Museums in Strange Places
"Slavery in Maryland: Facing Our Whole History at Sotterley Plantation"
(S02/E10)

Episode Description: So much of Maryland was built on the back of enslaved Africans, yet it's easy to avoid confronting the history of slavery in Maryland's former plantation country. Historic Sotterley is trying to change that. The plantation was built in 1703 by a man who made his money off the slave trade, and the site was witness to 165 continous years of slavery. Today, staff and descendents at Sotterley are committed to sharing the site's whole history and healing the legacy of trauma left by the violence of slavery with the ultimate goal of making their community and their world a better, kinder place.

This episode is sponsored by Grove History Consulting.

Nancy Easterling: There were no nice owners. If you own people, there was no nice.

There are responsibilities when you have a site like this, responsibilities to be honest even when it's difficult, responsibility to make your community and, if possible, your world a better place at the same time.

Hannah (Scripted): *I want you to imagine the pivotal moments of early American history scrolling past, sped up and compressed to only a few minutes…*

If your education was anything like mine, you might be seeing a lot white men who look like George Washington and Thomas Jefferson slide by, then maybe some Lewis and Clark types and the folks from Little House on the Prairie.

Bright-eyed explorers and pious religious refugees settling the thirteen colonies...

The signing of the Declaration of Independence, a manifesto of human rights...

The writing of the Constitution, a noble document to guide this grand democratic experiment...

The defense of the Capitol against British invasion in the War of 1812...

Brave settlers heading west in conestoga wagons to forge their own destiny...

But if you slow down this slideshow of history and zoom in, you'll see, in every frame, at every critical moment, behind almost every great white male progenitor of American freedom….slavery and the faces of free and enslaved Africans.

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Of all the people who arrived on ships to the Americas between 1500 and 1820, 80% were enslaved Africans.

If you had visited the home state of many founding fathers, Virginia, in the 1690s, you'd have seen four enslaved Africans for every one white servant. By the time of the Civil War, enslaved Africans made up as much as 50% of the population in some Virginia counties.

In Maryland, a law was passed in 1664 that decreed that slavery, from that point on, be determined by race, that to be black was to be a slave, that any child born to a enslaved person would then also be born into slavery.

By 1800, enslaved Africans made up almost 60% of the population in at least one Maryland county. By the time of the Civil War Maryland was also home to the largest population of free Blacks in the Union.

This is all to say that there is no true history of Maryland or of America without a history of slavery, the enslaved, and the enslavers.

So why is it that the enslaved are a mere footnote, or a specialty tour at best, in the historical landscape of the Chesapeake Bay region.

Welcome to Museums in Strange Places. I'm your host, Hannah Hethmon, a consultant specializing in podcasting for museums and cultural nonprofits. And this a show for people who love museums, stories, culture, and exploring the world.

Museums are the keepers of our history and culture, but they are also reflections of who we are now. I'm currently exploring the museums of Maryland, my home state, to discover how they reflect and shape this state's unique identity.

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In this episode, we're going to visit a plantation in the southernmost part of the northernmost state in the South.

Sotterley Plantation is not very famous. It's not even that well known in the history and museum community.

But Sotterley–a historic site situated on a hill overlooking the Patuxent River in St. Mary's County, Maryland–is important...because its 300 years of continuous occupation each represent a chance to interrogate romantic depictions of history and bring the stories of slavery and its legacies of trauma out of the shadows.

Here, historians and educators, with the help of descendents of the planation's occupants, free and enslaved, are trying to do just that.

The plantation house at Sotterley was built in 1703 with wealth earned directly from the slave trade.

Jeanne Pirtle: 1699, James Bowles, the first owner of what would become Sotterley came here from Kent, England.

This is Jeanne Pirtle, Education Director at Historic Sotterley. I spent two hours in the hot summer sun walking the grounds of Sotterley for this episode, talking to Jeanne and Nancy Easterling, Sotterley's Executive Director, about the past, present, and future of this complicated space.

Jeanne Pirtle: He was a slave trader. He ran a plantation here with enslaved and he was an agent for the Royal African Company, he also had political appointments, married into a wealthy family.

James Bowles was a merchant with The Royal African Company, which had listed Africans as one of their tradable commodities since 1663. By 1690, just a decade before Bowles bought land in Southern

Maryland to build his plantation, the company was the largest supplier of enslaved Africans to the Americas. So when Bowles decided to expand his operation from slave trader to slave master, he was able to arrange for a ship called the Generous Jenny to sail directly from the West Coast of Africa to Sotterley, it's hold full of Africans newly torn from their homes and families and subjected to a nightmarish journey at sea.

Nancy Easterling: Sotterley became part of an international project. The Middle Passage Marker Project where they recognize the people that were brought over from Africa.

This is Sotterley's Executive Director, Nancy Easterling.

Nancy Easterling: The middle passage marker project is a recognition of the lives that were forever changed on this passage. We're the first side in Maryland to have, uh, the ceremony and also put up the marker to have this story told.

Hannah (Scripted): *And it's at Sotterley's Middle Passage Marker that we begin our tour, bypassing the usual focus of any plantation tour, the big pretty house.*

Jeanne Pirtle: Over here is our Middle Passage Marker. So just past here, we decided to, this is where we're going to place our middle passage marker. It's as close to the water as we think the majority of people would be able to view it. And also it's here kind of in a little center where we're talking about enslavement anyway. So this marker was placed here in 2014. But it documents one ship in particular. We know that there were dozens that came to the Patuxent River, but we have traced at least one to the owner James Bowles in that arrived here in 1720. So it shows the primary documents and what happened on this ship. When it arrived, there were already a 29 slaves dead of smallpox that I buried. So we're assuming they were thrown overboard. James Bowles gets these enslaved people because he's an agent for the Royal African Company. He is in the slave trade. Wo he sells some locally, he keeps some, and then the rest of them probably never got off the ship if they weren't going to be sold, but they go on to Virginia on the Generous Jenny and then it arrives back. It takes about 16 months for the ship to make the trip.

Hannah (Scripted): *Before heading across the ocean to the Americas, The Generous Jenny had spent about four months trading on the west African coast. That means that some of the captured Africans had already endured months of imprisonment before the ship even left Africa.*

Jeanne Pirtle: So if you can imagine the horrible conditions. The captain of the ship had some shady practices. The people in the slave trade that are part of the Royal African company even say he's not following the rules. You can't even imagine the horror, the fear of the people that actually made it here and what they had to witness and live through and then they get here and there they're quickly acclimated or sold off.

If you're researching enslaved people, you follow the money and the land documents and the wills and things like that. Because in chattel slavery, you're considered property. So you're going to find the

stories by putting all those pieces together. There is a way to do it. You have to know what to look for. The owners were, you know, they, they were writing all the time. A lot of them were lawyers and, and they, um, they were suing each other all the time. There were always in court for one thing or another so you find a lot of writing from them, but you don't necessarily find the writing from enslaved. But they're talking to you, they're just talking to you, you just have to find it. So it's like finding gold when you find a document that you can connect the dots in there.

Hannah: Basically it's also detective work.

Jeanne Pirtle: It is, and it's addicting.

Hannah (Scripted): *Sotterly's Middle Passage Marker is not anything spectacular. It's a large metal sign raised up to eye level on a pole. It looks a lot like the many historical markers you see all over the US. So what's the big deal? Why is this sign so important?*

This marker is one small step towards filling in the gap in the whitewashed historical landscape of Maryland, a landscape that might otherwise let you stroll along the riverfront, enjoying the views of the water and the pretty house without having to think about what happened at that riverfront and who built that house.

The Middle Passage marker is a prompt, an invitation to stop and practice historical empathy.

Nancy Easterling: As I look at this sign–which we've got to tell Joe was leaning a little bit– the symbol that you see on there was the symbol that was branded onto the people that would come over on the Generous Jenny.

And we had a group of fourth graders recently here from one of our education programs, and they created signs for us. My hope for the future generations is restored because these kids were amazing. But on one of the signs, one of the young men, one of the groups of three young men, their sign was about talking about triangular trade, and they chose that symbol. And Jeannie took a moment and said, I'd like each of you to answer separately, how did that make you feel when you found that and you put that on your sign. Now again, these are fourth graders. These kids are about, you know, 10 years old. And one young man said, I said, it made me feel terrible. He said, I thought it was dehumanizing. And he said they were being treated like cattle. And the other young man who was standing next to him said, I also think it was dehumanizing. Again, a fourth grader. He said, people should not be treating other people that way. We are all people. You can't treat another person that way. It's not right.

We bring the story not just on our tour and in these exhibits, but our education programs come here. And these children learn from an early age that there were realities of enslavement and even the younger children…. there were, have been a schools that have come here that the second grade teacher says, well, you're not going to talk about slavery are you? And Jeannie says, well, yes we are, but it's going to be age appropriate and in such a way that….we can't have this topic taboo enough that you're not talking about it, that just perpetuates the problem.

So from a young age, you can talk about that, who was doing things here on the side and why they were having to do them and who wasn't doing them. You can have those discussions and at such a young age, these children can realize and get that sense of historical empathy that gives them current day empathy. And that sets their mind on what should be right or wrong. So you're shaping future perspectives by establishing that historical empathy. And it's so critical.

Hannah (Scripted): *The original two-room house at Sotterley was built in 1703 with blood money, the wealth James Bowles earned trading and selling humans. When he died about 25 years later, his wife Rebecca and his three daughters inherited the plantation and the 41 people enslaved there. Rebecca remarried, joining her estate with a man named George Plater II. The plantation would stay in the Plater family for the next four generations.*

During the Revolutionary War, slave-owner George Plater III unironically joined the fight for freedom. He was a member of the 2nd continental congress, one of the first governing bodies of the confederation of colonies that would become the United States. He also served as the sixth governor of Maryland. When he died, the property he passed to his son included at least 93 people bound into slavery from birth until death with virtually no hope for freedom.

George Plater V was the last of his family to own Sotterley. During the War of 1812, the plantation was crippled economically when a significant number of enslaved Africans escaped to fight alongside the British, who had promised them freedom in an attempt to weaken the slave-dependent economy of the new nation.

During the Civil War, Sotterley was owned by Dr. Walter Hanson Stone Briscoe, who made his money off a medical practice and the forced labor of about fifty enslaved men, women, and children. Briscoe's sons fought for the Confederacy to preserve their slave-owning way of life, while at least one enslaved man escaped Sotterley to fight for the Union and a chance for freedom.

As a reward for remaining loyal to the Union, Maryland was exempt from Abraham Lincoln's Emancipation proclamation, and the enslaved Africans on Sotterley remained enslaved for nearly two more years until they were freed by the new Maryland Constitution, which ended 165 continuous years of slavery at Sotterley Plantation.

But the house continued to be occupied, changing hands a few times over the next hundred years, and the land continued to be farmed, in part by the freed blacks once enslaved on the property and their descendants.

The last owner of Sotterley Plantation was a wealthy woman named Mabel Ingles, the granddaughter of banker J.P. Morgan. She bought the farm in 1947, and in 1961 she opened the site up for tours as a historic nonprofit and visited frequently as an involved owner until her death at age 92 in 1993.

Before I tell you how Sotterley went from rosy nostalgia for a bygone time to a Middle Passage site with a vision "to foster a better understanding of our world today by providing a living link to America's complex history and legacy of slavery," I want to tell you about this episode's sponsor, Grove History Consulting.

As you may know, podcasts require a huge time investment. This show is no exception. If I didn't have sponsors, I wouldn't be able to keep episodes coming out. That's why I'm so grateful to Grove History Consulting for helping to keep Museums in Strange Places *going. Grove History Consulting empowers history organizations to demonstrate their relevance and define their impact through exhibition development, education strategy, and writing. Tim Grove has been described as one of the most engaging, innovative, and entrepreneurial leaders in our field. He has years of deep experience in public history work, and is the co-founder of the History Relevance Initiative. I had the privilege to work with Tim on several history projects during my time at the American Association for State and Local History, and can personally recommend Grove History Consulting to any history organization looking to develop more effective education programs and engage visitors with relevant exhibitions. Learn more about Grove History Consulting's services and Tim's qualifications at GroveHistoryConsulting.com."*

Now let's get back to the story….

Nancy Easterling: When Mabel deeded the side over to the foundation at the time of her death, there was no money that came with it. So it was a nice gift, but money would have been even nicer. And that's when Richard Moe from the national trust for historic preservation came here and said, you cannot let this and it's stories be lost forever. You just can't go there. When the site was deemed one of the 11 most endangered homes in America by the National Trust for Historic [Preservation] 1996 helped save the site because the site was almost lost. We were able to get a Save America's Treasures grant, which helped stabilize the mansion, stabilized parts of the foundation, create a very extensive preservation plan that really looked because realistically at the history of the site and then started in the years following having guided tours, creating, getting the foundation set up to have a membership program, etc.

But just as many historic sites, there have been, it's been a growing process on how we tell our story When it was Mabel Ingles' place and she would open it for tours, it was very often the romanticized tours.

Hannah (Scripted): *But as you've already heard, things have changed since then.*

Nancy Easterling: We are, we are not the typical antebellum side that you have very often with the plantations, especially in the deep South. The really big notable change for Sotterley came when a wonderful lady, Agnes Kane Callum, came to trace her roots here to suddenly she knew that her family had been enslaved in southern Maryland. Just didn't know quite where. This is a remarkable woman who put herself through college as an adult when her kids were going through college and was a genealogy master. When she realized her roots were here, she started bringing tours here. She eventually landed on the board here. Serving on the board with her was a man, John Hanson Briscoe.

He had been former Speaker of the House, traced his family to the Briscoe family, the last slave owning family who was actually the family that owned Agnes's family. And they served on the board together.

Agnes and her connection here kind of set a piece in motion. She saw that slave cabin and saw the derelict nature of the slave cabin. She wanted to make sure it was never going to be lost.

Hannah (Scripted): *So early on, Sotterley's board included a descendent of the last slave holding family and descendent of the last generation of enslaved families at the plantation, John Hanson and Agnes Kane Callum. As we walked along Sotterley's gravel paths, Nancy told me about her personal connection to these two leaders and the legacy of descendent involvement that they began.*

Nancy Easterling: Those two...and I had the joy of knowing both of them. They were quite incredible and the respect they had for each other….cause as Agnes always said, I know John Hanson didn't create slavery, but he was willing to understand a story that honestly, prior to meeting Agnes, he did not know well. It wasn't what he was told about his family's ancestry. That wasn't the story that came up. But when she gave him the history and said, you need to understand this, he took it on board, and acknowledged it. What's been important for Sotterley are the people that have stayed on the board who are connected to all sides of Sotterly's history: John Hanson Briscoe's daughter Jan Briscoe is on now for her second term. She served as president. She's now vice president. There's also after Agnes Callum, one of her daughters, Martina Callum, was on the board for 10 years and then now her son Martin is on the board. So we are continuing that tradition of that collaboration, saying both of our ties are here.

As well as Donald Barbara who's just started his third term on the board whose family were farm laborers under Mabel Ingles. So we know that having descendants as part of our board and integrated in how Sotterly operates is important and helps shape the site so that we never lose that connection. That connection and that acknowledgement is so important to us.

It's our collective history. And that is really one of the biggest keys. It's not African American history. This is our history. White, black, free mand slave. It's all our history. And it needs to come to not only to the forefront, but as I said, be integrated whether it's on a signage, on an exhibit and our tour in an education program, in everything we do that needs to happen.

Hannah (Scripted): *And so, with help from Agnes Kane Callum, Sotterley spent it's first two decades as a foundation slowly preserving the physical site and shifting from a romantic interpretation to a more honest one.*

The turn had not completely been taken yet, but in 2009 we applied for grant to reinterpret the site. We knew that we needed to do a more holistic change. And in that, knowing that the story about those enslaved here was so critical. How do we need to look at our story differently and what, you know, where do we want our set our sights for the future and start making those changes bit by bit? There was a grant that we won to do a restoration of the slave cabin. After that re-interpretation grant, we got an IMLS grant to redo our tours. And that was a….re-doing your tours is a painful process and Jeannie and I lived through to tell the tale. There are people that cling to the old ways and it's not necessarily easy to

get an integration, because especially when you're trying to be more honest about the story of slavery, it is hard to get people to feel like they can talk about it. They somehow feel like if they talk about it, they're condoning it or something, I don't know. But there sometimes is that problem. And so, you know, there was a little bit of a pushback.

Hannah (Scripted): *But they managed to redo all their tours, add a new audio tour, and create an introductory video that told the whole story of Sotterley. And a few years ago, they added their first permanent exhibit, Land, Lives, and Labor, in a large out-building. This exhibit is small, but powerful, setting the tone for the kind of history that Sotterley is trying to do throughout their site. It addresses not just the history of forced labor during Sotterley's 165 years of slavery, but also the inequality and suffering that persisted after emancipation. At the entrance to Land, Lives, and Labor, a large statement on the wall ensures that no one leaves that space without being reminded of this reality. I want to read it out for you now...*
Hannah (Scripted):

----Acknowledging a Legacy of Inequality---

For more than two centuries, Sotterly owners, like other landowners in Southern Maryland, participated in labor practices that discriminated against people based on the color of their skin. Regardless of how relatively "kind" or "cruel" slave owners may have been, they helped perpetuate an inhumane, unjust system so deeply rooted in American society that it took a bloody Civil War to end it. Racial discrimination did not end with emancipation however, nad government sanctioned "Jim Crow" segregation laws and customs persisted for another century. Sotterley African American workers lived in a segregated, inherently unequal society, attending "colored" schools, working at low wage jobs, relegated to back balconies and read church pews, entering through back doors, and eating at take-out windows.

Today, the Sotterley community includes descendents of enslaved and free workers, owners, and managers. We acknowledge and are saddened by the suffering inflicted by past injustices, and are awed by the resilience and courage of those who survived and even thrived in spite of immense challenges. They have inspired us to continue the struggle for a more just world.

Hannah (Scripted): *What was life like for enslaved Africans on Sotterley Plantation? Thanks to the efforts of people like Agnes Kane Callum, Sotterley has preserved and interpreted a slave cabin on the site. It's not common for slave cabins to have survived to present day, and the cabin presents unique opportunity to reach back into the past to try and understand the lives of those enslaved here.*

Sotterley's slave cabin was built in the 1830s, during the ownership of the Briscoes, the last slave-owning family at the plantation. It's an extremely simple two-story wood structure. On the main level, there's a dirt floor, a fireplace, a few small windows, and very little else in the dim space. The upper level is not even a full room. The steep pitch of the roof means it's more like a large attic space.

Nancy Easterling: You're looking up toward the plantation house and then this cabin is tucked over to the side so that it didn't disturb the vista, heaven forbid. One thing that's important to remember is this slave cabin was built in the 1830s. Slavery in the different centuries was quite different. The chattel slavery, the horrific chattel slavery of the 1700s is different than slavery of the 1800s because they banned international slave trade. So now they started maybe taking a little better care of some of their slaves, those enslaved here. So this cabin was actually probably one of the nicer scenarios you would find. As Julie King from Saint Mary's College said there would have been slaves sleeping up in lofts and everything. You would have had them scattered throughout the site, but notably you could have 12 to up to 20 sleeping in this small cabin.

Hannah (Scripted): *When Nancy says this would have been one of the nicer scenarios, she's not saying this would have been a nice place to live. That slave owners would provide the most basic designated structures for the enslaved people they owned is not a sign of their benevolence or care.*

Jeanne and Nancy told me about the historical changes that prompted owners to build structures like this.

While it was possible to constantly bring new enslaved Africans to the Americas on the Middle Passage, they were treated as expendable pieces of property, and it didn't hurt the financial bottom line if they starved or died of exposure to the extreme cold or heat. Once the trans-Atlantic slave trade ended, plantation owners, who depended on slave labor to turn a profit, were limited to some illegal international slave trading and the domestic slave trade, so they started to do the bare minimum needed to keep their workers alive and working, like building a shelter for them to cook and sleep in.

Nancy Easterling: And as many people lived or more than in the main house...Jeanne I want you to describe how this is set up.

Jeanne Pirtle: So the slave cabin, um, exhibit allows you to walk in and experience the material culture and the heritage and the resistance of those that lived. It's based off of course research, but it's also based on the oral history and traditions of Agnes Kane Callum and her family.

So she interviewed her grandfather, great grandfather and other family members to not only find her roots, but they had stories of what slavery was like. So a lot of it is based on that. It's just a very simple exhibit. It does allow you to come in and kind of meditate and, and look at how, what life would be like about 1850 or so in the slave cabin.

This just gives you a little introduction. It displays their ingenuity, preserves their culture, and exhibits their resistance to slavery. One of the misconceptions is that if an enslaved person didn't run away, they weren't resisting, and that's not true. They resisted in lots of different ways. So one of the things that we do in here as is show you.

Hannah: I like that you are setting the tone right away. You don't have to walk around and try and wonder what the interpretation is right?

Jeanne Pirtle: So in the past, this is, there's pictures of it interpreted as a lot of different things, but it was not really historically accurate to say the least. And it was an attempt to display family life in here, but it was too romanticized and for a lot of years. It just stood empty.

But here you're going to learn that Hilary Kane, the father of this family that lived here wasn't even owned here. He was owned by the neighbor, and his family was owned here. And that was a pattern between the Billingsleys which were related to the Briscoes. A lot of families had, this one was owned by one owner and the family was owned by the other. And so that was a way to control, cause if you run off, then you risk what are they going to do to my family when I leave. So this is all about control and keeping them compliant. So Hillary was allowed–quote unquote–to stay with this family sometimes because he was so close. He was a plasterer and he was hired out other places, but he would just sleep in a simple, you know, plank with a rock or whatever, he would use. He had knowledge probably from his ancestors that came from Africa about what herbs to use for medicine. So he was known as the slave doctor so he could know help the sick.

They would have to make repairs and keep up their building, this was after they've already worked 14 hour days. Then they're here trying to supplement their meager rations and trapping small animals. And they had to, you know, gather the meager clothes that they're given yearly and keep them up. A lot of the small children didn't have many clothes at all.

Hannah (Scripted): *It has long been a horrifyingly-common held view by many white Americans that enslaved Africans were taken care of, that the quote-un-quote "arrangement" of slavery provided people who couldn't otherwise care for themselves good honest labor in return for a a home, food, and care. But this is simply not true, and is a racist lie propgated by white supremacists trying to hide the terror of slavery.*

Besides the fact that to be enslaved meant living under the constant threat of torture, rape, murder, and having your family taken away from you, they were on their own when it came to feeding themselves and their family and caring for their most basic of needs. It would have taken great strength and resilience to survive as an enslaved person.

Jeanne Pirtle: In the 1800s during the Briscoe ownership, according to Agnes' oral tradition, they were given a little fat back, which is the fatty part of the hog that the owner doesn't really want, and a little cornmeal in the ration. So it was not enough to feed this huge family. So they would have to gather, hunt trap, catch fish...constant work, even after you get back to the sleep cabin, you, you still got to figure out how you're going to survive.

So the older children would have slept upstairs in the loft divided and down here near the fireplace, you would have had the mother, her infants, toddlers, children and the father and whoever else the master decided that night was going to stay with you.

Hannah (Scripted): *The children. You probably just listened to that last bit and didn't stop to consider what it meant that this slave cabin was full of children. During the time of the trans-Atlantic slave trade, children typically made up at least a quarter of a a slave ship like the Generous Jenny's human cargo. Children were not exempt from the labor and suffering of slavery.*

Jeanne Pirtle: If you were an enslaved child at Sotterley , you would start work probably following your mother even when before you eight or ten years old, and then you would start actually working.

If your mother was the cook, you'd probably be helping in the kitchen. You might be waiting on the master or the master's son. Or you'd be out in the fields

Hannah: It'd be hard physical Labor at age eleven.

Jeanne Pirtle: It would be about a 14 hour day too. We can't even really imagine today the amount of work that they had to do, and how hard and how long without rest, without enough food, without enough shelter.

Nancy Easterling: Truly most adults today probably couldn't do the work that a child did back then was expected of them, was demanded of them.

Jeanne Pirtle: And if you go to places like Mount Vernon, they have slave quarters also, but you have to realize, even though the owners here were very wealthy for Saint Mary's county in Maryland, George Washington and Thomas Jefferson, they were way wealthier. So the status of your owner. I had to do with what you had or couldn't do. So it varied on your location, where you were enslaved, who your owner was at any one time, from century to century. We know that it was probably very brutal here in the 1700s. In the 1800s that change to a more patriarchal kind of ownership, but still, and even if the master may recognize your marriage, you know, you could still come home and your child would be sold.

So living in that constant fear and stress is very traumatic and people that legacy lives on through the generations and a lot of this legacy is not erased yet. We're still working on it. So as a nation,

Nancy Easterling: One of the things that's interesting that a Jeanne incorporated here is you also realize that they, they were creative and they were ingenious. And looking at that ingenuity, how did they hang on to who they were? There's a rosary hanging up because during the Briscoe era, the owners were Episcapalian and you were going to be going to the Episcopal church and a lot of the African American community had converted to Catholicism. Well, you weren't supposed to be practicing Catholicism. So hanging onto a rosary, sticking that away somewhere so we can see it. Making that choice for yourself without letting somebody else make it for you.

Food choices, the way that they prepared food, the Banjo, looking at how they might make something and make a musical instrument to keep their music traditions going. Finding ways to keep their ties to

who and what they are and their lives was important for them. And sometimes you could do it just under the radar, so somebody wasn't going to be figuring out what you were doing, but it was their way of hanging onto their own identity.

Hannah (Scripted): *So often, the emphasis at historic houses, no matter what happened there, is on restoring the building to its original state. I don't want to say that's not important, but I do believe, especially when historic sites have witnessed violence and oppression, that their value goes far beyond a pretty old house.*

At Sotterley, they care for their house, but they are also restoring their narrative from a romanticized plantation story to direct engagement with the ugly history of slavery in Maryland, a critical step in healing the trauma that the enslavers at Sotterley left as their legacy.

At a time when speaking frankly about the horrors and long-term reprecussions of slavery is still taboo for much of white America, they're also creating spaces where people of varied backgrounds can have open, honest dialogues about slavery and it's legacy and the deep roots of white supremacy that defined Sotterley's land from the very start….

Nancy Easterling: The first remembrance ceremony was held right there. And as you walked down to the water, we could...we had people doing libations and throwing offerings into the water. We had people from the Native American community All Face remembering the lives of so many that suffered injustices here, starting with the Native Americans whose land was just simply taken. Even though we don't delve deeply into the native American story here, we know and acknowledge that the native Americans were... this was their land and it was wrested from them. So in that ceremony they were certainly part of it there. It was to set there then that piece as well.

We had a Common Ground Connected Heritage Symposium this spring bringing not only descendents together, but anyone from the community that wanted to explore are our common roots, our common ancestry, but be able to have dialogues and respectful dialogue said can cover difficult topics.
It was an amazing two days and more of that needs to happen so that people can foster that connection.

...

We have to be part of community, not just our local community, but our regional community, our national community, a global community. Some of these stories and these ideas are ones that we need to foster throughout, understanding that people can make a difference in this world, that any organization should be able to realize there's a way they can give back.

So between education, preservation, stewardship, and community, it's what we feel are our four pillars of how we need to operate here. And I think so many places hopefully are moving more of that model that they realize there are responsibilities when you have a site like this, responsibilities to be honest, even when it's difficult, responsibility to make your community, and if possible, your world a better place. At the same time.

Hannah (Scripted): *More powerful than any epilogue I could write to this episode is the message on Heritage and Healing found on Sotterly's website. So I won't try to put this in my own words. Here's Sotterley's take on the relevance of history in healing our nation:*

"The first step to healing, is understanding the truth about our history. This grounds us and gives us strength to endure and face our struggles today. As we study history we find out about how our ancestors struggled and persevered, and even how they made the wrong choices or the right choices. It gives us a layer of power and resilience to know our stories and where we came from, our heritage, and how really connected we all are. The American myth of the loner individualist that only relied on themselves turns to dust, as we realize our ancestors relied on others in the family, community, servants or slaves, or even total strangers to give them support somehow, through employment, through their very lives, though charity or just encouragement, love and companionship.

Once we know the true story, then we can accept our past, all of our past, the good and the bad. We can examine our own lives to see ourselves and maybe think about an issue in a new way, or seek other perspectives on the same issue. Even though we aren't responsible for our ancestors' mistakes, maybe on closer examination, we are still making the same mistakes. Ancestors pass on more than their DNA!

One's own experiences of lives lived are powerful testaments to future healing, happiness and resilience. It makes us strong, and that strength and lessons learned can and should be shared with future generations.

Historic Sotterley is a place that anyone can visit and learn about lives lived to find history, heritage and healing. Listen to the past as we build our collective futures."

Since I visited Sotterley, it has been designated as a UNESCO Site of Memory for the Slave Route Project.

Thanks for joining me on this adventure as I explore Maryland's museums. Today's episode was sponsored by Grove History Consulting. If you enjoy Museums in Strange Places, please help me keep it going by sharing this episode with a friend who think history matters.

Find more information on the topics discussed in this episode and pictures of Historic Sotterley Plantation on my website hhethmon.com

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