

# THE LAUREL CEMETERY MEMORIAL PROJECT

← UNCOVERING OUR FORGOTTEN PAST →

LCMP Newsletter  
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Winter 2025

1852 – 1958

## THE GRAND UNITED ORDER OF GALILEAN FISHERMEN: A BALTIMORE-BASED INTERNATIONAL AFRICAN AMERICAN MUTUAL AID ORGANIZATION WITH TIES TO LAUREL CEMETERY

/ ASHFORD KING, PRINCETON UNIVERSITY

Five years before the outbreak of the Civil War in 1861, and nearly a decade before the thirteenth amendment abolished slavery in 1865, the Baltimore couple Helmsley and Harriet Nichols, who were free Black community leaders and entrepreneurs, sat down to put in motion the founding of a benevolent society to support the city's Black working families. Thus, in 1856 they launched the Grand United Order of Galilean Fishermen (abbreviated here as "the Order" or "the OGF"), an organization that promised to pay benefits to members who were sick and thus unable to work, as well as to pay funeral costs for members' families in the event of their passing. This was a form of combined health and life insurance based on the concept of mutual aid, as opposed to profit-seeking. »

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.

[laurelceemetery.omeka.net](http://laurelceemetery.omeka.net)

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## FEATURES

The OGF had both male and female membership. The Order famously organized a legal defense for miners of guano (bird excrement used in agricultural fertilizer) who in 1889 revolted against slavery conditions at their worksite on Navassa Island in the Caribbean and underwent a very public trial in Baltimore. Though the Order began in Baltimore, its membership would spread as far west as Illinois, as far north as Massachusetts, and as far south as Jamaica.

One (and perhaps the only) remaining meeting hall associated with the Order is found roughly one hour west of Baltimore in historic Charles Town, West Virginia, where it was built in 1885. It has been preserved thanks to the advocacy efforts of George Rutherford, a community leader and a veteran of the civil rights movement (pictured below).



Above: George Rutherford at the Fishermen's Hall in Charles Town, West Virginia. Photo: Cris Rutherford, 2024.

Opposite: Reporting about Anthony Armstrong in the *Baltimore Sun*.

The man primarily responsible for bringing the OGF to the Caribbean was Anthony Armstrong, who was interred at Laurel Cemetery in 1890, as reported by the *Baltimore Sun* in two separate articles from November 18 and 19, 1890 (fragment of which appear below in respective order). According to the *Baltimore Sun* from November 19, 1890, at his funeral, then-Grand Ruler (the title given to the OGF's chief overall administrator) Thomas I. Hall led proceedings "according to the ritual of that order [the OGF]."

According to U.S. Census records, Anthony Armstrong was born in Virginia around 1820, most likely into slavery, but he lived much of his later life in Philadelphia. Reporting in the *Baltimore Sun's* November 18, 1890 edition tells us that he was a Civil War veteran of the Union Navy, and that he survived the Battle of Hampton Roads as a crewmember of the storied U.S.S. *Cumberland*. I believe Armstrong may have forged some of his connections in the

Caribbean during his naval service, though further research is needed to confirm this. He was also a prominent member of a variety of African American secret and benevolent societies, including the Knights Templar, the Odd Fellows, and the OGF.

In the OGF's newsletter from June 30, 1906, sixteen years after Armstrong's death, the organization's then-National Secretary, a man named Columbus Gordon, wrote: "Armstrong was well-known among prominent men of the West Indies, and this was a great influence for the Order to spread in the Islands. He visited the Islands accompanied by Thomas I. Hall, who was Supreme Ruler at that time, and organized a Tabernacle. The work continued to grow until today, and now, there are several prosperous Tabernacles located there." In Philadelphia, he worked in the oyster business (as represented in Armstrong's entry in *Gopsill's Philadelphia City Directory* for 1870). »

**A Prominent Colored Man's Death.**—The body of Anthony Armstrong, colored, the National Grand Deputy Ruler of the Order of Galilean Fishermen, who died in Philadelphia on Thursday, was brought to Baltimore last night by a large committee, representing the orders to which he belonged, and was received by National Grand Ruler Hall and a committee from the local tabernacles of the order. The funeral will take place from the Galilean Temple, on South Liberty street. The interment will be in the lot of the order in Laurel Cemetery. Deputy Ruler Armstrong was one of the most prominent colored men in Philadelphia, and was a member of Ivanhoe Commandery, Knights Templar, Order of Good Samaritans, Grand United Order of Odd-Fellows, American Protestant Alliance, and the Ancient and United Order of the Brothers and Sisters and Sons and Daughters of Moses. He served on the United States frigate *Cumberland* when she was sunk in the Hampton Roads by the Confederate ram *Merrimac*. He visited Kingston, Jamaica, in 1887, with National Grand Ruler Thomas I. Hall, to establish the Order of Galileans there. He possessed a considerable fortune.

## A GRAND COLORED FUNERAL.

**The Services by Societies Over the Body of Anthony Armstrong.**

With imposing services the body of Anthony Armstrong, deputy national grand ruler of the Order of Galilean Fishermen and a grand officer of the Ancient and United Order of the Brothers and Sisters and Sons and Daughters of Moses, was laid to rest yesterday in Laurel Hill Cemetery. Deputy Ruler Armstrong was one of the foremost organizers of colored societies in the United States, and Galilean Temple, where the body lay in state, was thronged all day with colored men, women and children, who had called to take a last look at his face and to attend his funeral. Representatives were

Armstrong Anthony, oysters, 1725 Chegnut, b  
1718 Sansom

However, Census documents show that he eventually moved from being an “oyster man” (as reported in the 1870 census), to selling furniture and cars by 1880. At his passing, the *Baltimore Sun* reported in its November 18, 1890 edition, he “possessed a considerable fortune.”

These records indicate that Armstrong was a prominent international civic leader whose influence and work touched the lives of many, whether defending freedom against the pro-slavery Confederacy in the Civil War or working via the Order to alleviate the financial burdens of working-class African Americans from New England to the Caribbean, and whose burial at the historic Laurel Cemetery in Baltimore was a momentous and highly attended occasion.

Though I have been unable to find any portrait of Armstrong, other portraits of OGF officials with Baltimore ties abound. These include:

- (1) Helmsley Nichols, the above-mentioned co-founder of the OGF and husband of co-founder Harriet Nichols;
- (2) Thomas Hall, the Order’s second national leader after Helmsley Nichols;
- (3) the Reverend T.H. Shorts, ostensibly the successor to Hall;
- (4) J.P. Evans, State Grand Secretary of Maryland in 1906;
- and (5) Charles F. McLaurin, Private Secretary to the National Grand Ruler in 1906. ★




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Ashford King is a PhD candidate at Princeton University and a scholar of hemispheric American studies working with sources in Spanish, English, French, Portuguese, and Haitian Kreyòl. For more information related to the topic of this article, see his recent publication in the journal *Atlantic Studies*. Any student or researcher interested in the OGF and in consulting the primary sources used here should feel free to contact him at [alking@princeton.edu](mailto:alking@princeton.edu). Special thanks go to George Rutherford for his invaluable and ongoing collaboration, to Cris Rutherford for the original photograph included here, as well as to Steven Knowlton for locating and sharing the 1906 OGF newsletter cited above.



2 Late THOMAS I. HALL Successor to Hemsley Nichols



3 REV. T. H. SHORTS, D. D.  
N. Supreme G. Ruler G. U. O. of Galilean Fishermen.



4 J. P. EVANS  
Director of Bank, Present State Grand Secretary of Maryland



5 CHAS. F. MCLAURIN,  
Private Secretary to the N. G. S. Ruler.

## RESEARCH

# THE DEATH CERTIFICATE TRANSCRIPTION PROJECT

The Death Certificate Transcription Project is getting a boost from the involvement of student researchers from Coppin State University and beyond. Students are identifying Laurel Cemetery burials from the Baltimore City death certificate reels. Additionally, they are involved in developing biographies of notable individuals and helping to craft the content and design of Historical Information Signage.

There is plenty of room for others (not just students!) to contribute to the project. Contact [lcmpbaltimore@gmail.com](mailto:lcmpbaltimore@gmail.com) to get involved.

**In fall 2024, Karrissa Brown (LCMP Student Intern) transcribed Laurel Cemetery burials from 2 Baltimore City Death Certificate reels. She worked on reels from 1891 and 1914. Below, she discusses differences that she found when reviewing the reels.**

1. CM1132-043, 09/1891-12/1891
  - a. Period: 3 months, in the fall and winter
  - b. Entries: 232
  - c. <1 year old: 70 (43%)
  - d. Female: 123 (53%); Male 109 (47%)
2. CM1132-119, 04/1914-08/1914
  - a. Period: 4 months, in the spring and summer
  - b. Entries: 168
  - c. <1 year old: 35 (26%)
  - d. Female: 87 (52%); Male: 81 (48%)

### Data Analysis and Comparisons

A. The number of burials in 1914 were significantly lower than the number of burials in 1891. The first reel was over 2,600 documents and resulted in 232 related to Laurel Cemetery. The second was over 3,500 documents and resulted in only 168 entries. This aligns with other project data revealing a decrease in the number of Laurel Cemetery burials in the first quarter of the twentieth century.

B. Gender trends showed a slim majority of female burials compared to male burials in both reels.

C. In the first reel, a significant 43% of deaths were infant burials. I found it insightful to mention that the rate of infant burials decreased to approximately 26% in 1914. More investigation is needed to understand the exact cause. However, potential explanations could include an increase in medical knowledge, a

difference in time of year, and/ or women having less children in the 20th century.

D. Overall, the leading causes of death in both reels do not match the causes of death in modern day America. In 2023, the CDC stated that the leading causes of death (in order) were heart disease, cancer, unintentional injuries, chronic lower respiratory diseases, and strokes. In the 1891 reel, the leading causes of death were phthisis pulmonalis, consumption, pneumonia, bronchitis, and marasmus (or malnutrition). This does accurately reflect the historical context; it is known that tuberculosis was a leading cause of death of African American Baltimoreans of this time. Phthisis pulmonalis and consumption were terms used to describe tuberculosis at this time.

E. In the 1914 reel, the leading causes of death differed. Again, the leading cause of death was pulmonary tuberculosis, and other related respiratory diseases. Although, cardiovascular deaths increased drastically in this reel compared to the last. Cancers were frequently listed as causes of death as well. With an increase in medical knowledge, the causes of death were much more precise. Additionally, the layout of the death certificate allowed for more precise causes of death to be entered. For example, in the 1891 reel, one may have listed hemorrhage as the cause of death, but in the 1914 reel, the cause of death would be listed as “fell from 6 story window and hemorrhaged.”

*Karrissa Brown is a junior at Coppin State University, pursuing a major in Applied Psychology with a minor in Anthropology. Having a passion for research, Karrissa aspires to continue her education by earning a PhD in Applied Developmental Psychology with a concentration in Early Childhood Interventions.*



Karrissa Brown

## UPDATES

# DR. ANTIONETTE JACKSON'S KEYNOTE ADDRESS

On Thursday, November 21, Dr. Antionette Jackson delivered the keynote address at the meetings of the American Anthropological Association. Her talk was entitled, “The Art of Remembering & Making A Way—Going There, Knowing There & Other Curious Lessons from The Genius of the South.” Dr. Antoinette Jackson is Professor and Chair of the department of Anthropology at the University of South Florida (USF); Director of the USF Living Heritage Institute, and Founder and Director of the **Black Cemetery Network (BCN)**. One of her many memorable comments was when speaking about conducting interviews with members of the Gullah community. She stated that “listening” helped her to move from a story of deficit and lack to one of agency. As such, it is important to listen to the voices and perspectives of community

members as these voices will often reveal undocumented strength and resilience. This is also true regarding the study of burial communities associated with forgotten African American cemeteries.

At the close of her talk, she was joined by Florida State Representative, Fentrice Driskell. Rep. Driskell was instrumental in pushing through Florida’s **HB 49 on Abandoned and Historic Cemeteries**. This 2023 bipartisan legislation enabled the creation of the Historic Cemeteries Program and establishment of the Historic Cemeteries Program Advisory Council, both within the Florida Division of Historical Resources. For more information check out this Florida Courier article: **Florida’s abandoned cemeteries bill signed Into law.** ★

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## SITE CLEAN UP DATES

There will be two site cleanups and walking tours at the Historic Laurel Cemetery site on Belair Road. Please keep an eye on the Laurel Cemetery Memorial Project website for further announcements about these events. Anticipated dates will occur in March and April. ★

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## NEW ADDRESS FOR LCMP

Please make a note of the new LCMP Mailing address:

4638 Chatsworth Way  
Ellicott City, MD 21043

## PROFILES

# DOWN THE RABBIT HOLE ... CHASING SQUIRRELS!!

/ DONNA T. HOLLIE

One of the benefits of working, collectively, on the Laurel Cemetery death certificates is the cooperation being fostered. For example, when we find deceased women working as washerwoman, we share that information with Dr. Edward Papenfuss who is researching in this area. If we notice Blackwells we let the Laurel death certificate project director, Glenn Blackwell, know that we may have located one of his relatives. We tell Gloria Porter when the deceased may be related to Jones Watkins, the founder of her church, Israel Baptist. Noreen Goodson is researching the Pye family so we inform her when the funeral director listed on a death certificate is Felix Pye or his sister, Roberta Pye Elliott. Knowing that my husband was descended from Robert and Louisa Carroll Squirrel, who are also buried in Laurel, Noreen copied and sent me the death certificate for **George W. Squirrel, Jr. (1856-1912)** *and down the rabbit hole I went*, hoping to find a connection to my husband's family.

The certificate indicated that George, Jr. was born in Maryland to **George W.** and **Catherine Dorsey Squirrel** so I began looking for information about the family in census records.

I found them living in Baltimore in 1880. The household included George, Sr., his wife Catherine and their children **Albert**, **Olivia** and **Levi**. There was no George Jr. so I assumed that by then he was married and had established his own household. But then I noticed something—Levi was born in New York and Albert and Olivia were born in Canada. On Familysearch.org I found the 1861 census for Toronto, York, Ontario Canada and there they were: **George Sr.** born in 1830, **Catherine** born in 1832, and **George, Jr.** born in 1856—all natives of Maryland. Also included was two year old Victoria who was born in Canada.

I was curious about why the Squirrels left Maryland. Were they enslaved and fleeing to escape physical punishment? Were they fearful that their family was about to be separated by sale or divided among a deceased owner's heirs? Perhaps the enslaver had defaulted on a mortgage after using family members as collateral. Did they have assistance from Underground Railroad conductors and station masters or did they strike out on their own? Or were they free and fleeing to Canada because they feared being stolen, like **Solomon Northup**, and sold into slavery? So many questions ... further down the rabbit hole I went.

In the process I've learned some things about life for African descended people in Toronto in the 1860s when the Squirrels were residents. Canadian slavery was abolished in 1834 but

racism was alive and well; some African American communities were referred to as N-----towns. However, there were African American jurors and jury foremen, the right to vote was not denied based on color and taxes were equitably applied to all races. Most freedom seekers worked in menial jobs or in agriculture. In some communities, schools were segregated but cemeteries were not. By the early 1840s the A.M.E. church had been established and Prince Hall Masons were actively providing cultural, social and economic benefits to residents and incoming freedom seekers.

It appears that the family returned to America following the Civil War as they were in Carroll County in 1870, the place where Catherine Squirrel was born. Catherine opened two accounts in

the Freedmen's Bank, one for herself and one for her niece, perhaps with money she earned as a store keeper. By 1880 the family moved to St. Mary's Street in Baltimore where George Sr. earned his living as a waiter. George Jr., a stevedore, lived on Spring Street in 1900. He had a son named **Thomas Squirrel** (1873-1969) who lived on Winters Lane in Catonsville and was a member of Grace A.M.E. church. I even found a man online who is researching the Squirrels and has a photo of George, Jr. that he's willing to share.

Have I answered the questions I have about the Squirrels? No. Is George Squirrel related to my husband? Who knows? Perhaps I'll find answers by going down another rabbit hole on another day.

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St. Wm District 4

| Names of inmates.    | Profession, Trade or occupation. | Place of Birth. | Married during the year | Religion. | Residence if out of limits. | Age next birth day. | Sex.  |         | Married or Single. | Widowers. | Widows. | Colored Persons Mulatto or Indian. | Residents.         |    |              |    |  |  |  |  |
|----------------------|----------------------------------|-----------------|-------------------------|-----------|-----------------------------|---------------------|-------|---------|--------------------|-----------|---------|------------------------------------|--------------------|----|--------------|----|--|--|--|--|
|                      |                                  |                 |                         |           |                             |                     | Male. | Female. |                    |           |         |                                    | Members of family. |    | Not members. |    |  |  |  |  |
|                      |                                  |                 |                         |           |                             |                     |       |         |                    |           |         |                                    | M                  | F  | M            | F  |  |  |  |  |
| 1                    | 2                                | 3               | 4                       | 5         | 6                           | 7                   | 8     | 9       | 10                 | 11        | 12      | 13                                 | 14                 | 15 | 16           | 17 |  |  |  |  |
| 1 Geo. H. Squirrel   | Labour                           | u. d            |                         | Methodist | Toronto                     | 31                  | M     |         | M                  |           |         |                                    |                    |    |              |    |  |  |  |  |
| 2 Catherine Squirrel |                                  | u. d            |                         | Methodist |                             | 29                  | F     |         | M                  |           |         |                                    |                    |    |              |    |  |  |  |  |
| 3 Geo. Squirrel      |                                  | u. d            |                         | u         |                             | 5                   | M     |         | M                  |           |         |                                    |                    |    |              |    |  |  |  |  |
| 4 Victoria Squirrel  |                                  | Toronto         |                         | u         |                             | 1                   | F     |         | M                  |           |         |                                    |                    |    |              |    |  |  |  |  |
| 5 Geo. Squirrel      | Labour                           | u. d            |                         | u         | Toronto                     | 21                  | M     |         | M                  |           |         |                                    |                    |    |              |    |  |  |  |  |
| 6                    |                                  |                 |                         |           |                             |                     |       |         |                    |           |         |                                    |                    |    |              |    |  |  |  |  |
| 7                    |                                  |                 |                         |           |                             |                     |       |         |                    |           |         |                                    |                    |    |              |    |  |  |  |  |
| 8                    |                                  |                 |                         |           |                             |                     |       |         |                    |           |         |                                    |                    |    |              |    |  |  |  |  |
| 9                    |                                  |                 |                         |           |                             |                     |       |         |                    |           |         |                                    |                    |    |              |    |  |  |  |  |
| 10                   |                                  |                 |                         |           |                             |                     |       |         |                    |           |         |                                    |                    |    |              |    |  |  |  |  |
| 11                   |                                  |                 |                         |           |                             |                     |       |         |                    |           |         |                                    |                    |    |              |    |  |  |  |  |

32

All Colored

Squirrel

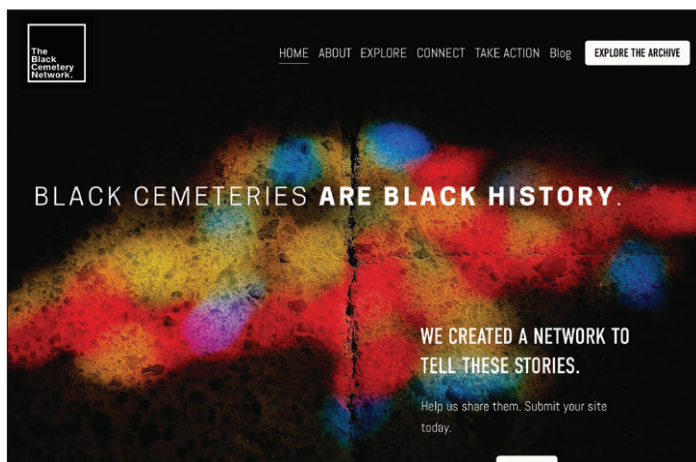
Squirrel

Geo. Squirrel

## CONNECTIONS

# TO LEARN MORE ABOUT HERITAGE PRESERVATION ACTIVITIES AND ADVOCACY, FOLLOW THESE ORGANIZATIONS

## THE BLACK CEMETERY NETWORK



*From their website:*

### OUR MISSION

We connect people and projects working to counter black cemetery erasures.

### OUR STORY

The Black Cemetery Network (BCN) was founded in response to the national call to action to raise awareness about the issue of erasure and silencing of black cemeteries throughout the U.S. These cemeteries contain stories about people, place, and families which are often missing from the larger public narrative. Our network connects living records of forgotten histories through research, advocacy, and collaboration.

## CULTURAL HERITAGE PARTNERS



*From their website:*

### OUR MISSION

Cultural Heritage Partners (CHP) is a private law firm with a public mission: to leverage humanity's past to create a better future. CHP takes on matters that advance the principle of access to cultural heritage as a human right. A team of attorneys, historians, tribal specialists, archaeologists, and art scholars serves clients globally.

The firm's victories have strengthened international and federal preservation law, secured the protection of important sites, objects, and traditions, affirmed the sovereignty of Tribal and First Nations, and helped communities whose culture has been systematically devalued be heard in the courts, legislatures, and before international tribunals.

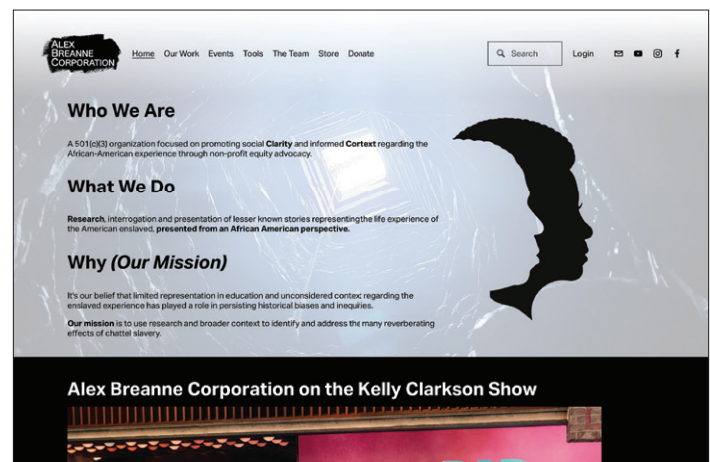
## ADVISORY COUNCIL ON HISTORIC PRESERVATION



*From their website:*

The ACHP promotes the preservation, enhancement, and sustainable use of the nation's diverse historic resources, and advises the President and Congress on national historic preservation policy.

## ALEX BREANNE CORPORATION



*From their website:*

### WHO WE ARE

A 501(c)(3) organization focused on promoting social Clarity and informed Context regarding the African-American experience through non-profit equity advocacy.

### WHAT WE DO

Research, interrogation and presentation of lesser known stories representing the life experience of the American enslaved, presented from an African American perspective.

### WHY (OUR MISSION)

It's our belief that limited representation in education and unconsidered context regarding the enslaved experience has played a role in persisting historical biases and inequities. Our mission is to use research and broader context to identify and address the many reverberating effects of chattel slavery.

4638 Chatsworth Way  
Ellicott City, Maryland 21043

*laurelcemetery.omeka.net*

## DONATIONS

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

**Laurel Cemetery Memorial Project, Inc.**

**4638 Chatsworth Way**

**Ellicott City, Maryland 21043**

## INQUIRIES

Questions about the Laurel Cemetery Memorial Project?

Email [lcmpbaltimore@gmail.com](mailto:lcmpbaltimore@gmail.com)

## MEETINGS

For information about meetings and/or volunteering,

please contact [lcmpbaltimore@gmail.com](mailto:lcmpbaltimore@gmail.com)

or visit [laurelcemetery.omeka.net](http://laurelcemetery.omeka.net).



## LCMP OFFICERS

Elgin L. Klugh, *Chair*

Molly Ricks, *Secretary*