

## **In Support of HB 0893/SB 0234 Abandoned Cemeteries - Acquisition and Disposition:**

As President of the Friends of Halfway African American Cemetery, I am writing in support of HB 0893. Our nonprofit is solely dedicated to preserving and restoring a nearly-lost, historically significant Black cemetery just outside Hagerstown city limits. The legal owner of the remaining cemetery is the organization that originally founded the cemetery in 1897. But this organization became defunct sometime in the 1940s. We have worked with real estate lawyers as well as an attorney with expertise in Black cemetery ownership challenges to explore every possible legal avenue to ownership. We have tried to work with the Washington County Board of Commissioners. All to no avail after six years.

Not having ownership and having no real existing owner has prevented us from applying for numerous grants to further our preservation efforts, especially the repair of the many broken stones. It also prevents us from getting military stones for the 13 veterans from the Civil War who currently have no grave markers of any kind.

This cemetery has experienced degradation, destruction, and rampant racism over the decades. In the 1950s, a developer bought most of the six-acre cemetery, built homes on top of it - without moving any graves - and then put very restrictive "whites only" covenants in the deeds. In addition, these houses were built in such a way as to landlock the remaining 0.7 acre of cemetery so that no access was allowed to families from that time forward. I have donated a piece of my land to ensure a permanent public pathway which we solidify with a grant from the Maryland Heritage Areas Authority two years ago. But we are stymied in some of the other preservation and restoration work due to the ownership dilemma.

Our organization and its volunteers have worked hard to haul out trash, to cut back vegetation, to honor those buried there with research into their lives and regular events to acknowledge the veterans, and to find living descendants. But we continue to be stymied by our lack of ownership of the cemetery. Descendants support our nonprofit organization having ownerships, several descendants serve on the Board of Directors, and the neighbors have been grateful for the clean-up.

This legislation would provide a pathway to ownership that we currently do not have, even after six years of trying. It is nearly impossible to get ownership of an abandoned cemetery such as ours right now in Maryland, especially one that was never affiliated with any church or diocese.

I would be happy to answer any questions or provide additional information or in-person testimony if desired.

Our website is [www.halfwayafricanamericancemetery.org](http://www.halfwayafricanamericancemetery.org) for more information about the cemetery, its history, and the nearly 400 individuals buried in it.

Thank you for your time. Sincerely,

*Elizabeth A. Paul*

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