

Executive Director of Preservation Maryland Nicholas Redding's Washington's Birthday Speech

“History is a guide to navigation in perilous times.” Those words, uttered many years ago by the noted historian David McCullough are perhaps even more meaningful today than when first they were spoken. History - the story of who we are and why we are the way we are - is a critical tool for all who seek to make the world a better place in these complex and trying times.

Within this statehouse, history has been made thousands of times - *but within these four walls* - perhaps no moment was more powerful or instructive to our current discourse as the moment when General Washington resigned his commission and set an ethical standard to which all leaders are continually called.

As the Executive Director of Preservation Maryland, the state's oldest and largest non-profit preservation organization, we are charged with protecting the places where stories like this unfolded. As the state grows and we welcome new citizens - our work becomes a complex balancing act of providing a place for our past while recognizing the future needs of the state.

Fortunately our work is a wise economic investment. Time and again, study after study has proven that well preserved communities, landscapes and historic sites generate meaningful revenue and spur economic prosperity - underscoring the

saying that the past can enrich our future.

Our organization began its work in 1931 on the eve of the bicentennial of George Washington's birth. Our original mission was focused exclusively on protecting the sites and places here in Maryland associated with Washington. Since then, we have broadened and expanded our efforts and have embraced a bold and inclusive agenda to tell the full story of our state and its people. Today, our efforts cover the broad expanse of Maryland history from native peoples to slave dwellings to the places where women suffragists rallied to the sites associated with the struggle to gain civil liberties for our LGBTQ brothers and sisters. Our work also embraces efforts to utilize historic places to revitalize communities and create equitable economic opportunity. Preservation in the 21st century is truly a reflection of the diversity of this state.

But, in 2018, our attention returned to our Washingtonian roots - when we were called upon to help defend the iconic viewshed of Mount Vernon. Mount Vernon may reside in the Old Dominion - but the view which drew Washington to those hallowed acres resides wholly across the Potomac, entirely within Maryland.

Standing on the sloping, historic lawn of Mount Vernon, the view of Maryland is stunning and unspoiled. For the past sixty-plus years, Marylanders of all stripes have worked tirelessly to protect the view - establishing a first-of-its-kind national park at Accokeek in the process.

In 2018, decades' worth of effort and investment in preservation could have been undone by an alarming proposal to construct a towering natural gas compression station with smokestacks peering high above the trees on Maryland's shore.

Washington's view - nearly the same since he took his last breath in 1799 - would have been irreparably and permanently damaged.

In partnership with George Washington's Mount Vernon and a host of local and regional partners, Preservation Maryland sprang into action to rally public opinion and protect Washington's historic view. The outcry from across the nation was deafening - so much so that Dominion Energy, not known for backing down without a fight, relented and quickly withdrew their proposal. Dominion was no match for General Washington and the voices of many.

The effort - *quick as it was* - provided several key lessons:

First: Maryland's history - and its place in the story of the man who was “first in the hearts of his countrymen” - is second to none. Our history matters and tens of thousands of advocates from around the nation agreed.

Second: It's clear that Marylanders value their history - and they overwhelmingly support public and private efforts to invest, protect and interpret our heritage.

Regrettably, the kind of funding that would help to document places like Washington's viewshed and provide for greater protection has been increasingly hard to come by - and preservation research funding is sorely missing in this

year's budget.

Third: It is incumbent upon all of us to proactively work to protect places like Washington's viewshed and to make preservation a priority. Not only is it good public policy - but it is a wise economic investment. Historic preservation has a profound return-on-investment. From Washington's viewshed to historic tax credits aimed at utilizing the past to revitalize communities - investing in heritage makes sense.

Returning to Washington and this room, it is important to remember that in their moments of darkest despair, the light of history lit the path for our nation's founders. It was *their* guide to perilous, complex and confusing times. Patrick Henry, the Virginia patriot who famously demanded “liberty or death,” also exclaimed that, “I know of no way of judging of the future but by the past.” It was, as he explained, “[the] one lamp by which my feet are guided.”

In 1775 during some of the most difficult and trying days of the revolution, Washington penned a letter to General Philip Schuyler in which he provided a line of encouragement rooted in his own understanding of the past: “Perseverance and Spirit have done Wonders in all ages.”

But, it wasn't just the founders who found solace in history - so too did Frederick Douglass, Maryland's own prophet of liberty. Douglass consistently relied upon the lessons of history to construct his foundation of hope. It was Douglass who once wrote that, “The whole history of the progress of human liberty shows that

all concessions . . . have been born of earnest struggle.” Having grown up under the harrowing lash on Maryland's eastern shore, if anyone knew struggle it was Douglass. Yet, the arc of history offered him hope in the struggle - that *with* struggle Douglass and his people could receive the blessings of liberty.

Of course, history is not always the story of continual progress - there are back steps, drop-offs and infuriating hypocrisies. Certainly, not all of American history is exceptional or proud. Examples abound and challenge those, who like myself, are entrusted with preserving our past. The glaring example is that many of our liberty-loving founders also owned slaves - a grim fact to reconcile with the obvious good they did in establishing this republic. Maryland history, too, is full of such contradictions, such as the uncomfortable fact that nearly 100 years ago to the day, this legislature worked tirelessly to *prevent* the adoption of the 19th amendment - which guaranteed women the right to vote - and would not certify its ratification until 1958.

Unquestionably, not all history can or should be celebrated. However, there is a profound difference between celebration and remembrance. We, of course, do not celebrate slavery, but at our own peril would we choose to forget it. Or, as Elie Wiesel, the holocaust survivor and author once wrote, “If we forget, we are guilty.”

Instead, we remember and confront the brutal reality of what transpired. And, from that remembrance we see that even in these darkest chapters of history there

is hope. From the pitiful deprivations of slavery arose Harriet Tubman, who chose to take action and, as she explained, “Would fight for my liberty so long as my strength lasted.” Indeed, Tubman was a living example of Washington's adage that, “Perseverance and Spirit have done Wonders in all ages.”

Perhaps the true value of history is to be reminded of our higher calling - of what President Lincoln once called, the “Better angels of our nature.” History, like *each* of us, is filled with imperfections and contradictions - and our job is not to make excuses or to forget - but to learn from them and to find in these historic places, stories and personas a lamp which will light our own path towards a creating a more perfect Union.