



Stephanie Ceruolo
GRAVE IMPORTANCE



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Dear Friends

I am writing to you about some truths I found out regarding where I live and where I worship. The proximity, the intimate relationship between Broadneck Peninsula and SMC to the “peculiar institution” called chattel slavery is not new to many persons. It was new to me.

SMC documented a wealth of history regarding legal slavery as part of the 2014 Trail of Souls Pilgrimage and even permanently installed markers in our church and on our grounds acknowledging our participation in a society that benefitted from enslaved labor.

But 20 years ago, when I moved to Annapolis from Boston, I thought slavery had nothing to do with me. The ongoing fight for civil rights, yes. But the workings of plantations and the reliance of slavery in an agrarian economy? Nope. But Annapolis is my children's home and I feel differently now.

One of the things that I first noticed about Annapolis as a resident was all the random cemeteries. Obviously, their placement made perfect sense when people were originally buried there, but time and development have rendered them remnant. The respect with which the development has grown up around them, though, also makes them a stark reminder of our cultural devotion to memorials of the deceased.

Unfortunately, the Broadneck Peninsula is home to many memorials that did not stand the test of time because the deceased laid to rest were enslaved persons.

The 2014 Trail of Souls report sums up why these graves became so invisible over time. The description of the fifth station in our historical marker trail “acknowledges that enslaved persons were typically buried outside white-only portions of graveyards and church yards, and their first-name-only markers soon disintegrated.”

Through the work of the Annapolis Genealogical Society to document the Anne Arundel County burial sites of enslaved persons, I learned that I pass one such site every time I drive St. Margaret's Road on my way to church. If you have noticed the Walnut Hill sign on the east side, you have driven past it, too.



An unknown number of enslaved persons - and possibly some formerly/freed enslaved persons - were buried there, but the exact location is a mystery. I walked the grounds looking for a sign, but of course there was none. It was a bit haunting and also sad to know that as the business on that site was clearing land for another entrance to their property off Whitehall Road, they had no reason to be respectful of the land's prior use.

8. John Small House/Walnut Hill



1563 St. Margaret's Road

Walnut Hill, located on the hill west of the entrance to Amberly, was built in 1770 by John Small, Sr., on land that was part of Felicity Plains. It was a small two-story frame house. The kitchen became part of the house after 1940. When Dr. Oliver Tilghman Brice owned this house in the 1930s, it was much as it had been originally, including quarters for enslaved persons and a barn. There was a very small graveyard behind the house.

The Annapolis Genealogical Society is not alone in their efforts to research and honor these historical graves. Recent media coverage talks of efforts in Richmond and Georgetown. Even more locally, the Broadneck African-American Heritage Project, Inc. is a group comprised of congregants from Asbury Broadneck United Methodist Church focused on the 4-acre cemetery to the side of their church building. The oldest areas of the cemetery have been overtaken by woods and are simply marked with white crosses. I can only imagine how much work it took to figure out the sites of the graves and mark them. The markers are plain as the actual individuals are still obscured by time.

What really struck me during my visit were the two large signs explaining environmental restoration efforts involving a small stream that ran through the property. The signage for those efforts far surpassed any addressing the graves. Not that environmental restoration is not important, but it is another reminder of how important it is to "mark" what we deem worthy of acknowledgment.

I am guided by the words of Margaret Huang, President and CEO of the Southern Poverty Law Center, a decades-old nonprofit organization that started as a "catalyst for racial justice in the South and beyond" but has evolved its mission to include "advance the human rights of all people."



She said, "agreeing on a shared history together is always one of the first steps to figuring out how we make the future better." We do not need to look any further than SMC and its long and storied past in our community to have the perfect opportunity to embrace our past and aid in efforts to chronicle and honor its history to improve our collective experience. The hope is that with these efforts our church community will soon reflect the inclusivity we espouse each Sunday morning as we take our place at God's table.

With respect,

Stephanie

Focus Area 2: Identifying and Marking Unmarked Graves

What's Next ?

In the process of researching slave graves and the graves of free persons of African descent, most burial locations were not recorded and had no lasting markings and names. If enslaved persons were buried in the churchyard of the Severn Heights church (1731-1803) they would have been buried with no markings or perhaps a wooden post that quickly decayed. Likely those graves were never relocated.

Near SMC is Walnut Hill where at least 50 enslaved persons are buried near the barn with no markings or names. There is the slave graveyard at Whitehall Plantation, the churchyard at Asbury Broadneck Methodist Church, and the graveyards at other area private and public sites. The cost of this focus area should be minimal.