

# MONTGOMERY COUNTY HOUSING OPPORTUNITIES COMMISSION

## STATEMENT OF DR. DAVID ROTENSTEIN

February 6, 2019

Good afternoon. My name is David Rotenstein and I am here to speak in support of preserving and commemorating the River Road Moses Cemetery site. The last time I appeared before the HOC in October 2018, I delivered a report I had prepared documenting the site's history and its eligibility under multiple criteria for designation in the Montgomery County Master Plan for Historic Preservation and the National Register of Historic Places. Today I am here to clear up some misinformation about that report and my statement to the HOC at that time.

The first time I wrote about African American cemeteries and their preservation was in a 1992 article published in the *Philadelphia Inquirer* (Attachment A). Since then I have written many articles for academic and popular publications that deal with African American history and historic preservation.

I believe the River Road Moses Cemetery deserves the utmost respect and care so that it will suffer no further disturbances. It should be a space of reflection, reverence, commemoration, and learning to celebrate the lives of the people who once lived in River Road and its affiliated communities. I wholeheartedly support the objectives stated by the many of the people advocating for its protection and commemoration. However, I cannot abide by the methods they are using to smear and demean everyone they perceive as opponents — HOC staff and commissioners, Montgomery County officials, academics who don't tailor their findings to suit their needs, and ordinary citizens.

Marsha Coleman-Adebayo and her allies have a fraught relationship with the truth regarding the cemetery and its many issues. In recent months they have fabricated information about my work and my former association with them. These fabrications have been broadcast on the radio and disseminated in press releases and social media posts. These passionate advocates for preservation and commemoration are now using the same tactics they have accused Montgomery County government, real estate developers, and members of the general public of using in the displacement and erasure of the River Road African American community and the cemetery. Furthermore, their resistance to a more inclusive approach that draws on examples from throughout North America involving similarly desecrated sacred sites is puzzling. It's almost as if they are trying to reinvent the wheel using a sharp multi-edged geometric shape instead of a smooth circle. The tactics they are using taint the advocacy, diminish its efficacy, and create an unfortunate precedent for future efforts.

In addition to the 1992 article, I have prepared a timeline for the HOC and others to compare against information disseminated by members of the Bethesda African Cemetery Coalition and it is appended to this statement. I am prepared to answer any questions the Commission may have.

Thank you.



# Let those in African American graveyards rest in peace

By **DAVID S. ROTENSTEIN**

**T**he indignity of slavery and economic discrimination against African Americans is a blemish on our past. Some might argue that archaeology helps to shed light on misunderstood and obfuscated parts of history like the social behavior of enslaved African Americans or their descendants. But when disenfranchisement follows a person through life and into the grave only to re-emerge under the guise of archaeology some cen-

*Chances are, if your ancestors were poor their remains are open for grave-robbing archaeologists.*

tury or two later, who's to say where scientific propriety ends and desecration begins?

These sentiments were echoed by Rep. Gus Savage (D., Ill.) after the excavation of a colonial-era slave cemetery in New York City was halted by the federal government last Thursday.

"So often, African Americans have their peace in life disturbed by government," Savage told reporters last week after the General Services Administration responded to outrage from African Americans and announced its decision to stop archaeological excavations at the construction site of a proposed office on Broadway in Lower Manhat-

tan. Hearings by a special advisory committee are expected to debate the future of the project.

Chances are, if your ancestors were poor — slaves, tenant farmers or textile-mill workers — their final resting place and skeletal remains are fair game for grave robbers disguised as archaeologists. If your ancestors were African American or Native American, the likelihood of them being excavated is greater than if they came from middle class

white backgrounds.

Poverty and racial bias — combined with the decay and neglect of cemeteries lacking those ornate marble monuments marking the graves of the elite — can eradicate the modest memorials erected by the poor for their loved ones. Like the people buried in them, the cemeteries of the poor are lost and forgotten.

In 1990, Congress debated several bills dealing with the repatriation of Native American skeletal re-

mains and artifacts. The result was legislation protecting Native American burial sites.

According to Clark Spenser Larsen, an anthropologist at Purdue University, the graves of African Americans aren't protected by federal laws.

"The law states that all institutions receiving federal funding must inventory collections of Native American remains, assess who they are and contact descendants," Larsen ex-

plains. "But that federal law deals only with Native Americans."

Larsen, who has worked with the skeletal remains of Native Americans, African Americans and whites, suggests that there isn't any real bias toward the excavation of any one racial or ethnic group.

But Theresa Singleton, an archaeologist with the National Museum of American History at the Smithsonian Institution, points out that there potentially might be a greater number of African American graves excavated, compared to other groups, because of historical biases.

"It's largely because graves of African Americans are unmarked and in many cases undocumented," notes Singleton. "I just don't think it's the intent of archaeologists to say, 'OK, let's go dig up African American burials (graves) and not dig white American burials.'"

One of only a handful of archaeologists of African American descent, Singleton specializes in the archaeology of plantations and other slavery-related sites in the Southeastern United States. She suggests that economic inequalities, rather than racial differences, account for many African American cemeteries going unmarked and undocumented.

"I think it's more economic-based because the cemeteries of the elite are marked, well-identified and preserved," Singleton notes. "I don't think it's a black and white thing. I would say the discrimination is based on class."

Many African American cemeteries are excavated because of federal laws requiring archaeological studies prior to certain federally funded construction projects. Roads, reservoirs and even office buildings like the recently reported project in Man-

hattan all have displaced the graves of African Americans and others.

But as Singleton points out, "I guess disenfranchised groups are getting more attention. These poor people, black or white, are in the cemeteries that are getting excavated."

Nearly 150 African American graves from the First African Baptist Church were excavated in 1983 due to construction of the Vine Street Expressway in Philadelphia. In Southwest Arkansas, 79 black graves were excavated in 1982 by the Arkansas Archaeological Survey to make way for construction along the Red River.

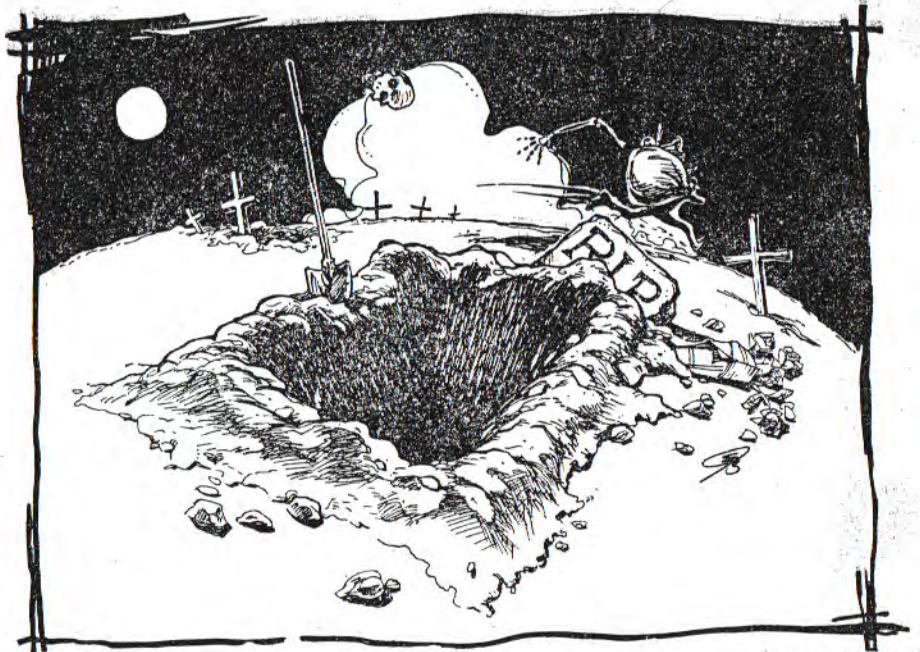
After a cemetery is identified by archaeologists, the agency sponsoring the project must decide on a way to deal with the find. This might involve selecting a different alternative or location for the project, its outright cancellation or excavation of the site.

Singleton stresses that while she doesn't believe there's any conscious bias on behalf of the archaeologists to dig African American cemeteries, "I wonder if that (bias) does occur on some decision-making level. I don't know."

Says Larsen, "Most states, if not all, have some sort of legislation dealing with human remains regardless of who they are."

But most state laws, like their federal counterparts, are designed to protect Native Americans because of passionate Indian-rights lobbying. Perhaps now, with the outrage in New York, the same might be forthcoming for African Americans.

David S. Rotenstein is working on his doctorate in folklore at the University of Pennsylvania.



For The Inquirer / ERIC J. BATTLE



### Timeline of Events, Dr. David Rotenstein and the River Road Moses Cemetery

DATE	EVENT
April 2017	Marsha Coleman-Adebayo ( <b>MCA</b> ) invites me to attend a Bethesda African Cemetery Coalition ( <b>BACC</b> ) planning meeting at Macedonia Baptist Church ( <b>MBC</b> )
April 2017	I recommend <b>BACC</b> contact Chicora Foundation, a non-profit South Carolina research firm that specializes in African American cemetery planning, public policy, and documentation. In January 2018 I followed up with Chicora's director; he told me that no one from MBC or BACC had contacted them.
Sept. 2017	Montgomery County Chapter of the NAACP writes to the Montgomery County Council asking that designation proceedings begin to list the River Road Moses Cemetery site in the Montgomery County Master Plan for Historic Preservation. <b>MBC</b> and <b>BACC</b> were not informed of this and did not learn about it until several months after the fact. Then-Council President Hans Riemer replied to the NAACP in a letter dated Jan. 4, 2018, that Master Plan for Historic Preservation designations are made in accordance with Chapter 24A of the Montgomery County Code via the Historic Preservation Commission and Planning Board.
Nov. 2017	<b>BACC</b> asks me to conduct research and prepare documentation to initiate designation of cemetery site in Montgomery County Master Plan for Historic Preservation and National Register of Historic Places. A verbal agreement is executed that I would conduct the work and if the designation was successful I would present <b>MBC</b> with an invoice for direct labor and expenses incurred.
Nov. 2017-Aug. 2018	I conducted archival research in MD, VA, and DC and consulted sources in PA and NY. I identified members of the River Road descendant community and descendants of the displaced Reno and Chevy Chase Black communities whose kin founded White's Tabernacle in the 1870s and the two cemeteries, Chevy Chase (1880-1910) and River Road (1911-1958). These individuals include White's Tabernacle founders' descendants and the descendants of people buried in both cemeteries.
Dec. 1, 2017	My article, "The Moses Cemetery: Where Serial Displacement Meets History" is published in The Activist History Review at <a href="https://activisthistory.com/2017/12/01/the-moses-cemetery-where-serial-displacement-meets-history/">https://activisthistory.com/2017/12/01/the-moses-cemetery-where-serial-displacement-meets-history/</a> .
Dec. 2017	I read a statement into the record at the Montgomery County Housing Opportunities Commission ( <b>HOC</b> ) that I was working on behalf of <b>MBC</b> and <b>BACC</b> to prepare historic preservation designation documentation pursuant to Chapter 24A of the Montgomery County Code.
Feb. 2018	I wrote a series of blog and Facebook posts for <b>BACC</b> derived from my research and using photos and I video I shot to document <b>BACC</b> and <b>MBC</b> advocacy for the cemetery site. The latter were used to defend the proposal presented in my September 2018 report that the site is a traditional cultural property inextricably tied to <b>MBC</b> , River Road, and the DC and MD descendant communities.

### Timeline of Events, Dr. David Rotenstein and the River Road Moses Cemetery

DATE	EVENT
April 2018	I backed away from <b>BACC</b> activism after concerns arose with its partner, SURJ, and the tactics being used to lobby for the cemetery's preservation and commemoration. I believed that the information being disseminated, the attacks on community members and public officials (e.g., HOC) were not conducive to achieving the necessary wide community support for future Historic Preservation Commission and Planning Board proceedings to secure designation under Chapter 24A of the Montgomery County Code.
June 2018	After learning that <b>BACC</b> had produced a video (posted on YouTube) for use in activism for preserving the cemetery that incorporated video footage and still photographs that I produced without securing permission in advance and without credit in accordance with U.S. Copyright laws, I revoked all rights to the intellectual property I had previously produced. YouTube deleted the video after reviewing my copyright claim.
July 2018	I began sending <b>MCA</b> and Segun Adebayo ( <b>SA</b> ) drafts of report sections and oral history transcripts. Despite requests for acknowledgement of receipt, I received no replies.
Aug. 2018	I learned that <b>BACC</b> had formed a partnership with American University graduate students to conduct oral history research and other ethnographic fieldwork with members of the descendant communities — work that I had been doing on behalf of MBC and BACC since Nov. 2017.
Sept. 2018	I emailed <b>MCA</b> and <b>SA</b> that my report was nearing completion and that I wanted to arrange a way to share drafts with them. I received no replies to my emails.
Sept. 2018	After rushing to complete the report with my research results and recommendations for historic preservation protection under county and federal laws, along with the necessary form to begin the review process in Montgomery County, I began distributing the report to members of the descendant communities and government agencies. The first agencies to receive the report were the Montgomery County Planning Department, Montgomery County Parks Department, and D.C. Historic Preservation Office.
Sept. 18, 2018	I met with Harvey Matthews in the <b>MBC</b> basement and I provided him with a bound printed copy of the report; printed transcripts from the interviews I did with him in 2017 and 2018; a printed copy of the Maryland Inventory of Historic Properties Form; and, all of these materials and interview audio files burned to DVD.
Oct. 3, 2018	I presented a printed and bound copy of my report, including the completed Maryland Inventory of Historic Properties Form, and a written statement to the <b>HOC</b> .
Dec. 10, 2018	<b>HOC</b> posts a scan of my October 3 statement and the bound report on its website.
Dec. 2018	<b>BACC</b> produces another video and it is posted on the Internet (Vimeo). I presented <b>BACC</b> with a claim for the unauthorized use of my intellectual property and the video subsequently was deleted.

### Timeline of Events, Dr. David Rotenstein and the River Road Moses Cemetery

DATE	EVENT
Jan. 23, 2018	<b>MCA</b> interviews former Montgomery County Council candidate Tim Willard on her WPFW radio talk show. In the interview, she described me several times as <b>HOC's</b> historian ("THEIR historian"). <b>MCA</b> and Willard in a three-minute segment then made false statements about the report I prepared and <b>HOC's</b> use of the report and my October 2018 statement.
Jan 29-31, 2018	<p><b>BACC</b> releases several statements via email and its Facebook page with false statements regarding my relationship to HOC, the contents of my report, and my October 2018 statement to <b>HOC</b>. In addition to disseminating false information about MBC's history and its associations with the cemetery, the statements included the following false assertions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>A self-appointed authority on the history of the lost River Road African community, who had offered to assist our struggles to achieve historical designation of the Moses Cemetery turned against the coalition and submitted his report to HOC, instead of to Macedonia. [In 2017 and 2018 MBC and BACC regularly described my research as authoritative and recommended its current and potential allies to read my blog posts and a December 2017 article I wrote for an online public history journal. As this timeline shows, MBC stopped communicating with me in August 2018 and the first parties to receive the report were members of the descendant community and government agencies other than HOC.]</i></li> <li>• <i>This historian claimed his research revealed that Macedonia is not the descendant community and recommended that HOC should establish an advisory committee to determine how to memorialize the deceased ancestors. HOC abandoned our prior understanding and decided to adopt the recommendation of the historian. This was a clear attempt to diminish our involvement and dilute our voice. [Nowhere in my report, my October 2018 statement, or other writings have I ever claimed that MBC "is not the descendant community." In fact, on pp. 93-106 of my September 2018 report, I explicitly stated that MBC is part of the descendant community. And, despite repeated requests from MBC's former pastor, Rev. Sterling King (in March 2018), that I not write about MBC's history because in his opinion there was no historical association connecting the church with the cemetery. Rev. King's comments were made to me in a telephone call March 27, 2018, and in a meeting held in the MBC basement with Segun Adebayo April 3, 2018. I took into account Rev. King's comments and proceeded with researching and writing about MBC's history and its associations with the cemetery in my Sept. 2018 report (see pp. 68-72). My recommendation to HOC in the statement I delivered Oct. 3, 2018, reflected my concern that members of the more dispersed descendant community were being excluded by MBC and BACC in efforts to preserve and commemorate the site. As recently as November 2018, members of the dispersed descendant community identified in my report and whose contact information I had provided MBC had not yet heard from MBC or BACC.]</i></li> </ul>