

## **President Ferguson**

### **Special Joint Session to Dedicate Statues of Harriet Tubman and Frederick Douglass**

Monday, February 10, 2020

It is an honor to join Speaker Jones in commemorating the addition of the statues of Harriet Tubman and Frederick Douglass to our historic State House. This building is a shrine to American democracy--in fact it is a National Historic Landmark--due to the events that occurred here during the period of the Revolutionary War. The actions of many great people are remembered here from that time, such as George Washington, Charles Carroll, and William Paca--largely because those are the names that have come down to us in recorded history. But there are many names of people that are not recorded, whose actions are not so well remembered--but whose lives intersected with and who contributed in meaningful ways to the building of our society. Historians believe that enslaved people surely labored in building this State House--but there is no record of them. For years, the only image of an African American in this building was behind you, on the wall, in the form of a bronze relief portrait of Charles County native Matthew Henson who, along with Commander Robert Peary, discovered the North Pole in 1906. That plaque, installed in 1961, was the first state-funded memorial to an African American. It remained the only image of an African American on public display here until President Emeritus Miller included the portrait of Senator Clarence Blount in the Caucus Room.

It's no wonder that young students from Baltimore visiting here a few years ago wrote to me expressing sadness that they 'did not see themselves' portrayed in Maryland's most historic building. And that is why it was my honor to move the portrait of Senator Verda Welcome from the James Building to the wall of the Senate Chamber last month, where now all who visit and

learn the names of Maryland's Four Signers of the Declaration of Independence, will also learn the name of the first African American woman to be elected to a State Senate in the country.

Tonite, we as a state, take a huge step forward in bridging the gap in representing our history with truth, and acknowledging the contributions of those whose actions have gone unrecorded. We will likely never know the names of the many enslaved people who helped to build Maryland, but the names of two native Marylanders who were born here enslaved, and who emancipated themselves, are known to ALL Americans. Harriet Tubman and Frederick Douglass tonite join the pantheon of those honored in this building for their role in Maryland history, but their contributions transcend the borders of this state, and are heralded around the world by all seek to understand the legacy of slavery and the lives of those who personally suffered its horrors and who dedicated themselves to helping others become free.

When Emancipation finally came to Maryland with the ratification of the Constitution of 1864, Harriet Tubman was working for the Union Army where she'd served as a cook and nurse, and as a valued scout, even leading a military expedition to the Combahee River in South Carolina the year before. We can only imagine what her reaction might have been to finding out that slavery was abolished in her home state.

Frederick Douglass, however, was keeping close tabs on the progress of emancipation in Maryland, and when it was finally accomplished he quickly returned to this state--where he could not safely visit since his escape from Baltimore in 1838. On November 17, only sixteen days after the ratification, he made a speech at the Bethel Church in Baltimore. In this remarkable speech, Douglass, despite the years of slavery he endured here, conveys warm

admiration for his home state, and great optimism that with the end of slavery, Maryland could finally live up to its potential. In addressing his fellow Marylanders, he said:

*You are no longer a border slave State, vexed between two extremes, enduring the evils of slavery...but a central Free State, destined, in my opinion, to become morally and politically, as you are geographically, the keystone State of the Union.*

Tonite, let us remember this hope of Frederick Douglass, and appreciate this moment of recognition for him and Harriet Tubman. And tomorrow, and every day, let us work together to help realize their vision for a greater society, and a greater Maryland.