



## VRA Bulletin

Volume 51  
Issue 2 *Fall/Winter*

Article 3

December 2024

# Queens United: Building a Descendant Community Network

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### Recommended Citation

Floyd, Joni, and Kevin Porter. "Queens United: Building a Descendant Community Network." *VRA Bulletin* 51, no. 2 (December 2024). Available at: <https://online.vraweb.org/index.php/vrab/article/view/254>.

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# Queens United: Building a Descendant Community Network

## **Abstract**

In the midst of aggressive measures to erase Black history and culture through distorted legislation and manufactured popular opinion, there has been a steady increase in the number of institutions working together to acknowledge their historic complicity in U.S. chattel slavery and atone for the legacies of systemic racism in slavery's wake. This article is authored collaboratively by two heritage workers who, as descendants from the same enslaved family, seek to leverage their institutional affiliations in order to combat Black cultural erasure by launching a cultural heritage program that centers the goals of the descendant network with which they collaborate.

This article serves as a blueprint for applying the community-based archival interventions approach to the descendant network. It will also offer strategies and insights gained from establishing trust and building capacity in the planning of a heritage project.

## **Keywords**

Collection access, preservation, research, advocacy, collaboration, digital humanities, atonement, community-based archival interventions, descendant network.

## **Author Bios & Acknowledgements**

Joni Floyd is the Curator of Maryland and Historical Collections at the University of Maryland.

Kevin Porter is an independent researcher and founder of the White Marsh Historical Society.

## Introduction: Getting to “The Roots of Things” Indeed

“There is a distinct possibility that our ancestor Mary Queen first stepped foot on Maryland soil here in 1715 with Captain Thomas Larkin, who had transported her from England.” Kevin Porter shared his speculation on a crisp November afternoon in 2024, as he and Joni Floyd (the authors of this paper) were taking in the scenery of the swirling waters of the South River, a Chesapeake Bay tributary in Anne Arundel County, Maryland. The “here” Porter refers to is the grounds of Historic London Town & Gardens, a “‘lost’ colonial town and garden sanctuary on the South River.”<sup>1</sup> This heritage site’s slogan reverberates in the work Porter and Floyd have been doing together over the last seven years: finding “sanctuary” in their work to recover something “lost;” in their case, a shared ancestry. Their work is an act of recovery – in history, in community, and in spirit.

Kevin Porter is a federal records manager by profession and a genealogist by passion. He has been researching both sides of his family tree for nearly two decades. On his website “Queen Family Heritage Foundation,” he shares his research on the first Queen ancestor:

Mary Queen, also known as the “Poppaw Queen” or “Queen Mary” was born – a free woman of color – between 1680 and 1690 near the Popayán Province, in South America. During the time of “Queen Anne’s War,” she embarked on a two-year voyage to England after the British privateer Captain Woodes Rogers laid siege on the port town of Guayaquil in modern-day Ecuador. Around 1715, Mary was brought to the South River Hundred, in Anne Arundel County, Maryland by Captain Thomas Larkin. She entered an indenture with merchant-planter James Carroll, at his Fingaul plantation in All Hallows Parish, Anne Arundel County, Maryland, but was illegally enslaved and never set free. In his last will and testament dated 12 February 1728, James Carroll bequeathed Fingaul, along with his White Marsh properties including the “Bright Seat Farm” – to Jesuit superior, Rev. George Thorold, S.J. Two of Mary’s daughters – Nanny and Phillis – remained at Fingaul, while she and her son, Ralph, were later sent to the “Old Bohemia” plantation, in Warwick, Cecil County, Maryland. Many, if not all, of the Queen families enslaved by the Maryland Jesuits descend from the maternal lines of either Nanny Cooper (a.k.a. “Queen”) or Phillis Queen.<sup>2</sup>

While the details above sound like the data points for a compelling GEO-mapping project (where location-based data is used to create a map), Porter’s primary goal has been to disseminate his research – through his websites, his participation in DNA and genealogical sites, and more recently, his non-profit – to locate more direct-line descendants and expand the impact of his research. Like many family historians conducting research on their connections to enslavement in the United States, the interest in this work is expanding beyond distant relatives doing similar work; they are being contacted by academic institutions with offers of collaboration. Thanks to organizations like Universities Studying Slavery (USS), more universities are sharing best practices for researching their complicity in the institution of slavery and providing guidance about, and models of, atonement to the descendants of the enslaved. The scale of that atonement is frequently in measure with the existence and organizational capacity of the descendants. In brief, Porter could see that the Queen descendants needed to build a descendant community.

Porter reached out to Joni Floyd in 2017. Floyd is also a GLAMR (galleries, libraries, archives, museums, and records management) professional; for nearly 20 years, she has applied the participatory heritage methodology to her work in positions in Maryland, including librarian-archivist, museum director, executive director of the state’s African American heritage commission, and now curator advocating for autonomous community archives. Furthermore, Floyd was raised in

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<sup>1</sup> “Home,” Historic London Town & Gardens, <https://www.historiclondontown.org/>.

<sup>2</sup> “Queen DNA Project,” Queen Family Heritage Foundation, August 19, 2018, <https://queenfamily.org/>.

Queenstown, an Anne Arundel County neighborhood named after the same Queen ancestors. It dates to at least the mid-1800s, but growing land-records research points to its existence as far back as the late 1700s. For the last two years, she has been leveraging the skills and professional network she amassed over her career to combat the erasure of Queenstown due to sprawl, “upzoning,” and – most ironically – the impending expansion of the Baltimore/Washington International Thurgood Marshall Airport, named to honor the first African American justice on the Supreme Court. Like Porter, Floyd wants to build a descendant community; for her, however, she wants to put the history of her ancestors to work to save the community for generations to come.

The dynamics involved in the authors’ search for their roots parallels this special issue’s focus on “getting to the roots of things” to combat the “onslaught of precarity exacerbated by systemic injustice.”<sup>3</sup> The authors argue that GLAMR professionals can “find solid ground to work from” by growing their awareness of the descendant community engagement circle.<sup>4</sup> In addition, as both Porter and Floyd have a foot in each world, they are particularly qualified to share with an audience of digital humanities practitioners how the descendant community networks operate from within. This is not a how-to essay; rather, its purpose is threefold:

- To provide a snapshot of how the network operates both between and from within so that allies working in the digital humanities fields have a way in if they wish to support this work.
- To create space for the work that the descendants of Mary Queen are doing to acknowledge and safeguard their positionality as the authorities behind the work.
- To honor the spirit of the ancestors through this work.

### **What Is Descendant Community Engagement?**

The University of Georgia’s Franklin College of Arts and Sciences Department of Anthropology makes clear the terms of its relationship with the descendant community:

A “descendant community” within the Laboratory can mean many things, including, but not limited to, a tribal nation or an organization or family representing a diasporic or other community of origin. A descendant community retains ancestral and cultural ties to collections stewarded by the Laboratory.<sup>5</sup>

Since the late 1960s, community engagement has evolved into an academic methodology in public history fields such as public archaeology, ethnography, social history, historic preservation, and museum studies. As anthropologist Chip Colwell points out, academics have undertaken a variety of measures to address ethical considerations to “help ease the historic tensions” between the groups they seek to engage.<sup>6</sup> A similar trajectory can be traced in the cultural heritage management field.

The National Summit on Teaching Slavery (NSTS) is an initiative within the cultural heritage field designed to provide a democratic space for educators, curators, scholars, activists, museum and historic site professionals, and descendants of enslaved people to create a new model for teaching the history of slavery in the United States.<sup>7</sup> In 2018, the National Trust for Historic Preservation’s African American Cultural Heritage Action Fund, in partnership with James Madison’s Montpelier, held its first summit. Framed as “the first national, interdisciplinary effort to formulate a recognized

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<sup>3</sup> As stated by the guest editors in the call for proposals for this special issue.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> “Descendant Community Engagement: UGA Archaeology,” accessed December 30, 2024, <https://archaeology.uga.edu/descendant-community-engagement>.

<sup>6</sup> Chip Colwell, “Collaborative Archaeologies and Descendant Communities,” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 45 (2016): 113-127, <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-anthro-102215-095937>.

<sup>7</sup> James Madison’s Montpelier, “National Summit on Teaching Slavery,” <https://www.montpelier.org/learn/national-summit-on-teaching-slavery/>.

model for best practices in descendant engagement and slavery interpretation,” the goal was “to build a model for descendant engagement at historic sites that is rooted in best practices for historical research, community dialogue, exhibition design, and historic preservation...”<sup>8</sup> The model created – The Rubric – calls for the sites to work with “descendants of the enslaved as partners and advisors at every step to ensure that they are interpreting slavery in a manner that is effective, informative, and respectful of the experiences of the enslaved.”<sup>9</sup>

A concomitant outcome to these readily available best practices, rubrics, conferences, and partnership opportunities is that descendent community members organized themselves, either by forming their own groups or expanding the scope and reach of previously existing groups. Descendant organizations like the Montpelier Descendants Committee (MDC), the GU272 Descendants Association, the Dark Branch Descendants Association, and Highland’s Council of Descendant Advisors have joined established groups like the Hemings Foundation, the West Ford Legacy Foundation, and Coming to the Table, the Linked Descendants working group for racial reconciliation, to operate from a seat of collaborative power to create a platform.<sup>10</sup> Their goals frequently range from uncovering hidden lineage that was erased or never included in U.S. history classes to articulating the impact of historical trauma and forging a path toward sustainable self-advocacy.

These platforms have already been tested, as seen in the recent controversy at James Madison’s Montpelier. The board’s reversal of its decision to remove MDC members and fire staff who supported them was in great part a result of the support the MDC mustered from the media and other descendant groups.<sup>11</sup> Additionally, there is encouraging commodification of the descendant community work as the brokering of institutional accountability is becoming a niche enterprise. Take the example of the Georgetown Memory Project (GMP): the GMP describes itself as “an independent tax-exempt organization founded by friends, allies, and alumni of Georgetown University.”<sup>12</sup> Established by Richard J. Cellini, “attorney, business executive, and scholar of institutional accountability for slavery,” Cellini now serves as the founding Director of the Harvard Slavery Remembrance Program.<sup>13</sup> The business acumen, fundraising know-how, and sheer willingness of Cellini and allies like him, is welcome; however, descendant groups are now positioned to lead this work. It must be pointed out that authors like historian William G. Thomas III and journalist Rachel Swarns readily acknowledge and identify the names of individual descendants and their organizations in their work. The time to document and center the work of descendants is now.

## **Lessons from the Queen Family Network**

### *Network Lesson #1: Build and Share Your Authority*

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<sup>8</sup> Montpelier Descendants Committee, “The Rubric,” September 28, 2020, <https://montpelierdescendants.org/rubric/>.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Montpelier Descendants Committee (<https://montpelierdescendants.org>), Linked Descendants working group Coming to the Table (<https://comingtothetable.org/linked-descendants-working-group/>).

<sup>11</sup> Christine Grubbs, “Embattled Montpelier Votes at Last to Share Governance with Descendants,” *Cultural Heritage Partners* (blog), May 16, 2022, <https://www.culturalheritagepartners.com/montpelier-votes-to-share-governance-with-descendants/>.

<sup>12</sup> “Georgetown Memory Project,” <https://www.georgetownmemoryproject.org/>.

<sup>13</sup> Mac Daniel, “University Appoints Richard Cellini to Lead Legacy of Slavery Remembrance Program,” *The Harvard Gazette*, October 26, 2022, <https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2022/10/university-appoints-richard-cellini-to-lead-legacy-of-slavery-remembrance-program/>.

In 2016, Porter learned about USS member Georgetown University's efforts to reckon with its complicity in U.S. chattel slavery and its legacies on campus. As a 2023 *Washington Post* article explains

The flurry of activity is part of a wave of reckoning over slavery that took off when Georgetown University revealed in 2016 that its Jesuit founders had sold 272 enslaved people into forced labor in Louisiana in 1838. Eighty-nine of those people were taken from White Marsh, a 2,500-acre compound that had been bequeathed – along with over 30 enslaved people – to the Society of Jesus by a member of Maryland's Carroll dynasty more than a century earlier.<sup>14</sup>

He learned that Georgetown was working with the descendants of the 272 enslaved people sold “down South” by the Jesuits of the Maryland Province of the Society of Jesus in 1838 to save the university from bankruptcy.<sup>15</sup>

Although his ancestors were not sold south during the 1838 sale, Porter's research on his ancestral connection to the Queen family led him to the site of the GU272 – the White Marsh Plantation, one of eight plantations owned and operated by the Maryland Province of the Society of Jesus, the Jesuits. Porter researched this slave labor, solidifying his standing as a descendant of the Queens who remained in Maryland and finding others who shared that heritage and may want to participate in the larger conversation about recognition and reparative outcomes. In 2018, he launched the Queen Family Heritage Foundation website to attract family history researchers and share his work. As the website states, “The Foundation is also dedicated to reuniting descendants of those Queen family lines, preserving family histories, educating the community about Queen family history, and conserving historical landmarks.”<sup>16</sup> Here Porter positions himself to represent the Queens and advocate for their needs, rights, and interests while simultaneously reaching out to more descendants to join him in this work.

In 2022, Porter founded his own 501(c)3 nonprofit. He named it the White Marsh Historical Society (WMHS) as a public assertion of the rights of the descendants of the enslaved to claim that site's history. WMHS's goals include conducting research to uncover the Queen family history, integrating the findings into Maryland's historical narrative, and ensuring the preservation, documentation, and memorialization of the African American burial grounds uncovered at the site of the current Sacred Heart Catholic Church. As a result, he has consulted with officials of the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Washington and the Jesuits USA East Conference and become a key figure in facilitating dialogue between the descendants, the media, and other stakeholders to align their shared goals. As the *Washington Post* describes,

Porter's forebears and hundreds of other enslaved people had once worked and worshiped at this Jesuit outpost near the Patuxent River, held in bondage by some of the priests and brothers who were building the Catholic church in the nascent United States. Their final resting places have long faded from view, subsumed by nature even as the adjacent cemetery for White parishioners was tidied and honored through the ages.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Georgetown University, “Georgetown Reflects on Slavery, Memory, and Reconciliation,” accessed April 15, 2024, <https://www.georgetown.edu/slavery/>.

<sup>15</sup> GU272 Memory Project, “GU272 Organizations: Who's Who,” Georgetown University, accessed April 15, 2024, <https://gu272.americanancestors.org/gu272-organizations-whos-who>.

<sup>16</sup> Queen Family Heritage Foundation, “About,” March 9, 2020, <https://queenfamily.org/about/>.

<sup>17</sup> Steve Hendrix, “Maryland Church that Once Enslaved People Gets Cleanup,” *Washington Post*, January 17, 2023, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/history/2023/01/17/jesuit-slave-cemetery-maryland/>.

Porter has also worked with other descendant organizations to envision a descendant-led site that is “a place of learning, education and reflection.”<sup>18</sup> The creation of this nonprofit has been a key component in confirming the place of the descendants as advocates. However, he mindfully avoids solo voice autocracy, a common challenge of serving as spokesperson.<sup>19</sup> Porter reinforces the interconnected nature of his work by supporting the operational capacity of other nonprofits with Queen descendant ties by serving on their boards, since governance remains a common stumbling block for nonprofits.

Robin Proudie and Irving Gaither are members of the WMHS; Porter is a member of Proudie’s Advisory Committee; and Floyd is a member of Dr. Aisha L. Abdul Rahman’s nonprofit Legacy Builders & Empowerment Inc. and helped draft the WMHS’s strategic plan. Porter is a key liaison between what Proudie termed the “Jesuit enslavement diaspora” and the descendants who remained in Maryland. As reported in the *Catholic Standard*, “Porter is well known in the local community as a point of contact for those interested in learning the history of their ancestors and genealogy...”<sup>20</sup> As Porter told the reporter, “[Connecting families] is the most gratifying part of what I do. A lot of the families here were brought together by my initial research...Descendants from Louisiana reached out to me because of our DNA connections and some of the archival work that I’ve done. That’s the most important part of this, bringing us together.”<sup>21</sup>

*Network Lesson #2: Listen to the Ancestors: Acknowledging Afrocentric Social Capital*

Like Porter and other descendants, Robin Proudie traces her ancestry to those enslaved by the Jesuits at White Marsh Plantation. However, in 2019, while residing in Maryland on the very land that was once part of the plantation, Proudie received a letter from Slavery, History, Memory and Reconciliation Project (SHMR) researchers in St. Louis, Missouri, informing her that she was a descendent of Henrietta Mills who was also enslaved by the Jesuit leaders of Saint Louis University (SLU).<sup>22</sup> Proudie moved back to St. Louis, her hometown, to devote more of her labor to genealogical inquiry and advocating for redress. In 2021, Proudie expressed to St. Louis Public Radio that “they [her ancestors] are whispering in my dreams. Telling me, pushing me, to let me know that they were here...their lives matter.” Through her work with the SHMR researchers, she discovered that Henrietta Mills’ mother, aunts, uncles, and grandparents were also Queen descendants forced from White Marsh to Missouri in 1829. Curious about her connections, she took a DNA test which revealed matches with current Queen descendants, including members of Porter’s immediate family and other GU272 descendants.

In a 2022 interview with the local PBS affiliate, Proudie explains that when she took a tour of St. Louis University, she could feel the presence of her ancestors. “It just made me feel proud and it made me feel angry because they’re not acknowledged, you know, they’re like nameless souls...”<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Breana Ross, “Hundreds of Enslaved Persons’ Graves Found at Church in Bowie,” *WBALTV*, updated February 28, 2023, <https://www.wbalTV.com/article/enslaved-persons-lost-graves-found-sacred-heart-church-bowie/43120979>.

<sup>19</sup> I.K. Zola, *Rehabilitation Psychology* 19(4): 180-183, doi:10.1037/h0091061.

<sup>20</sup> Catherine Buckler, “Cardinal Gregory leads prayer service for enslaved African Americans buried in Sacred Heart Parish’s cemetery in Bowie,” *Catholic Standard*, February 27, 2023, <https://catholicreview.org/cardinal-gregory-leads-prayer-service-for-enslaved-african-americans-buried-in-sacred-heart-parishs-cemetery-in-bowie/>.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Marissanne Lewis-Thompson, “‘Their Lives Matter’: Descendants of Those Owned by Jesuits Want Their Voices Heard,” *St. Louis Public Radio*, June 21, 2021, <https://www.stlpr.org/culture-history/2021-06-21/their-lives-matter-descendants-of-those-owned-by-jesuits-want-their-voices-heard>.

<sup>23</sup> Gabrielle Hays, “At Least 70 People Were Enslaved by the Jesuits in St. Louis. Descendants Are Now Telling Their Stories,” *PBS News Hour*, March 31, 2022, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/education/at-least-200-people-were-enslaved-by-the-jesuits-in-st-louis-descendants-are-now-telling-their-stories>.

This acknowledgment embraces the Afrocentric principle of the circularity of history and ancestor veneration.

In 2023, Proudie's extensive research, her work raising awareness, and her willingness to listen to the voices of her ancestors led her to establish the 501(c)3 non-profit organization Descendants of the St. Louis University Enslaved (DSLUE). As its executive director, Proudie's vision for DSLUE encompasses the Jesuit enslavement diaspora.<sup>24</sup> Her openness to this and other support networks of descendant groups, advocacy organizations, grassroots coalitions, academic institutions, researchers/historians, scholars, genealogists, faith-based organizations, and legislators is her own brand of Afrocentric social capital. From prayer circles, headstone dedications, press briefings, archeological excavations, and reparations conferences and symposiums to reunion events and ceremonial and educational programs, Proudie says she not only includes the multivocality of voices described in *The Rubric* from the Montpelier Descendants Committee but shares it with local institutions, academics, and community partners to ensure that descendant communities' voices are centered.

Proudie, her board, other descendants, and affiliates generated a 10-point restorative justice plan that was submitted to Saint Louis University's President and Board of Trustees. Proudie also garnered historic support on April 24, 2024, when SLU's Student Government Association (SGA) unanimously voted to pass Senate Resolution 007-24. This resolution stands in solidarity with the DSLUE families, calling for SLU leadership to make DSLUE a strategic priority and adhere to the 10-point plan for redress.<sup>25</sup>

DSLUE believes they and other descendant communities tied to the Jesuit slavery diaspora, affectionately called cousins, are not monolithic in their thinking. All descendants should be given the grace to share in this season of reclaiming, restoring, and repairing in their own ways. With that said...We Are One!<sup>26</sup>

In February 2024, Proudie held a teach-in and press conference on the SLU campus to publicize the results of the collaboration with DSLUE advisors, community leaders, and SLU stakeholders along with policy experts and legal counsel. A reporter noted, "As the echoes of African drums reverberated through the air, Robin Proudie stood proudly, a symbol of a lineage demanding acknowledgment and justice..."<sup>27</sup> Proudie, economist Julianne Malveaux, and civil rights attorney Areva Martin announced that "they meticulously calculated the value of the labor performed by enslaved individuals like Henrietta Mills between 1823 and 1865" to be "somewhere between 361 million dollars to 74 billion."<sup>28</sup>

*Network Lesson #3: Develop the Network: Embrace Sankofa*

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<sup>24</sup> DSLUE (Descendants of the St. Louis University Enslaved), "Legacy Initiatives," accessed April 14, 2024, <https://dslue.org/legacy-initiatives/>.

<sup>25</sup> Special Needs Network, "Saint Louis University Student Government Association Adopts Resolution Urging University to Work with Descendants of the Saint Louis University Enslaved," GlobeNewswire News Room, May 13, 2024, <https://www.globenewswire.com/news-release/2024/05/13/2880818/0/en/Saint-Louis-University-Student-Government-Association-Adopts-Resolution-Urging-University-to-Work-with-Descendants-of-the-Saint-Louis-University-Enslaved.html>.

<sup>26</sup> DSLUE (Descendants of the St. Louis University Enslaved), "Our History," accessed April 14, 2024, <https://dslue.org/legacy-initiatives/>.

<sup>27</sup> Travis Cummings, "'We're Asking for That Debt to Be Paid': Descendants of Slaves Who Built Saint Louis University Demand Recognition and Compensation," *KSDK*, February 9, 2024, <https://www.ksdk.com/article/news/local/black-history/descendants-of-slaves-who-built-saint-louis-university-demand-compensation/63-d52f559a-83da-47b3-a5d2-219f33cedafc8>.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

The “Sankofa” is a metaphorical symbol used by the Akan people of Ghana, generally depicted as a bird with its head turned backward taking an egg from its back. It expresses the importance of reaching back to knowledge gained in the past and bringing it into the present in order to make positive progress.<sup>29</sup>

The Sankofa symbol and principle reverberate through places that honor Africanisms. Examinations of networks uncover hidden connections; for example, because of Robin Proudie’s work, Saint Louis University holds an annual Sankofa ceremony to recognize African American graduates as well as any student who graduates with degrees in African American studies. So too with Dr. Aisha L. Abdul Rahman, a California native brought into the network by Kevin Porter, who reached out to her as a Queen descendant based on DNA matching. The reverberations also are reflected in the fact that Dr. Rahman was already conducting Queen family history research with the curator of Maryland and Historical Collections, none other than Joni Floyd. Since then, Rahman has invited Floyd to join the board of her nonprofit, Legacy Design Studios.

Rahman’s work epitomizes the Sankofa principle. In addition to reaching back into her family history for personal affirmation, her net positivity reverberates in her work for the African Diaspora. In her studio, she showcases Black artwork “from artists on the continent of Africa and in the diaspora” and creates content and programs that “foster opportunities for mental and emotional growth and development of men, women, and children of African descent.”<sup>30</sup> She also helps to raise funds for schoolgirls in Elmina, Ghana to purchase sewing machines, demonstrating that engagement beyond U.S. shores is a hope shared by the network.

#### *Network Lesson #4: Recognize the Embedded Outreach Person*

Irving Gaither says, “My idea is to give everyone the opportunity to receive a higher education, because I think that it will lift up our community. And so, I am holding the Jesuits to their 100-million-dollar pledge.”<sup>31</sup>

Gaither is a lifelong Marylander, local historian, and another White Marsh Historical Society board member. His network includes board membership on the Northern Arundel Cultural Preservation Society whose boundaries encompass the Queenstown community in Anne Arundel County that was settled by the descendants of those enslaved at the White Marsh plantation. In addition to his Queen family ancestry, Gaither is a descendant of the Gathers, Hawkins, and Harrison families enslaved at White Marsh. With so many family connections among and between organizations, Gaither is the lynchpin for outreach. As a frequent speaker at several historically African American churches and civic organizations in Anne Arundel and Prince George’s counties, he shares with attendees the Jesuit order’s atonement pledge and how to participate. The process for recognition by the church involves a process called “validation” which includes DNA verification and proof of affiliation with the kinship. As both a community member and someone fluent in the validation process, Gaither strengthens the network by making participants comfortable with the process.<sup>32</sup>

In addition, Gaither keeps the network grounded in the basics of family history work: genealogical and community research, writing, and sharing his findings within the network. He is an

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<sup>29</sup> SANKOFA, <https://sankofa.org/>.

<sup>30</sup> Legacy Design Studio, “Help Raise Funds for the Girls in Elmina,” accessed April 20, 2024, <https://legacydesignstudio.com/>.

<sup>31</sup> Irving Gaither, interview with Joni Floyd and Kevin Porter via Zoom.

<sup>32</sup> Rachel L. Swarns, “Catholic Order Struggles to Raise \$100 Million to Atone for Slave Labor,” *New York Times*, August 16, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/04/17/us/catholic-church-jesuits-reparations.html>.

example of three principles of building community:<sup>33</sup> participation, promotion (involve everyone), and press to advance the mission. He has participated in every prayer service, cemetery clean up, and synod; he promotes every event beyond his network and can be counted on to bookend Porter's comments to the press or serve as the solo WMHS spokesperson in his absence. For example, at the 2023 prayer service for the enslaved buried at Sacred Heart Parish/White Marsh plantation, Gaither put the needs of the organization in greater context:

My ask to my state representatives and my representatives on Capitol Hill was for the property to be, or the graves, to be kept where they are, to be preserved, and for there to be an educational space here. To tell the stories of them and how there was this acceptance of enslavement in this country. The state of Maryland created laws that made it happen. A number of religious institutions, not just the Society of Jesus, not just the Roman Catholic Church, bought into this process and allowed it to happen. So, we just want to tell that history as well.<sup>34</sup>

*Network Lesson #5: Provide Community-Based Archives Interventions*

Born and raised in the same neighborhood as her double cousin Irving Gaither, Floyd has been working in the cultural heritage field for over two decades. In her current role as Curator of Maryland and Historical Collections at the University of Maryland, Floyd specializes in community-based archival interventions, employing the community archives approach to solving present-day community problems. In the case of the Queenstown community, since the current Anne Arundel County master plan is set to disrupt the residential character of the neighborhood with industrial zoning and high-occupancy housing, Floyd has been advising the local civic association on the procedures for obtaining a historic designation for the neighborhood. Making the case for this designation is a community effort; it goes beyond the Queenstown Rosenwald School listing on the National Register of Historic Places (Floyd co-wrote the application in 2009)<sup>35</sup> or that singer/actress Toni Braxton grew up here. It involves collecting the family records of current and former residents to make the case for this distinction, which would provide protection from the planned zoning.

Floyd has also tapped the research banks of the Queen descendent network to collaborate to make the case to save the neighborhood from erasure. So far, by funneling this documentary evidence to the local civic association – the Severn Improvement Association (SIA) – it has advocated successfully for the Queenstown community in two key ways. The SIA has convinced the local zoning offer to request that Queenstown be restored to one zoning region instead of its current two.<sup>36</sup> This separation of Queenstown occurred during the development of Maryland State Route 100 in the 1970s. More than a symbolic dissection, the two zoning districts have forced individuals and association members to duplicate efforts when advocating for community revitalization measures by region. Additionally, thanks to presenting the community's archival evidence, the local zoning office has agreed to request that more than 50% of the properties

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<sup>33</sup> James S. Gruber, *Building Community: Twelve Principles for a Healthy Future* (Gabriola Island, BC, Canada: New Society Publishers, 2020).

<sup>34</sup> Catherine Buckler, "Cardinal Gregory Leads Prayer Service for Enslaved African Americans Buried in Sacred Heart Parish's Cemetery in Bowie," *The Catholic Standard*, February 27, 2023, <https://www.cathstan.org/faith/cardinal-gregory-leads-prayer-service-for-enslaved-african-americans-buried-in-sacred-heart-parish-s-cemetery-in-bowie>.

<sup>35</sup> Sherri M. Marsh and Joni Jones, "National Register of Historic Places Registration: Abington Farm," *Maryland Historical Trust*, October 2009.

<sup>36</sup> "Region 3 Stakeholder Advisory Committee (SAC) Meeting," Anne Arundel County Maryland Office of Planning and Zoning, August 20, 2024, [https://aacoprod.aacounty.org/AACOServicePublic/rest/SharedDrive/loadFile/web/opz-region-plan3/Notes\\_082024.pdf](https://aacoprod.aacounty.org/AACOServicePublic/rest/SharedDrive/loadFile/web/opz-region-plan3/Notes_082024.pdf).

previously “upzoned” as industrial be restored to residential status. Currently, the Queenstown community is a county council vote away from being returned to residential.

**Conclusion: Queenstown Descendant Community Network as Microcosm**

Fittingly, on that day in November when Porter identified where Mary Queen may have first set foot in Maryland, Porter and Floyd were visiting the Historic London Town & Gardens to attend the talk “The Journey of My Ancestors,” presented by Reverend Lawrence Walker, president of the Montpelier Descendant’s Committee. Among his many insightful comments, Reverend Walker discussed the importance of including the voices and perspectives of descendants of the enslaved at the onset of projects and programs concerning the history of slavery in the U.S. The standing-room-only, mostly white audience suggests that there is an audience for this history, and specifically for this history as delivered by descendants. Moreover, his remarks about the lessons learned from building his coalition of descendants greatly resembled the experience of our network.

Clearly, one of the larger objectives should be for the pockets of descendant community networks to collaborate formally. For now, however, the Queenstown Descendant Community Network is focused on building lasting relationships within the community rather than pursuing simple, short-term projects for individual gains. We are greater than one person and one project. The authors hope that this will serve to bear witness to the work of descendant community workers; here is a space that points to their authority and their agency. It is the authors’ hope that this work lays the groundwork for future digital humanities collaborations.

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