

Talk for the Coatsville Picnic

Good afternoon everyone. I would like to begin by thanking Mrs. Blair, Mr. Pry, and everyone involved in planning this fantastic event for inviting me to speak to you today. I was very honored to be invited to join you and to give a short talk. For those of you who I have not yet had the pleasure to meet, my name is Jody Brumage. I live in Locust Valley, or the suburbs of Burkittsville as I like to call it. My family has lived along the mountain since just before the Civil War, so I've got a few generations in the books for my history in the Middletown Valley. I am visiting with you today in my capacity as the Historian and Curator for the South Mountain Heritage Society in Burkittsville.

I want to say that it is a distinct honor to be asked to address your picnic today. I love history. It is a driving force in my daily life. I have been fascinated by it since I was a child. I studied it in college. I've embarked on a career in it. History is, in my opinion, one of the essential components of our human identity. We are programmed to look to the past as a reference for our present and future. It is in our nature and thus it is worthy of our attention and our dedicated study.

I do not want to speak for too long this afternoon, but I did want to make a few points which I feel are important to our communities. This won't be the typical historical lecture, in as much as I am qualified to give. But I do speak with my few years of experience to the importance of honoring our history.

By honor, I mean to convey a number of actions which we should do in observing history. We should celebrate, but we should also reflect. We can commemorate, but we must also learn. We can sift through and study with the greatest of curiosity, but we must also look for those things which we ought not do again. History is the single greatest tool we have for gauging what works and doesn't work in our world. What is right and what is wrong.

At South Mountain Heritage Society, we are dedicated to the mission "to preserve and interpret the history of Burkittsville." Now for starters, I must define "Burkittsville" to mean Burkittsville, Coatsville, Locust Valley, Broad Run, and all of our surrounding area. Our mission contains two actions: to preserve and to interpret.

We cast a wide net for our programs at the museum because our history is all shared. Some of our stories are more positive than others, but we all have our villains and heroes. In the past few years as I've continued to study and learn about history, I've learned that you cannot view history in sections. History should be viewed as one continuous journey, both with highs and lows. We must strive to understand the perspectives of all the voices of the past in order to fully understand the history we are telling.

Our local history presents an intriguing path through four centuries in time. Our first residents began to arrive in what was then the frontier of the Province of Maryland in the 1730s. These residents included wealthy land holders who received hundreds and sometimes thousands of acres of land from the King's land patent office. These residents included families of men, women, and children who toiled with great difficulty to carve out an existence in a wilderness that had only been explored a few decades earlier. Some worked out of necessity, others out of bondage to others. By the 1800s, towns began to develop up and down the valley, Burkittsville and Coatsville among them. In the middle of this century, a horrific war was waged in this country and in this valley. Its effects were long felt in a community which suffered with segregation until the middle of the next century. In the present century, our nation continues to struggle with the effects of our shared history.

Our ancestors, foremothers and forefathers, make important decisions which greatly effected our present life. They were inspired by faith and spirituality to gather together and form a community where their strength in numbers could improve their wellbeing.

Two governors of our state of Maryland have hailed from our community. The first, Thomas Sim Lee contributed greatly to our success in the Revolutionary War and the founding of our United States, but also was the largest slave owner in Frederick County in his time. Half a century later, in 1842, a gentleman from Petersville was elected as the 26th Governor of Maryland. Francis Thomas' term as our state's executive was marred by a scandalous and very public divorce. But the former Congressman and Governor rebuilt his career. In 1864, he worked on the committee which produced the 1864 Constitution of the State of Maryland, which upon ratification abolished the institution of slavery in Maryland, making it the first former slave state to end the horrific practice by popular vote. When Governor Thomas died in 1876, he was

interred at St. Marks Church in Petersville. On the reverse of his grave stone, an inscription reads “the author of the measure which gave to Maryland the Constitution of 1864 and thereby gave freedom to ninety thousand human beings.”

Three years before Francis Thomas made his mark on our shared history, a man by the name of George Albert Whalen was born in Point of Rocks. A man of great intellect, he attended Storer Normal School in Harpers Ferry and graduated to become a teacher. For nearly 4 decades, “Mr. Whalen” as he was known to all ensured that the African American community received a solid education. In 1898, he appealed to local industrialist Outerbridge Horsey and was given a lot and the support to build a permanent school for Coatsville. Though severally under-funded by the county, teachers such as Whalen, Olivia Morris, Lucy Groomes, Alice Dunn, Alice Delauter, Helen Loud, and Helen Roberts continued that original mission until Frederick County’s public schools were finally integrated in 1959.

One of my favorite photographs that I share with visitors of the museum depicts over thirty women and men of Coatsville, dressed in their soldiers’ and nurses’ uniforms inside the Horsey School during World War I. It is a striking image and one which speaks of ultimate dedication and service.

In 2002, the fourth century in which our story has unfolded, a joint effort of citizens in Coatsville and Burkittsville led to formal recognition of this historical community by the State and the placing of road signs marking its location on the map.

We continue to work together not only in our study of the past, but in our appreciation of it. This is where I find institutions such as South Mountain Heritage Society to be so vital to our communities. I do want to share a few things with you today about the heritage society.

Our organization was originally created in the 1970s when Burkittsville was placed on the National Register of Historic Places. Though this early group later ceased to operate in the mid-1980s, the historical community reorganized in the early 1990s to form South Mountain Heritage Society. Our initial focus was to stabilize and restore the former Resurrection German Reformed Church. Once that project was completed, though as you well know there is always something that needs to be done with a historic building!, we took on the task of collecting documents, photographs, objects, books, and other resources of our local history.

Why do we devote time and money to this effort? Well, first and foremost, we believe it is essential for our community today and generations to come to understand the stories that I've shared with you today. We feel that it is of vital importance that the stories of Coatesville, Locust Valley, Broad Run, Burkittsville, and all of our county to be safeguarded and made available for researchers and the public to use. The best way for us to understand the past is to interact with it, and I'm happy to say that this is one of our primary goals at the museum. Aside from our permanent exhibits, we are building our research collections, expanding our archives, and we've launched a digital archive of records that are available to anyone for free.

Here is where you can help. I invite you to join me in paying attention to our historical resources. Please consider donations of photographs, documents, letters, objects, books, or anything that is a product of our shared history. We are ready to serve you as a place of safekeeping for our community's history. We are very willing to accept quality reproduced copies of photographs and documents in the respect of families who wish to continue possessing their historic records. The beauty of the digital age is that with a scanner, we can take high resolution copies and easily reproduce them for our exhibits and research archives. I also come today armed with pencil and paper. Anyone who has stories to tell and share, please let me know and I am ready to take them down.

I invite you to get excited about our community's history. I invite you to take an active role in making everyone know of the unique and important story of Coatesville, Burkittsville, or wherever your home might be. Share your stories, make the records of our past available for others to see and study. It is so important that we make sure that future generations know the stories that we all hold in ourselves and our families, to appreciate the significance of the communities they inherit. Thank you again for inviting me to be with you today, and I hope to see you all at the museum sometime.