

**Tuajuanda C. Jordan, President, St. Mary's College of Maryland**  
**Keynote Address: Lest We Forget**  
**Sotterley Plantation Middle Passage Marker Ceremony**  
**Saturday, November 1, 2014**

Thank you:

Nancy Easterling

Jeanne Pirtle

Michael Whitson

The Planning Committee

Good morning. It is a pleasure being here today. I am honored to have been invited to make the keynote address at this august event. I apologize for not being able to be here from the beginning. I have just given the keynote address at the St. Mary's County Human Relations Commission's breakfast on the importance of volunteerism and I very much appreciate the organizers of this important event for tweaking their schedule to accommodate mine!

I recall first consciously meeting Nancy Easterling at a fundraising event for a local politician before I officially began my tenure as president of the St. Mary's College of Maryland. She immediately invited me to visit Sotterley Plantation. I indicated that I would make my way there one day. I must admit today that it has never been a priority of mine to visit plantations as they are a reminder of a very dark time in

history - a time that some refer to as the glory days of Southern living, economic prosperity, and gentility but to me they represent the zenith of man's inhumanity to man in this county.

As we all know, Sotterley Plantation was a very active and willing participant in the slave trade serving as, in my interpretation, a clearinghouse for the slaves who had survived the Middle Passage. The amount of emotion that fills me as I stand here on this ground is equivalent to the emotion I felt the first time I walked on Rosecraft Road one warm summer's morning. Rosecraft, as you probably know, is a winding road with trees on either side. Looking at the woods, being acutely aware of a swamp not too far away and the river that is an integral part of this place shrouded me in darkness and sadness. So much so that I started to hum "Strange Fruit", the classic sung so movingly by Billie Holiday. Know that I will not be singing the song being that in at least three generations of Jordans I am one of only two who cannot sing. Nevertheless, the words are important for me to say to convey the meaning of this occasion to me at a place that played a significant role in the history of my African heritage in this county. "Strange Fruit":

*Southern trees bear a strange fruit*

*Blood on the leaves and blood at the root*

*Black bodies swingin' in the Southern breeze*

*Strange fruit hangin' from the poplar trees*

*Pastoral scene of the gallant South*

*The bulgin' eyes and the twisted mouth*

*Scent of magnolias sweet and fresh*

*Then the sudden smell of burnin' flesh*

*Here is a fruit for the crows to pluck*

*For the rain to gather, for the wind to suck*

*For the sun to rot, for the tree to drop*

*Here is a strange and bitter crop*

“A strange and bitter crop”...haunting, isn't it?

When one reflects on the past, we have a tendency to not to want to discuss the mistakes, the atrocities, the inhumanities that have occurred. Yet, we must. Lest we forget.

Today you heard the members of our community speak on, sing about, dance to the significance of this period in our history. To the casual observer it seems as if we are at a celebratory event. Yet, we know that we are not “celebrating” slavery and its associated history. Rather, we are celebrating how far we, as a community, have come in recognizing that we must acknowledge the past and learn from it as a means to improve the human condition. We do not want to repeat the past. As Nelson Mandela once said, “A new society cannot be created by reproducing the repugnant past, however refined or enticingly repackaged.” (Nobel lecture, 1996). And, it is indeed a new society we should seek to create. The impact of slavery is still being dealt with more than 150 years after the Emancipation Proclamation. Thus, each and every day we must work to educate members of our society about the what, the who, the why, the when, and the how of this dark moment in our history. Lest we forget.

Long ago there were a myriad of reasons why African tribes were fighting. Their reasons were not much different from other groups of people who fight or are fighting on other continents. Warring Africans took prisoners of war (POWs). The prisoners were traded as commodities to the invaders – i.e., the Europeans. The

Europeans packed the POWs into over crowded cargo holds and carried them away on ships.

I cannot fathom what it would have been like to be packed into cramped quarters, in virtual darkness, for what had to seem like interminable time. Despair and disease were rampant. Imagine the physical, mental, and spiritual resolve it must have taken to live through the unknown - that which we call the Middle Passage. Those who survived had to be remarkable human beings! And, when they were able to disembark, having endured the unimaginable, what was their reward? Continued captivity in a strange land with strange people; an elaborate system of captivity that continued to evolve from simple, overt enslavement to a sophisticated, intricate and covert system of oppression that remains in one form or another today.

President Abraham Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863. This, however, was of little consequence to slaves in free states, of which Maryland was one. Though unpopular, the Maryland state government abolished slavery in the Maryland state Constitution in 1864. It was not ratified however until the votes of the Maryland Union soldiers were counted. This important vote effectively ended 165 years of slavery at Sotterley Plantation. That is something to celebrate indeed!

Some might ask, since slavery was abolished, why do we need to talk about it? Why do we have to spend money preserving artifacts and buildings? Why can't we just live our lives today and not worry about the past?

Our past is always with us in one form or another. We cannot just live for the day or "move forward" with any certainty until we know our past and try to understand it. The impacts of slavery are deep and far-reaching. The results manifest themselves in a variety of ways that have profound effects on our culture, health, economy, and values. Correlations have been made that link the weakened family, economic status, and chronic health problems of African Americans to slavery. Additionally, in this nation the notion of white supremacy has its roots in slavery and I believe it is perpetuated by ignorance and fear. Thus, history cannot be ignored.

Can we right the wrongs of history? No. But, what we can do is educate people about **that** history and provide them the opportunity to engage in history within and beyond the classroom in both formal and informal settings. This is why museums and sites such as the Sotterley Plantation are so important. This is why we must continue to acknowledge and preserve the past. Lest we forget, we are bound to

repeat it. Lest we forget, we will never be able to learn from it and to use what we learn to address the problems of today and the challenges of tomorrow.

As I reflect on my life, from spending my formative years in segregated Virginia neighborhoods and schools to becoming the president of one of the best colleges in the country that just so happens to be a majority white institution in a place that thrived in the slave trade, I cannot help but marvel at how far we have come in a relatively short period of time. Yet, I know we have lots more work to do as evidenced by events such as Ferguson, MO, and more recently by a 30-something white male calling me the “N word” in Lexington Park.

Nonetheless, when I look at our youth, I am hopeful. These young people embrace diversity and seek it out. They appear to gain energy from it. They are curious about the world and are engaged in it. They are collaborative, collegial problem solvers. Importantly, they take humane approaches to their problem solving. We, the elders, must foster and support their curiosity. We must help them develop their creativity and problem-solving skills. To do this, we must continue to develop innovative and cost efficient ways to help them learn and think about the world around them. The policeman in Ferguson, MO, and the white guy in Lexington Park

may be lost causes but our youth and people like you who attend events like this represent our future.

Formal institutions of learning such as St. Mary's College as well as informal educational institutions such as museums and historical sites like the Sotterley Plantation each has a role to play in shaping our future individually and in partnership. If we continue to educate the public and to acknowledge, preserve, and learn from the past, I have no doubt that the world can be a better place and the likelihood of another Middle Passage and Sotterley Plantation thriving will never again come to past. Lest we forget

Thank you for the opportunity to share this important moment in history with you. I look forward to working with this community to acknowledge, preserve, and understand our past as a means to prepare our citizens for a more humane and just society for all going forward. Thank you.