

What: Maryland National Park and Planning Commission honorary guest speaker Black History Celebration

When: Friday, February 25, 2011

Where: Regional office (8787 Georgia Avenue, Silver Spring, MD 20910).

Title: Stories that Bind a Community From the Civil War to Today

Good morning Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission! I am delighted to be here to celebrate Black History Month and thank you- as representatives of the state of Maryland- for welcoming me into your community.

I am here today to speak about the stories left untold surrounding the Civil War –stories crucial to the bedrock of who we are – as Americans and as African Americans. They are stories which we will never have the opportunity to hear. I am going to focus on a few stories we do know- so we can think about why we as a community must absorb all we can from the small number of first-hand accounts we do have from that period. With written and oral narrative, a small group of the enslaved community helped keep their history alive. They, in turn, bind our community, challenging us to stand on their shoulders and continue the quest for betterment.

We all know there are few ways to betterment without education. As W.E.B. DuBois wisely noted: "Of all the civil rights that the world has struggled and fought for, for five thousand years, the right to learn is undoubtedly the most fundamental. The freedom to learn... has been bought by bitter sacrifice." Listen to those words- struggle, sacrifice, freedom, right, fundamental.

Indeed, a right we all now see as a God-given, fundamental part of who we are as people- as a

country- was not always seen as a right for the black community. But yet, it is a fundamental aspect of who we all are as humans to fight for our rights. Like a tree whose roots will twist and turn until they find water...whose shape will branch in all directions, we have and will risk many obstacles and dangers to enlighten our minds.

Narratives as a Source of Power

Stories...narratives themselves can be the source of power- the source of inspiration- then and now.

Montgomery College Professor John Riedl teaches an African American history class where he focuses on three slave narratives- including Frederick Douglass', which I will speak about in just a few minutes. He finds there is no substitution for the students to read – and feel to power of- first-hand accounts. But, as an historian who has written a dissertation on the language of race- he says the narratives we have are just a small glimpse of reality of slavery. It is automatically a self-selecting group of individuals who not only had the ability to write but also that urge to tell their story.

So equally as important, he stresses, are folklores: stories that have reinforced community values even without being committed it pen and paper. These folklores survived even slavery's attempt to obliterate personality and transform people into objects and property. Keeping those stories alive served as a source of power and inspiration to the storytellers and listeners alike. Professor Riedl recounts how often times slave owners would find the folklores adorable, charming, simple stories. By looking at the surface, they missed the deeper meaning. Really, many of those stories were about people who were powerless but who were able to use the power of communication to manipulate the powerful.

Enslaved Man Turned Educator: Enoch George Howard

The journey of preparing for this speech introduced me- and reacquainted me- with some phenomenal Marylanders whose stories personify the transformative power of the knowledge, learning and passing down history through storytelling. I want to start with a man named Enoch George Howard who was born and died in Montgomery County. His great, great, great grand-niece, Joy, sent along some information about this man on whose shoulders the entire Howard family still stands. Family members pieced together their history from property records and the like....and what a history it is...one which continues to inspire the family to continue reaching.

What they know is that Enoch was born into a life of slavery – his mother, Polly, had him around 17, just one year after Enoch’s father bought Polly to be his slave girl. That’s right Enoch’s master, the family believes, was also his father. Enoch was the oldest of eight siblings- three of whom also were children of the master- all of whom were slaves and treated as such. One of Enoch’s tasks was selling goods for his master at the market in Baltimore. He also was able to make a few cents personally by selling crops he grew on his own very small plot of land. That will become important in just a second.

On the plantation, Young Enoch became a man, became a husband, became a father of four, until at 37 years old his master and his master’s family – keep in mind Enoch’s own family –became unable to pay the slave tax. Enoch spent 25 cents for his freedom- and freedom for his wife and children. But, he didn’t stop with freedom, a few years later he handed over his life savings- from nearly four decades of selling his own crops- to his former master in exchange for land. After growing up in slavery, Enoch was now not only a free black man, but also a free black land-owning man.

A number of newspaper articles from today help to fill in the rest of the story. One of them gives good perspective as to just how lucky Enoch was to be able to buy his freedom. Around the same time as when Enoch and his family became their own masters, slave masters were advertising sales in Rockville- one claiming a 14-year-old girl for sale would be a quote “slave for life.”

Like most enslaved children, Enoch had no formal education but he picked up some basic math and reading skills through managing life on the plantation and negotiating sales at market. Just this small window into an educated life meant that for Enoch, personal freedom and land ownership were not enough. He was still an illiterate freeman whose children also were growing up in ignorance. He knew the only way to a true future was through education. The excuse that there was no school for black children in Montgomery County simply would not do. So what did Enoch do? He built a school- on his land. His children- and those of his extended family and community- would not live a life without education. That school continued to flourish- and eventually the county bought it. It still stands and now serves as a community center in Sandy Springs. The story goes that Enoch went on to own 900 acres of land- among the most of any freed black man in the county at that time. But more importantly, his children all thrived: one went on to found a newspaper, another to become a public school principal. And the generations since then have not let Enoch down- but more about that later.

Piecing Together History

The Howard family is lucky that they were able to piece together their family narrative. One of our professors at Montgomery College, Alonzo Smith, gives credit to families and historians who dig and resurrect the past- saying they are almost equally as important as the people who made the history themselves. They are reason we can reconcile the multi-cultural Montgomery

County of 2011 to what it was like here 150 years ago when ads in the Rockville Gazette listed runaway slaves and downtown Rockville included a slave jail and market. It can be a laborious task to piece together life back then, partially Professor Smith says because there was a deliberate and systematic attempt to suppress stories- for fear they would inspire education and, thus, freedom.

That is exactly what one Harvard undergraduate discovered in a college history course—and at the age of 23 has published a book on his discovery called *American Uprising: The Untold Story of America's Largest Slave Revolt*. Daniel Rasmussen spoke recently on NPR about why history books devoted a single line, maybe two, to an 1811 slave revolt in New Orleans where hundreds of slaves nearly sacked the city. Daniel calls it “one of the most remarkable moments of historical amnesia in our national memory” – a major event simply vanishing from history. He claims this was strategic attempt to write certain moments out of history – possible because the main actors – enslaved men in this case- either were killed or illiterate. By piecing together property records, financial records, newspaper clippings, letters, Daniel unraveled the story of one of the largest slave revolts led by 11 separate leaders, of all different backgrounds, all united to break the chains of slavery. The revolt began when one man worked his way up the hierarchy to become the right-hand man of his slave owner. Because he knew how the plantation ran and the sugar planting schedules, he had the freedom to travel and meet with other planters and, unbeknownst to his master, to begin a nascent revolt organization. After years of planning, hundreds of men stole military uniforms, weapons, drums and led an organized and strategic revolt. Daniel describes it as a true political movement.

Ultimately it was unsuccessful. White planters got wind of the planned revolt, and surrounded the men- beheading 100 of them and hanging their corpses throughout the city as a lesson to any

other slave who sought to follow in their footsteps. Reports painted the men as criminals. But on NPR, Daniel stressed the importance of understanding the sophistication of the planning and recognizing these men as heroes who were willing to sacrifice anything- and did- for freedom. He says he wrote the book in order to change the tone about slavery- because enslaved men and women and the subsequent generations felt ashamed of their pasts and talked about their experiences through the lens of victims. In reality, he urges all of us to celebrate the triumphs these men achieved, the knowledge and power they were able to accumulate despite the physical and mental chains.

A massive slave revolt- the biggest in the country- simply erased? Forgotten? How many more lessons are we simply not learning because of stories left untold?

The Human Spirit's Quest for Freedom: Fredrick Douglass

As we know in the days before the Civil War, slave owners knew the way to fan the flames of oppression was to smother literacy and education. Statistics vary- but in the mid-1800s estimates put the literacy rate for blacks around 5 to 10 percent nationwide. But what we know, too, is that the human spirit--the human quest for freedom--can overcome even the tightest shackles.

Perhaps the most famous example of this is another Maryland man whose passion to learn enables us to be able to learn about from his own words: Fredrick Douglass. In his slave narrative, he repeatedly talks about the quote "mental darkness" under which masters cloaked their slaves in order to keep them as property rather than help them realize their multi-layered, complex, and soulful personalities. In fact, Douglass explains most enslaved people, including himself, never even knew their own ages. He writes quote "it is the wish of most masters within my knowledge to keep their slaves thus ignorant. I do not remember to have ever met a slave

who could tell of his birthday.” The slave narrative of Phillip Johnson, a Poolesville native, mentions the fact that he, too, didn’t know his age. He says his master’s wife told him she didn’t remember the date but informed him he was born in December- which she recalled simply because her son was born around the same time. It goes beyond that- Douglass explained many black children did not even know who their fathers or mothers were- being separated and sold into slavery as infants.

For Douglass, growing up on plantation, the first sign of the knowledge of power was the great gap between what he knew and what the white kids knew. But it wasn’t until he was a pre-teen when he had his “a-ha moment.” When he went to live with a new master, the mistress of the house immediately started to teach him the alphabet. It was when he was starting to master 3 and 4 letter words when Douglass says he began to see the light. The first ray began to beam when his master discovered what his wife was doing. In front of Douglass, he scolded her, calling it unsafe to teach a slave to read, that it would “spoil” him, make him valueless and discontented. As a young boy, Douglass says those words stirred something inside him- quote “from that moment, I understood the pathway from slavery to freedom.” Because of the passion of his master to keep him ignorant, Douglass had full confidence that reading was the key to his freedom. He writes that in addition to the wife’s kind teaching, it was his master’s reaction that truly taught him the power of knowledge.

So, for the next seven years, Douglass scrambled. As a city slave in Baltimore, he was able to leave the grounds and interact with white kids around his age. He writes that he made them his teachers- bribing them with bread in exchange for quote “that more valuable bread of knowledge.” He would trick white boys into writing competitions in order to learn from his

mistakes- their successes. He learned to write on brick walls and fences, copying the letters he saw written at the ship-yard.

The more he learned, though, the more morose he became. Self awareness, he found, to be eye-opening and excruciating. He says when he hit bottom, he almost envied those who remained in the dark. But he kept his passion for learning- and eventually teaching- alive. Later in his life, he started a “Sabbath school” where he spent Sundays teaching enslaved men how to read. They, like him, had a quench to learn- even though doing so risked whippings. He explained quote “their minds had been starved by their cruel masters. They had been shut up in mental darkness. I taught them, because it was the delight of my soul to be doing something that looks like bettering the condition of my race.”

“Bettering the condition of my race.” That is the unifying rallying cry that links so many of these narratives- that quest to not only better oneself but to pull together and better the community.

Keeping History Alive: Nina Clarke

Nina Clarke, a 7th generation Montgomery County native, believes in the power of the narrative and the importance of keeping history alive. Now in her 90s –I want her genes, she still lives on her own, drives, and seems decades younger- Nina’s grandparents were slaves in Montgomery County but what she knows about them is very scant. Her father, who was literate, and her mother, who had the equivalent of a third-grade education, never talked about what their parents went through. Perhaps because they didn’t know. Sharing that narrative - either orally or written - was not done in her family whether out of shame or frustration. Only one uncle, Nina recalls, would tell the stories of how her grandmother’s back remained branded with whipping marks

and how they would take a piece of meat skin to grease their mouth to trick their minds into thinking they had eaten that day.

Perhaps because she knows so little about her own family history, Nina deeply believes in the importance of sharing your own story- your own history- for the next generations. For that reason, she does the speaking circuit, she writes books, she meets with students- or as she says lectures them until her tongue hangs out- any way to talk about what she has learned in the past century. After all, being born in 1917 means she has seen just about it all: growing up in segregated schools, teaching during desegregation and then becoming a historian of black public schools in Montgomery County.

According to her research, it was 1872- around the time when Enoch George Howard was building his school- when the Maryland General Assembly allocated \$50,000 to the entire state to support schools for black students. Montgomery County's share for the year: around \$2000. I know all about tightening budgets- but no educator can do much with that little. That covered- barely- teacher pay and some used supplies. It did not cover school buildings. It did not cover transportation.

When Nina was school aged- some fifty years later- not much had changed. The school in her community meant one room, one teacher for grades one through seven. Where they met depended on who had the space. Her father, she says, built a dance hall on their own land to serve as the community school. When the Klu Klux Klan burned down the hall to deprive black kids of an education, they found somewhere else to learn. For high school in the early 1900s, there weren't options in more rural areas like Montgomery County. So, when her older sisters were ready for high school, which started in 8th grade, they had to move to a big city, like

Richmond or Philadelphia. It was never a question for her parents- they would find any way to get their children there- and find any distant relative, friend, with whom they could stay.

When Nina was ready for high school, she says a man named Julius Rosenwald privately funded schools in Montgomery County for black students. So, Nina received her education in a building she says reminded her father of a long, narrow chicken coop. Just getting to school was an act of fortitude. She says the parents came together to buy a used Ford bus- a blue bus with chipping paint. Every day they rode what they dubbed the Blue Onion- an homage to the layers of peeling paint. When they reached a hill, she recalls, everyone stood outside while the boys pushed the Blue Onion up the hill.

She recalls one friend had to hail the milk truck every day to get to school. Other kids would walk, thumb rides. Whatever it took to get to school. There were no snow days. There was no playing hooky. To the parents, just one generation removed from slavery, education was too much of a prize to throw away. She says she grew up knowing quote “you couldn’t have a good life unless you had a good education. If you remained illiterate, you were in the lower rung of community.”

It wasn’t until the mid-1900s, around the time of *Brown v. Board of Education*, when Nina said the County started taking the lead in building schools for black children. Montgomery County, she says, was the first in the state to get ready for integration. She was one of the first black teachers to enter a classroom full of white students- in fact she says for a while she was the only black teacher in her school, with the janitor being the only other black staff member. But you know what- you could say her experience proves children really are the hope of the future. She says her first graders – and their parents- welcomed her with open arms. When parents started to

see how thorough her learning plan was compared to the other teachers, they actually began to request she teach their children. However, there was one incident- which Nina still recounts with a bit of heartache- when one of her students said “don’t you think it’s time for you to clean out my desk?” Well Nina, agreed....she went and poured out that little girls desk and instructed her to put everything away neatly, telling her that Ms. Clarke was not like every other black woman that little girl had come into contact with- she was not her maid, she was her teacher. Nina knew it was not the girl’s fault- segregation was all she had known. But, that was it- one single negative incident after years of fears that integration would poison education. Nina smiles today when she goes to speak in schools- she find schools today like a flower garden- where different types, different colors, blend together to form a more beautiful package.

Nina is hopeful about the next generation- she tells a story about one time when she was teaching second grade and talking about her experiences. She said one little girl would not stop crying and saying she “didn’t want her to have to go that bad school anymore.” She couldn’t understand why her teacher would have ever had to go through that experience.

Even if it is upsetting to young children, Nina says it is imperative to tell the stories. They need to know their history so the past can be a source of strength to build a better future. But she thinks even parents today are too removed from the stories of the past. She says it is the older generation’s duty of tell them and quote “make them realize had it not been for the sorrow and sadness and troubles we went through you wouldn’t have what you have now.”

The older generation’s duty. Indeed, with knowledge comes responsibility. Our ancestors— those enslaved men and women who risked whippings and those kids growing up in a segregated county who hitched rides to school— did not pursue knowledge just to better themselves. They

did not go through the process of telling their painful stories for their own cathartic relief. No, they did it for the generations to follow. With the power of knowledge comes the responsibility to make sure the next generation never forgets— never takes for granted the pain, suffering, joys and progress the generations before made on their behalf. Today's generation who, as Nina Clark explained, need to know where they came from in order to realize where they can go now.

And just like knowledge meant freedom during the Civil War era, knowledge means an open path to where they can go now. A recent report by the Harvard Graduate School of Education finds that every single year- about one million Americans drop out of high school. Of the students who make it through - about 70 percent go on to college. 70 percent go – but how many receive a degree? The report found only about 4 in 10 Americans receive either an associate's or bachelor's degree by their mid-twenties- only 3 in 10 African Americans.

And these numbers collide with the reality that a high school degree alone is no longer sufficient to compete. The report finds Americans with a high school degree or less have fallen out of the middle class. The report projects that nearly two-thirds of the jobs created in the next decade will require workers have at least some post-secondary education. Some means an associate's degree or a professional license or a certificate- like what we offer at Montgomery College – to even enter the job market.

But hearing the statistics- hearing the job market reality- is not always enough to light the fire under a student. That spark must come from home or from the community – from us. We must instill in our children the importance of education – not just because of where it can take them in the future but because of where it has taken those men and women who came before.

Success Story at Montgomery College

At Montgomery College, I see that hard-knock reality, but I also see the stories that make me optimistic for the future- the stories that make me realize the grand tradition of prizing education is still burning.

I want to introduce you to a student story– the story of a young man who found Montgomery College at a low point and knew with education he, and his community, could rise.

Let me share the story of Aaron Montenegro. Aaron grew up in East Los Angeles where gangs and drugs replaced textbooks. 3 schools...3 expulsions. A month in juvenile detention followed. Aaron survived because his family knew the path he was on would lead nowhere. So, his sister got him through High School and his aunt then plucked him out of the streets of LA to our streets here in Montgomery County. Aaron came to Montgomery College, where he served as president of the Latino Student Union and was a member of student senate, while at the same time interning at a law firm and at the Smithsonian. He then transferred to American University (AU), from which he graduated with Honors last spring with a degree in Philosophy. He subsequently received a fellowship to study at UCLA Berkeley, as part of the Public Policy and International Affairs Fellowship, as well as a full scholarship at AU for a Master's Degree in Philosophy and Social Policy. He still is an active member of the campus community at AU, currently organizing the immigrant workers sector on campus to educate them about their rights. He also created a language exchange program for the college.

Aaron did not say “woe is me” and become resigned with what life offered them. He changed his path through education. And now, he wants to help the next generation. Hearing his story should inspire us educators to do more- but it also inspires us as members of the same community to tell their stories of struggle and triumph.

Back to Enoch

Hearing stories - like those of our Montgomery College students, Enoch George Howard, Frederick Douglass and Nina Clarke— haunt us and inspire us. Though these stories are not recounted often these days, the embers of this quest for betterment live on. It is up to us to keep those embers burning. Enoch George Howard's great, great, great grand-niece Joy believes knowing their family narrative has been instrumental in passing down family values. As their family tree flourishes, so too do the achievements of the Howard family. Her parents, aunts, uncles, everyone in the family grew up knowing they would have an education, they would succeed- there simply was no choice. In this generation of Howard's alone, Joy says, there are 25 teachers. She cannot recall any one without a college degree and says everything in their family harks back to Enoch's mission. For her family, knowing Enoch's story of struggle has taught them that no matter what, you must have the self esteem, the determination and the hope that there is a better tomorrow. She believes it has been crucial for her family to have that foundation- she says quote "these stories and knowing the history always gave our family pride and urged us through achievement and accomplishment because each generation heard the story, each generation built their lives based on the stories that we heard."

In full disclosure, I have to go off on a tangent here on behalf of Joy and my own community. Joy graduated from high school a year early, at the age of 16. So, her parents sent her to Montgomery College, where she thrived for two years before receiving a Bachelor's degree from Oklahoma. So she is a proud alum of our community college and has since pursued an education in journalism and, appropriately, teaching.

I want to close with a family tradition Joy shared which reflects just how important education is to her family and how formative their family history has been on making them who they are today. When the family gets together, whether for a reunion, birthday, funeral, they sing a song called “Where Was Eva Sleeping.” She jokes it is mandatory for every Howard to learn this song as soon as they leave the womb. The elders in the family lead the song as a way to pass down the important message.

So what is the song about? Joy says her family’s understanding is that Eva was the daughter of a slave master who secretly taught slaves on the plantation how to read and pursue their freedom. Although she died as a child, the story goes, she gave them a lock of hair to serve as inspiration. Joy says quote “today we use the song to inspire our children to reach for the stars, to pursue their dreams, and to remember that they are supported by a strong family foundation...”

Conclusion

There is this hope. There is this commitment to pass down values to the next generation. But, there also is reality. I am often troubled when I see and hear about the priorities of our country’s youth today, about the way they receive their information and how they choose to communicate. Instead of family dinners or reading together before bed, many kids spent their nights glued to the television watching the latest bad-behavior reality show or to their mobile phones tweeting and texting. Many kids prioritize Sweet 16 parties, the latest Juicy Couture sweat suit and their Facebook statuses. Many kids get their news online, from who knows what source, and take it as fact. I am troubled by the increasingly anti-intellectual culture in our country where politicians do not need to read newspapers: Twitter can serve as their sounding board. Who needs speeches to show constituents their platform when 140 characters will do?

It is easy for us to get sucked in to today's pop culture crazes. But, just like the generations before us who went through painstaking process of cataloguing their journey, we too bear a burden. There is a responsibility for us as educators, whether in a school, home, or community, to make sure the next generation knows about what is truly important. As a culture, we must teach the subsequent generations so that they can pave a better future for the generations that follow.

Stories can, and do, change the world every day. That is their power. That is *our* power. Let us be inspired by the stories we know— and those we do not know— to pass on the passion of personal betterment in our own community. Let us continue to share our past as a way to build our future. Our foundation as a country- and a state- as a county- is one rooted in struggle, but also one rooted in the belief that knowledge is power. Let us carry that torch as we pass it on to the generations that follow in our footsteps.