

August 10, 2020

To: Bethesda African Cemetery Coalition, nofearcoalition@aol.com

Re: The Moses Cemetery of White's Tabernacle Lodge No. 39 of the Order of Moses, Bethesda, MD

We, descendants of the Morningstar Tabernacle No. 88 lodge of the Order of Moses in Cabin John, Maryland, write to disagree with the narrative being put forth by the Bethesda African Cemetery Coalition (BACC) regarding the Moses Cemetery on River Road in Bethesda.

We the undersigned are descendants of the historic African American community of Gibson Grove in Cabin John, Montgomery County. This community was founded in the 1880s when Sarah and Robert Gibson and ten other black families bought land from a local white landowner. They built their homes (referred to as No.10) along what is now Seven Locks Road (between River Road and MacArthur Boulevard) and some of their descendants still live here. Our ancestors established a local school for black children by 1882. The Gibson Grove AME Zion Church was formally established in 1898 when founder Sarah Gibson donated land. We are proud to belong to this community founded on self-reliance, education, faith and mutual support.

Our community is unique for establishing in 1885 the first documented Order of Moses benevolent society and cemetery in Montgomery County. It was formally named Morningstar Tabernacle No. 88 of the Ancient United Order of the Sons and Daughters, Sisters and Brothers of Moses, or Order of Moses for short. Other Montgomery County Moses lodges were established in Norbeck and in Emory Grove before 1900; these lodges constructed Moses Hall buildings on their sites. The specific objectives of Morningstar No. 88 were to provide for the care and education of the orphan children of deceased members, the burial of its dead, and the care and oversight of its sick and destitute. Our Morningstar book of minutes documents decades of early meetings from the early 1900s; it is, we believe, the only one existing in the county. The Morningstar Moses Cemetery, established as a final resting place for lodge members, exists to this day on Seven Locks Road with the foundations of its Moses Hall building still evident. More than seventy of our Morningstar ancestors are documented as buried there.

Morningstar No. 88 had strong ties with White's Tabernacle No. 39, owner from 1911-1958 of the currently disputed River Road Cemetery. For example, both Charles H. Brown and George Frye were part of the Gibson Grove community and the Morningstar No. 88 lodge. But Brown was also a trustee of White's Tabernacle in Tenleytown, helping in the incorporation of that lodge, and George Frye was a White's lodge member also. As members of White's, they were both buried in the River Road Moses Cemetery, Brown in 1912 and Frye in 1926. White's Tabernacle was based in the Tenleytown area of northwest Washington, DC. It was formed in the 1880s and incorporated in the District in 1910. In 1910, White's Tabernacle sold their abandoned cemetery land in Tenleytown to the Chevy Chase Land Company. The next year it purchased from the heir of Charlotte Gray land in a small black community on River Road in Bethesda. Burials of White Tabernacle trustees and members began the next year. Macedonia Baptist Church began in a home in 1920 in the community of Scotland. In 1937 it settled on River Road near the cemetery, and in 1945 moved across the road to its current site. While Macedonia Baptist Church maintains it is the only institution left with any historical claim for the ancestors buried in

the River Road Moses Cemetery, **it has not provided any documentation for any church members buried there.** In 1958 aging members of White's Tabernacle sold this land, which became known as the River Road or Friendship Moses Cemetery.

Now, we as descendants of the Morningstar No. 88 lodge of the Order of Moses in Cabin John write to disagree with the narrative being put forth by the Bethesda African Cemetery Coalition (BACC) regarding the Moses Cemetery on River Road in Bethesda. The Order of Moses, established through the mid-Atlantic states and Midwest in the late 1880s, was an organization for blacks who proudly shared their simple resources and helped one another in times of need. Participation strengthened black communities and united them. Its members were resilient people grounded in the Christian faith. BACC inaccurately portrays the Order of Moses and its leaders as only victims, giving no credit to its vital role in uniting and strengthening these communities.

We note with alarm that the BACC narrative about the River Road Moses Cemetery **does not rest in facts** but instead relies on incendiary language and false claims. BACC has provided **no** documentation to support their narrative or their denouncements of current research on the River Road site. We protest the disservice being done not only to our ancestors but to all past Order of Moses members who tried to live in grace and who deserve to be remembered with dignity. While we decry the ease with which African American cemeteries have all too often been erased, and face our own uphill battle with a proposed highway expansion threatening our Morningstar Moses Cemetery, the burial grounds created during segregation by benevolent societies like the Order of Moses, including the River Road Moses Cemetery, were **not** dumping grounds for raped and brutalized African girls; **they were hallowed resting places for loyal members.**

We call on BACC to please stop misleading supporters, public officials and private owners who rightfully wish for racial justice in death as well as in life but are not being given accurate facts regarding the River Road Moses Cemetery and its history.

Signed,

Descendants of the Morningstar Tabernacle No.88 Lodge of the Order of Moses

Christopher Waynes
Descendant of James Coates and William Coates

Peggy Gibbs
Descendant of James and Mary Crawford

Tamara Berry
Descendant of Harris Family Members

Sandra D. Thomas
Descendant of James and Mary Crawford

Roberta Tatum
Descendant of Crawford and Harris Family
Members

Shannon Steward
Descendant of Julia Stewart

Montgomery Crawford
Descendant of Crawford and Harris Family
Members

Pandora D. White
Descendant of James and Mary Crawford

Diane E. Baxter
Descendant of James Coates and William Coates

Rodney White II
Descendant of Allen White

Jerome T. White Sr.
Descendant of James and Mary Crawford

Nathaniel P. White
Descendant of James and Mary Crawford

Dawn Person
Descendant of James Coates and William Coates

Austin E. White
Descendant of Crawford and Harris Family Members

Pennie Newell
Descendant of James Coates and William Coates

Candyce Newell
Descendant of James Coates and William Coates

Rev. James Coates
Descendant of James Coates and William Coates

CC:

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