

THE LAUREL CEMETERY MEMORIAL PROJECT

UNCOVERING OUR FORGOTTEN PAST

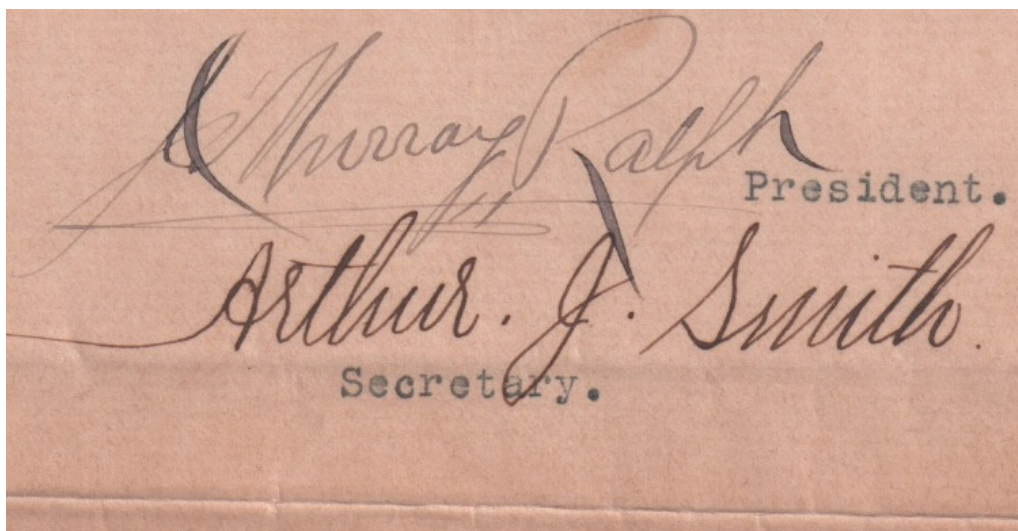
LCMP Newsletter
Volume ★ 003
Number ★ 001
Spring 2024

1852 – 1958

J. MURRAY RALPH IN THE NANNY JACK & CO ARCHIVES

/ PHILIP J. MERRILL

If this were the early 1990s, I would be running to the Enoch Pratt Library to ask for help in researching this J. Murray Ralph badge and Frederick Douglass Memorial Association proclamation that are artifacts from the Nanny Jack & Co Archives. For decades, I turned to my two professional and personal friends, librarians Eva Slezak and Ralph Clayton, who introduced me to the importance of Laurel Cemetery, where James Murray Ralph was interred in 1912. I couldn't have fathomed that I would be writing about Laurel Cemetery a couple decades later through the lens of material culture held in my company's archives. »



Signatures of J. Murray Ralph, President, and
Arthur J. Smith, Secretary, Frederick Douglass
Memorial Association of Maryland.

The mission of the Laurel Cemetery Memorial Project (LCMP) is to erect a permanent memorial in recognition of the thousands of African Americans who were laid to rest at the historic Laurel Cemetery, ensure the safety and stability of the site into the foreseeable future, and to educate the public about the rich history of the cemetery and the lives of those buried there.

laurelcemetery.omeka.net

In This Issue

FEATURES

- 1 J. Murray Ralph in the Nanny Jack & Co Archives

RESEARCH

- 4 Death Certificates / Decoration Day

PROFILES

- 6 USCT Burials at Laurel

CONNECTIONS

- 8 St. Peter's Cemetery / Contrabands and Freedmen Cemetery Memorial

UPDATES

- 9 Preservation Award / Heritage Grant / Archeology Month

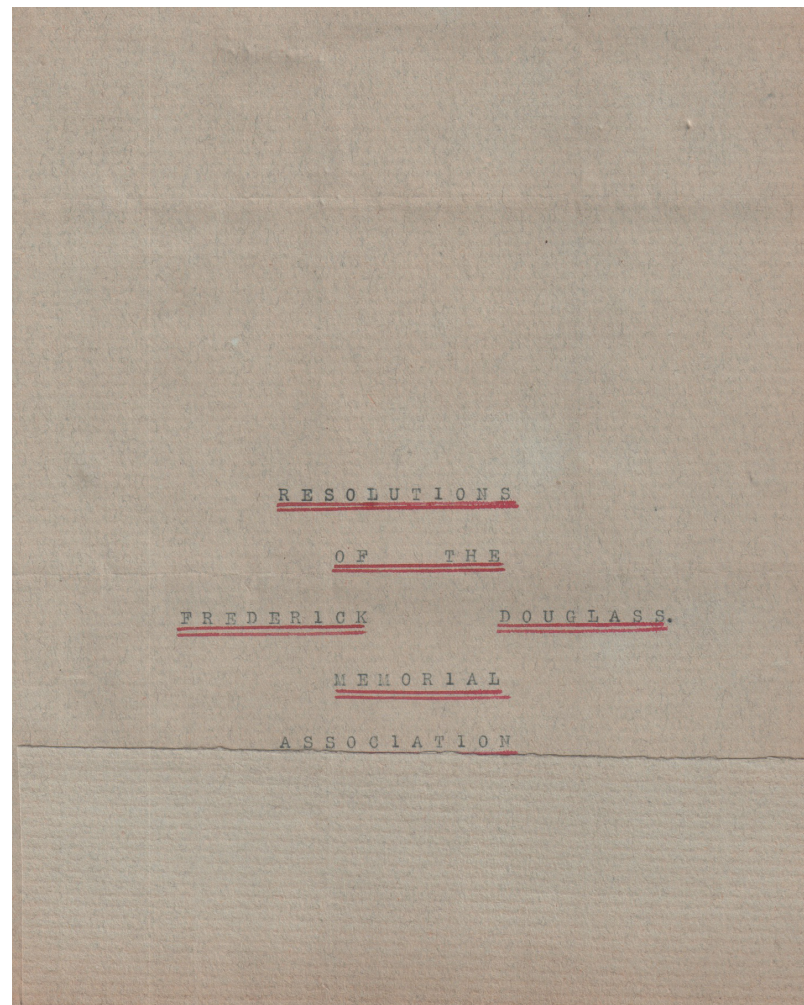
FEATURES

“I am afraid the young people of the race do not appreciate the great and noble services performed by Frederick Douglass.” This quote by James Murray Ralph was included in a 1910 *Baltimore Afro American Ledger* article. Ralph, a longtime East Baltimore resident, was a close friend of the famed abolitionist, orator, author, and diplomat. However, over 114 years later, more people are familiar with Frederick Douglass, but very few know the name and accomplishments of James Murray Ralph.

According to his 1912 death certificate, Ralph was born around 1837 in Maryland to James M. Ralph, Sr. and an unknown mother. The certificate also gives several other clues about Murray’s death that are absent from the *Afro American Ledger* article, such as the undertaker, Harry A. Vodery, who handled his body. Vodery, one of a number of Black funeral home operators in Baltimore, was also Ralph’s brother-in-law by marriage to Vodery’s sister, Sarah J.C. Vodery. The two were wed in 1886 at historic Centennial Methodist Episcopal Church. Both Ralph and Frederick Douglass were longtime members of Centennial and after Douglass’s death in 1895, Ralph raised the funds for a memorial window in the church that honored Douglass.

In 1892, Ralph encouraged Douglass to purchase the old site of Dallas Street Church, the former name of Centennial, which Douglass converted into houses. The structures at 516-524 Dallas Street are still extant and were landmarked by the Baltimore Commission for Historical and Architectural Preservation in 2002. They are the few remaining residential structures in Baltimore that are connected to J. Murray Ralph’s multifaceted story.

In the 1910 *Baltimore Afro American Ledger* article, Ralph provided intimate details about his connections to the Underground Railroad and abolitionist activities. He revealed that his aunt operated a “station” on Caroline Street where she harbored fugitive slaves, an action that could have resulted in her imprisonment or enslavement. In order to draw attention away from herself, she often denounced abolitionists and “Northern Negroes” to white people in the neighborhood. It was at his aunt’s home that Ralph met his first wife Elizabeth, who had escaped slavery in Virginia.



Ralph’s abolitionist connections didn’t end there; he read copies of Horace Greeley’s *New York Tribune*, which he passed around to other Black Baltimoreans before he burned the newspaper. In antebellum Baltimore, if Ralph were caught with this newspaper, he could have been jailed because Greeley was an ardent abolitionist who used his publication to expose the horrors of slavery. Ralph also read a copy of Frederick Douglass’ first autobiography, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, published in 1845, which he subsequently burned as well to avoid imprisonment. While burning both the *Tribune* and the autobiography saved Ralph’s life, the burning of Douglass’ book must have been particularly painful because of their deep friendship.

The journey to discover more about Ralph’s life provides a glimpse into 19th century Black Baltimore. J. Murray Ralph was a member of at least seven different fraternal and benevolent societies. These organizations provided support, finances, and camaraderie to Baltimore’s Black community during both the antebellum and

postbellum eras. They also provided sickness and death benefits, and many offered burial rituals for their members. For example, when Ralph died in 1912, the Scottish Rite Masons conducted a memorial service in Ralph's home at 2023 Oak Street. The various motifs and symbols of the societies were often inscribed on the headstones of deceased members, who were interred at Laurel Cemetery, Mount Auburn Cemetery, and other cemeteries where Black Baltimoreans were laid to rest.

Ralph had familial connections to the Voderys, a Black family whose occupations ranged from the funeral business to music publication. His life and activities allowed him to bridge the divides of class, occupation, and religious affiliation of 19th and 20th century Black Baltimore. When he established the Frederick Douglass Memorial Association of Maryland, it brought together the city's Black politicians, ministers, educators, and businessmen. The annual celebration commemorated the birthdate of his close friend and activities were held at historic Black churches throughout the city, including Centennial M.E. Church and Waters A.M.E. Church. In 1904, the celebration at Waters AME Church was presided over by Pastor John Hurst, a future AME Bishop, and featured speeches from Harry S. Cummings, the first Black Baltimore city councilman, and John S. Dancy, a prominent national Black politician and attorney.

Ralph was as revered upon his death as he was during his lifetime. In 1914, two years after he passed, the J. Murray Ralph Court No. 5, Heroines of Jericho, a benevolent association for Black women, was founded to honor his legacy. However, as the decades passed, less and less was known of Ralph's contributions to Black Baltimore. Although Ralph's story might not be well known, his descendants still remain connected to East Baltimore. At least one descendant graduated from Dunbar High School in the 1970s and the two of us communicated for a brief period. ★



Front and back of the J. Murray Ralph Court No. 5, Heroines of Jericho Badge.

RESEARCH

THE DEATH CERTIFICATE TRANSCRIPTION PROJECT

Faithful volunteers from the Baltimore Afro-American Historical and Genealogical Society (BAAHGS) are continuing the search through Baltimore City death certificates to identify those indicating burials at Laurel Cemetery. As of May 1st, the total number identified is **22,300!**

There are thousands upon thousands of more death certificates that need to be searched. We are looking for committed volunteers who are willing to be trained in the process. Through this effort, we are amassing a database that can be used by genealogists and other researchers. We are pulling up to **21** data points off each identified death certificate. These can be collectively used to analyze residential, cause of death, and occupational patterns and more. ★

An example of a Baltimore City death certificate indicating burial at Laurel Cemetery. This individual, Daniel Newman, was a 31 year-old former U.S. soldier whose primary cause of death was an Indian arrow.

Board of Health, City of Baltimore,
OFFICE OF REGISTRAR OF VITAL STATISTICS.

Permit No. *38954*

The Physician who attended any person in a last illness is responsible for the presentation of this Certificate, accurately filled out, to the undertaker or other person superintending the burial, within twenty-four hours after the death of said deceased, or sooner, if requested so to do, under penalty of law.

NO PERMIT FOR BURIAL CAN BE OBTAINED WITHOUT A PROPER CERTIFICATE.

CERTIFICATE OF DEATH.

Date of Death, *April 7th 1880*

Full Name of Deceased, { Write legibly and spell correctly. If an infant not named, give names of parents. } *Daniel Newman*

Sex, Male or Female, { Cross out the word not required in this line. } *Male*

Age, *31* Years, *4* Months, *14* Days.

Color, *Colored* Sex, *Male*

Married, Single, Widow or Widower, { Cross out the words not required in this line. } *Single*

Occupation, *U.S. Soldier since which time 4 years disabled*

Birthplace, { State or country (and how long in the United States, if of foreign birth. } *Baltimore Md.*

Duration of Residence in the City of Baltimore, *about 26 years*

Place of Death, { Give street and number. } *No 46 Sarah Ann St Baltimore Md.*

Cause of Death, { First (Primary), *Shrapnel from an Indian arrow in left side*
Second (Immediate), *Consumption & Necrophthis*

Duration of Last Sickness, *about 4 years*

All the above information should be furnished by the Physician.

Place of Burial, *Laurel Cemetery*

Date of Burial, *April 10 1880*

Under-taker, *J. W. Chase*

Place of Business, *198 N. Howard St*

Address

Medical Attendant, *J. W. Chase* M. D.

Extract from Regulations of the Board of Health to secure a full and correct record of Vital Statistics in the City of Baltimore.

SECTION 2. And it be further enacted and ordained, That whenever any person shall die in the said city, it shall be the duty of the Physician who attended during his or her last sickness, or the Coroner, when the case comes under his notice, to furnish within forty-eight hours after the death, to the Undertaker or other person or persons superintending the burial, a Certificate

DECORATION DAY AT LAUREL CEMETERY

/ ISAAC SHEARN

Laurel Cemetery was the final resting place for at least two hundred and forty men who served with the United States Colored Troops during the Civil War. “United States Colored Troops (U.S.C.T.) were the embodiment of Frederick Douglass’s belief that ‘he who would be free must himself strike the blow.’ Approximately 180,000 men—many who had formerly been enslaved—volunteered to fight in the Union army; nearly 40,000 gave their lives for the cause.... By the end of the war, African Americans accounted for 10 percent of the Union army. The U.S.C.T. were a watershed in American history, and one of the first major strides toward equal civil rights” (Battlefields.org).

The commemoration of U.S.C.T. veterans after the war in the form of Decoration Day ceremonies was a cornerstone of many African American communities during reconstruction, eventually forming the basis for the federally recognized **Memorial Day**. Newspaper reports from the earliest mention of Decoration Day in Baltimore date back to 1869. For years, this was a huge event for the community, marking how significant Laurel Cemetery was to the community for Decoration Day. Newspapers report crowds as large as 8000 to 10,000 people gathering at Laurel Cemetery for Decoration Day. This is remarkable in that it represents over 25% of the black population of the city at the time, which was approximately 39,500 according to the 1870 census. At this time, cemeteries were more central to the community than they may be or are today.

A number of famous orators would come to Laurel Cemetery for the planned events of Decoration Day including bishops, professors, and political activists. The first African American dean of law at Howard University, John M. Langston, spoke at two different decoration days, and this continued until in 1880. In 1880, there was a riot after one of these Decoration Day celebrations when the police tried to arrest a man and the crowd tried to resist this individual getting arrested. The police shot and killed a separate individual, not the individual that they were trying to arrest, but this was big news, and may have been the first “race riot” in Baltimore. This event marked the beginning of the end of Decoration Day being a very big part of Laurel Cemetery because in 1884, the government closed down Laurel National Cemetery and removed the headstones and burials to Loudon National Cemetery. ★

PROFILES

USCT BURIALS AT LAUREL

/ DONNA T. HOLLIE

230 men of African descent who served in the Union Army with the United States Colored Troops, were buried at Laurel Cemetery. Many have been re-interred at Loudon Park National Cemetery but some may remain under the Belair-Edison Crossing Shopping Center in Baltimore where Laurel was previously located. Some who were enslaved were manumitted before enlistment; thus their enslavers were eligible for a bounty payment from the state. Since enslaved people were not enumerated by census takers before 1870 and many of the soldiers died during the Civil War, it is difficult to discern much about their lives beyond names, regiments, companies and date of discharge or death. Following are a few for whom some additional information was uncovered.*

Pvt. John L. Seaton was born in Dorchester County Maryland and enlisted at the age of 18 on August 11, 1863. He was emancipated on April 19, 1861. He was 5ft. 2.5 in. tall and had black skin, hair and eyes. He served with the 9th Reg., Co. E. By September 29, 1863 he was hospitalized and he died in Baltimore October 27, 1863 of phthisis pulmonalis, a former name for tuberculosis. Seaton was buried on October 28th. In 1867 his mother applied for a pension saying that he had financially supported her prior to his death. She indicated that he enlisted under an alias and that his real name was **George W. Ellis**.

There were a variety of reasons why members of the United States Colored troops used aliases. Those who had run away from their enslavers often changed their names to avoid capture and re-enslavement. Emancipated men sometimes chose new names not associated with their status as enslaved people.** In some instances men enlisted multiple times in order to collect a \$50.00 bounty for each enlistment.

Pvt. James Carey was born in Worcester County about 1843. He is described in his enlistment records as 5ft. 4.25 in. with black skin, hair and eyes and was employed as a laborer. His

mother, **Julia Briddell** who applied for a pension in 1890, stated that Carey's real name was **John J. Briddell**. According to census records his father's name was **Kendall Briddell** and he had a younger sister named **Hester**. The entire Briddell family was free in 1850 so this soldier might have wanted to fight for the freedom of relatives or for freedom for all enslaved people. Carey/Briddell contracted tuberculosis and died at Hicks General Hospital in Baltimore on January 11, 1865. He served with the 9th Reg. Co. E.

Pvt. Aaron Dennis, of the 7th Regiment, Co. G, was a native of Worcester County Maryland. At enlistment on September 26, 1863, at the age of eighteen, Dennis was described as 5ft. 4in. with black eyes and skin and black curly hair. Initially he was thought to be missing in action but later was determined to be hospitalized at Fort Monroe Virginia where he died on June 6, 1865. The following day he was interred at Laurel. He had been enslaved by Jane Dennis who received a bounty of \$100.00 in compensation for his loss of service to her. Jane Dennis also enslaved a soldier named **John T. Dennis** who may have been related to Aaron.

*Were it not for the detailed research in primary sources conducted by the late historian/genealogist Agnes Kane Callum, most of the information uncovered would not be easily accessible. See her publications: *Colored Volunteers of Maryland, Bounty Records of the 9th Regiment United States Colored Troops, 1863-1866, 9th Regiment United States Colored Troops: Volunteers of Maryland, 1863-1866, and Colored Volunteers of Maryland Civil War: 7th Regiment United States Colored Troops, 1863-1866.*

**Originally named Frederick Augustus Washington Bailey, after escaping enslavement in Baltimore, he first used the name Frederick Johnson. He changed his name again and we know him as Frederick Douglass.

A member of the 7th Reg., Co. D., **Pvt. George Hollis** was born in Queen Anne's County, Maryland in 1837. He enlisted on September 26, 1863 and was described as 5ft. 11in. with curly black hair, black skin and black eyes. Hollis had been enslaved by Richard Tilghman who was entitled to a bounty of \$100.00 for the loss of Hollis' service. Hospitalized in Baltimore from September 29-October 31, 1863 Hollis succumbed to typhoid fever in Baltimore on December 7, 1863.

Cpl. Levi Johns of the 7th Reg., Co. B was born in Talbot County, Maryland where he was enslaved by John S. Bartlett. He enlisted on September 21, 1863 but was promoted to corporal eight days later, likely due to the death of a comrade/officer in battle. Born in 1843, he died in Baltimore at Hicks General Hospital on March 13, 1864 of remittent fever, which is usually the result of an infectious disease. At enlistment Johns was 5ft. 4.5in tall with black hair and eyes. His skin color was described as griffe, a term once used to describe the offspring of a Black and a mulatto or a person of mixed Native American and African American ancestry.

Pvt. William Moody, who enlisted in the 7th Reg., Co. A, was born in Queen Anne's County, Maryland. He was 5ft. 6.5 in. tall. Prior to enlistment he had been enslaved in Queen Anne's County, Maryland by Stewart R. Emory, who received a \$100.00 bounty when Moody enlisted. On January 11, 1864, after serving a little over three months, Pvt. Moody died at Camp Stanton in Charles County, Maryland of typhoid fever. The following day he was buried at Laurel Cemetery. He was twenty-six years old. He was married and in 1867 his widow, **Mary Moody**, applied for a pension. At that time she indicated that he had used two aliases: **Perry Moody** and **Tarry Moody**.

Jacob and Lewis Stafford of Dorchester County, Maryland may have been relatives. They were both enslaved by Caleb Shepherd

and both enlisted September 26, 1863. Pvt. Jacob Stafford of the 7th Reg. was born in 1843. At enlistment he was described as 5ft. 3in. tall. He was twice wounded in action, on August 24th and September 29th in 1864. He died in Baltimore March 8, 1865 at McKim's Mansion General Hospital and was buried at Laurel Cemetery on March 9, 1865. His enslaver, Caleb Shepherd, having been found disloyal to the Union, was denied the \$100.00 bounty he applied for when Stafford enlisted.

Kent County, Maryland resident **John Ward** enlisted in the 7th Reg., Co. E. on September 27, 1863. He was 5ft. 5.5 in. tall and had black skin, hair and eyes. According to his enslaver, James B. Richards, he was about twenty years old. Richards received a bounty of \$100.00 when John Ward enlisted. Pvt. Ward entered McKim's General Hospital on March 4, 1864 and died there March 15th. He was buried at Laurel on March 17th.

Pvt. Greenberry Wright, who was born in 1828 in Queen Anne's County, enlisted in the 7th Reg., Co. E. September 27, 1863. He had black skin and eyes and curly black hair, was 5ft. 5in. tall and had been enslaved by William F. Ford of Queen Anne's County. Wright died at 8 a.m. in Baltimore November 11, 1864 of erysipelas, a bacterial skin infection. His death occurred less than two months after his enlistment. His burial at Laurel took place the following day at 3 p.m. Wright was married and on December 24, 1864 his widow, **Jane J. Wright** applied for his pension.

In the 7th Regiment 85 men died of wounds sustained in action and 308 died of disease. 46 members of the 9th Regiment were killed in action and 268 succumbed to disease. An African proverb says that a man never dies as long as someone is alive to call his name. Think of these soldiers and

SAY THEIR NAMES.



NAME OF SOLDIER: <i>Seaton, John L. (alias)</i>					(6-12-9)
NAME OF DEPENDENT: <i>Widow, Minor, Mother, Collins, S.</i>					
SERVICE: <i>U.S. Col. Inf.</i>					
DATE OF FILING.	CLASS.	APPLICATION NO.	CERTIFICATE NO.	STATE FROM WHICH FILED.	
	<i>Invalid, Widow, Minor</i>				
REMARKS: <i>Per Mar. 16</i>		<i>143948</i>	<i>316619</i>		

The Historical Marker Database (<https://www.hmdb.org/m.asp?m=4112>)

Camp Stanton was located in Charles County, Maryland and was named for Secretary of War, Edwin M. Stanton. The men described in this article enlisted and trained there.

Pension Application Card, found at Fold4.com

CONNECTIONS

ST. PETER'S CEMETERY IN WEST BALTIMORE

The St. Peter's Cemetery is located in West Baltimore, not far from the campus of Coppin State University. It is estimated that between 400 to 1,500 burials are unmarked in the African American portion of the cemetery. Recently, WMAR 2 News ran a short story about descendant, Jennifer Johnson, and her efforts to preserve the cemetery and locate burials. Towson University Forensic Science professor, Donna Coleman, and her students contributed to this effort by using Ground Penetrating Radar (GPR) to locate graves. [Click here to view the story.](#)



Above: WMAR 2's piece about St. Peter's Cemetery.

Right: The memorial at Alexandria Contrabands & Freedmen Cemetery.

CONTRABANDS AND FREEDMEN CEMETERY MEMORIAL

Alexandria Contrabands & Freedmen Cemetery was the burial site for an estimated 1,800 African Americans. Many of these individuals fled to the Union held city of Alexandria during the Civil War. In 1946, the cemetery was rezoned for commercial use and in 1955, a gas station was built on the property. Concerned citizens formed the **Friends of Freedmen's Cemetery** in 1997. However, substantial change came about ten years later with the construction of the Woodrow Wilson Bridge. As the cemetery property was likely to be impacted by the bridge construction, it was possible to use federal highway mitigation funds (funds to mitigate against harm to historic properties) for archaeological investigations and the construction of the park and memorial. In 2007, the City of Alexandria acquired the property, leveled the existing construction, conducted extensive archaeological investigation, and planned and created the park and memorial that was formally opened and dedicated in 2014.

To learn more about the Alexandria Contrabands and Freedmen Cemetery Memorial, click this link: [Contrabands and Freedmen Cemetery Memorial | City of Alexandria, VA.](#)

Better yet, plan a drive to visit the site!



UPDATES

PRESERVATION AWARD FROM BALTIMORE HERITAGE, INC.

On October 19th, 2023, the editors of, and contributors to, *A Place for Memory: Baltimore's Historic Laurel Cemetery*, were honored with the Baltimore Heritage 2023 Preservation Award. Pictured below (from left to right) are Ronald Castanzo, Donna T. Hollie, Isaac Shearn, and Edward C. Papenfuse. Not pictured are Elgin Klugh, Beverly Carter, Glenn Blackwell, and Robert Schoeberlein. *A Place for Memory* was published in March 2023 by Rowman & Littlefield Publishers. ★



PRESERVATION MARYLAND HERITAGE FUND GRANT

Our project was recently awarded **\$5,000 from the Heritage Fund Grant Program**. These funds are made available by Preservation Maryland and the Maryland Historic Trust. Through a partnership with Baltimore Heritage, Inc., this money will be used to prepare a Laurel Cemetery nomination for the National Register of Historic Places. Additionally, funds will be used to assist in website presentation of the database from the Death Certificate Transcription Project. ★

2024 MARYLAND ARCHEOLOGY MONTH 2024 BOOKLET

Did you know that April is Maryland Archaeology Month? The April 2024 theme was *African Diaspora Archaeology: A Collaboration with Descendants*. Elgin Klugh and Isaac Shearn contributed an article about the Laurel Cemetery Memorial Project to the booklet, printed by the Montgomery Parks Cultural Resources Stewardship Section. The full booklet can be accessed here: [Maryland Archeology Month | MAM](#). ★

5487 Halflight Garth
Columbia, Maryland 21045

laurelcemetery.omeka.net

DONATIONS

To donate to the project, please send a check or money order to:

Laurel Cemetery Memorial Project, Inc.

5487 Halflight Garth

Columbia, Maryland 21045

INQUIRIES

Questions about the Laurel Cemetery Memorial Project?

Email lcmpbaltimore@gmail.com

MEETINGS

The Laurel Cemetery Memorial Project meetings are on the 3rd Friday of the month at 3:00pm (in months with 5 Fridays we will meet on the 4th Friday). Since the start of the Pandemic, all meetings have been virtual, via Zoom.

**For information about meetings and/or volunteering,
please contact lcmpbaltimore@gmail.com
or visit laurelcemetery.omeka.net.**



LCMP OFFICERS

Elgin L. Klugh, *Chair*

Molly Ricks, *Secretary*