of expertise across Maryland. It would identify and examine the various definitions in the Maryland Code of cemetery, burial ground, and burial site to propose a unified definition. It would identify and evaluate current practices carried out by county government and municipal cultural resource

management and historic preservation programs, nonprofit preservation organizations, and the private sector regarding cemetery documentation in Maryland. It would examine cemetery inventory systems implemented by other states to determine if any of these can provide useful information on how a new inventory program could be designed in Maryland and also review existing cemetery inventories maintained by county planning/historic preservation programs in Maryland, as well as cemetery inventories developed by genealogical organizations, to determine how best to integrate this information in the new state cemetery inventory and database system.

The workgroup would then identify a recommended set of data categories for information gathered for integration into the new state cemetery inventory system, recommend a location where the database would be housed, and recommend an entity or entities that would maintain the database and make it searchable by the public. A final report would summarize the workgroup's findings, and identify funding required to implement the program in future years.

In every Maryland community, cemeteries tell the story of American and local history and provide a sense of place. These fragile sacred spaces provide critical connections between our past and future, hold invaluable social, artistic, cultural, and architectural heritage, and bring communities together.

Establishment of a comprehensive Workgroup to Study the Establishment of the Maryland Inventory of Cemeteries is a foundational element of a broader effort to better document, protect, and preserve burial sites cemeteries for our citizens and benefit of future generations. This comprehensive program will validate those inventories already in place and provide consistency, accessibility, and the ability for other jurisdictions to participate state-wide. This important new tool will allow Marylanders to research and better understand those who came before us, and more deeply honor this aspect of our past for the present and future.

For these reasons, I request that you support HB509. Thank you for your consideration of my request.

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