

At Historic Sotterley, a Middle Passage for healing and hope

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Hollywood, MD - If one thing can be said about Historic Sotterley Plantation in Hollywood, it is that they are not afraid to recognize the dark chapters of its past.

There are parts of history today deemed senseless and brutal, but we cannot deny they existed. To do so would be an ultimate injustice. Newspaper accounts from St. Mary's County in years preceding the Civil War are rife with advertisements from planters seeking runaway slaves. Even in the 21st century there are those who do not realize the region was slaveholding territory, that most of tidewater Maryland's fathers and sons crossed the Potomac River and fought under Stonewall Jackson for the Confederacy.

The shadow of slavery continues to leave impressions of its tragic legacy on our society even today. Yet rather than run from the history that binds its past to a savage institution, the Sotterley Foundation has embraced that connection in ways that uplift and celebrate the spirit of a people from the scars of an unspeakable past to the healing promise of the future.

The National Historic Landmark hosted a Commemoration of the 150th Anniversary of Maryland Emancipation Saturday, Nov. 1, highlighted by the placement of a historical marker designating the former plantation as a place of Middle Passage, where slaves who survived the punishing cruise across the Atlantic from Africa would be dispensed to tobacco plantations throughout the region.

Middle Passage was a turning point of sorrow for those under slavery's yoke.

The ceremony was punctuated on a cold, windy and rainy day in a former barn by the choir from St. Peter Claver Catholic Church in St. Inigoes and outstanding performances by Spiritual Creations, a drum and dance troupe from Baltimore who performed heroically in bare feet on a concrete barn floor.

Master of Ceremonies Dr. Janice Walthour noted that Maryland was the first state to free its slaves by popular vote, 150 years ago on Nov. 1, 1864.

"President Abraham Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation of Jan. 1, 1863 had only freed the slaves of the states that seceded from the Union," Walthour said. "Maryland didn't have to free their slaves, but then voluntarily they voted by popular vote to free the slaves. I think that's when the progressiveness of the state of Maryland really actually began.

"Today, here at Sotterley, through the commitment of the Sotterley Board of Trustees, the administration, the staff, a supportive community, and those who initiated and are implementing the Middle Passage Port Marker project, we place our marker in history," she said. "We are working to create a community of acceptance for all individuals across multiple dimensions of race, diversity and culture. Today, we place this permanent marker to remember the victims of the middle passage and the trans-Atlantic slave trade, we remember and honor our ancestors and their contributions. We acknowledge the historical reality of their lives, their struggles and their death. We see and understand their connection to Sotterley, St. Mary's County, Maryland and the United States of America."

Executive Director of the project, Ann Chinn, said, "We don't consider this African-American history. This is American History. This nation would not exist without the presence of our ancestors. We share this history.

"I didn't even know Sotterley existed three years ago," Chinn confessed. "Tell people about this place, that they have the courage to mark this place."

"Slavery was a morally bankrupt economic system," Sotterley Education Director Jeanne Pirtle stated. "It may have been accepted, it may have been in legal in Maryland until 1864, but it was wrong and there is nothing that can make it right.

"Even with unspeakable hardship, terror, children and families ripped apart, abuse and fear, Sotterley's slaves survived and not just survived, but thrived, both culturally and spiritually," Pirtle stated. "This is Sotterley's story and the story will be told. Sometimes it's a hard story. Sometimes it's a triumphant story, but everyone must hear the story."

Pirtle said that a descendant of James Bowles and Rebecca Plater visited the site last spring and she said she unabashedly explained the Middle Passage Port Marker project and said they needed money to fund the marker.

"She never missed a beat, just wrote a check right on the spot," Priddle noted. "So the marker was actually paid for by the descendant of a former slave owner at Sotterley."

Dr. Tuajuanda Jordan, president of St. Mary's College of Maryland, joked, "It had never been a thought of mine to visit a plantation, especially one which had been a clearing ground for slaves who would have survived middle passage.

"We are not celebrating slavery," Jordan said, "we are celebrating our community. After 165 years of slavery, we must remember that a new society cannot be created by reproducing the repugnant past, and at Sotterley, that is something to celebrate indeed.

"Our past is always with us in one way or the other, shaping our future, past, culture, our health, economy and values," she said. "Bigotry is perpetuated by ignorance and fear. We must learn from it and use what we've learned."

Then, as the wind howled off the Patuxent River, a traditional ceremony was held outside in the gale to honor the new marker, that it may remind us of a darker past, that despite human suffering redemption may come, that such painful lessons mark a turning point in human history, that healing is possible, and that such sacrifices are never in vain.

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