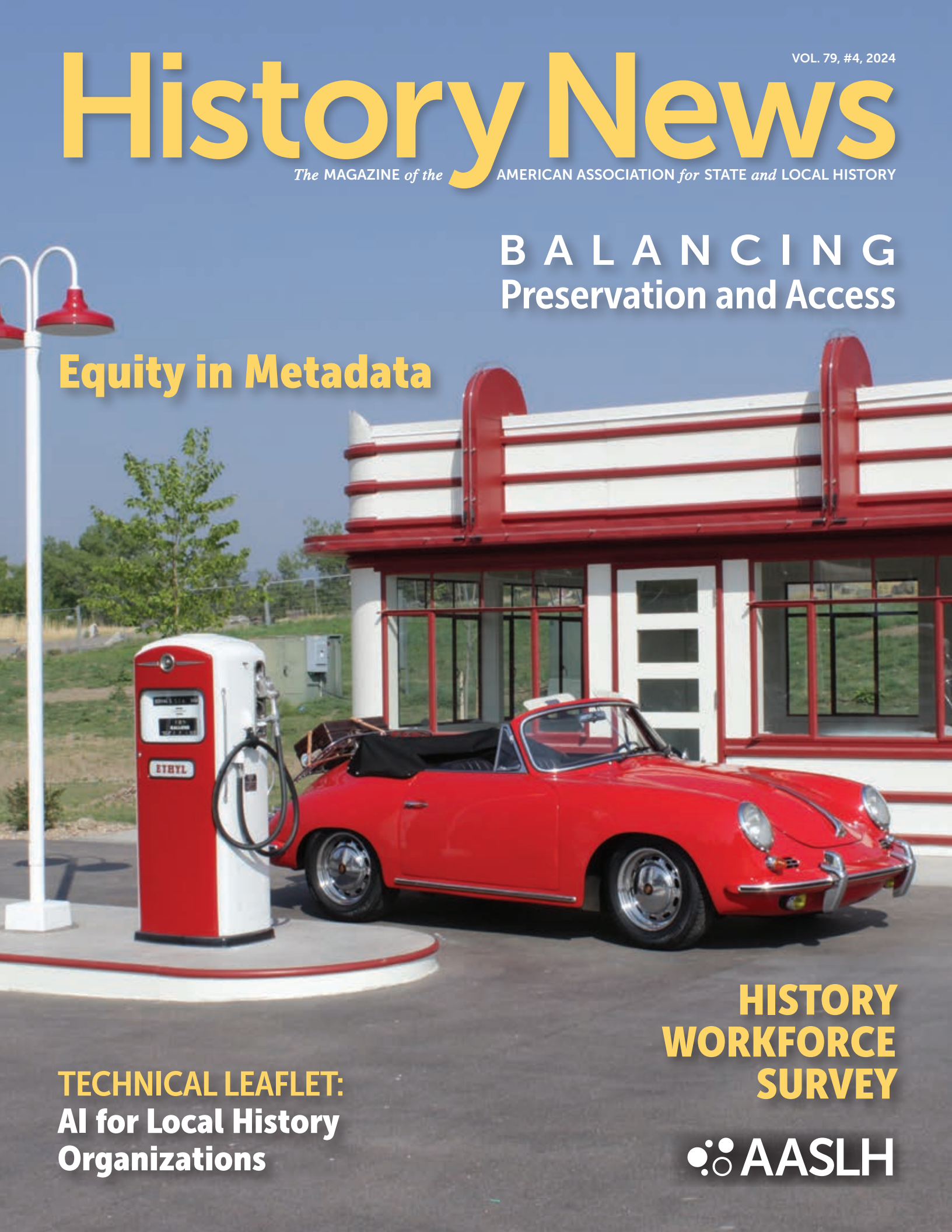
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History News

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BALANCING Preservation and Access

Equity in Metadata



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TOWARD EQUITY IN METADATA:
How Sandy Spring Museum Adopted Restorative Cataloging Practices





Top left: Early Sandy Spring's white families relied on Black labor.

By Allison Weiss and Lydia Fraser

Established in 1980, Sandy Spring Museum (SSM) in Maryland, about 30 miles west of Baltimore, is a triumph of devotion from local residents who were troubled by the disappearance and lack of dissemination of the community's material history. Though Black and white residents numbered almost equally throughout the nineteenth century in Sandy Spring, the museum's interpretation long perpetuated the fallacy that only the town's white residents had stories that could be told through primary source materials. Duly, the town's history has largely been told from the perspective of its most prolific white chroniclers. Over time, racially biased cataloging practices in our archives cemented this white-centric narrative, making authentic Black voices accessible only by chance or through laborious, page-by-page searches.

In the decades since its founding, the museum's mission has transformed. We've moved beyond a traditional interpretation that focused solely on the community's founding history and its dominant white Quaker culture. Today, we're dedicated to dynamic, participatory cultural heritage engagement that embraces the stories of *all* community members.

To redress the historic inequities in our collecting and cataloging practices, we launched *Equity in Metadata*, a restorative cataloging initiative.

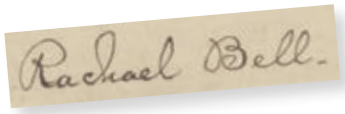
Equity: **freedom from bias or favoritism**

Metadata: **data that describes and provides context for digital items, which in turn helps users find and discover these resources.**

Our mission today is to connect diverse communities and advance social equity. To redress the historic inequities in our collecting and cataloging practices, we launched *Equity in Metadata*, a restorative cataloging initiative that centers the stories of the area's historic Black residents to facilitate a more holistic discovery of Sandy Spring's socially segregated yet economically interdependent community history.

Sandy Spring: A Community of Contradictions

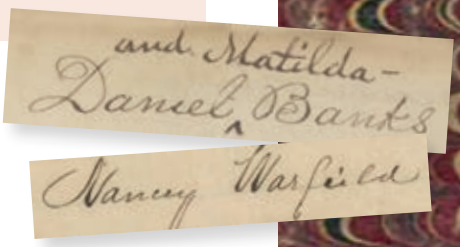
In the small town of Sandy Spring, events took place that held significant local and national historical importance. Its early Quaker settlers were a paradox, a mixture of both enslavers and vocal abolitionists. Some freed the people they held in bondage roughly 50 years before the Civil War, or risked being "read out" of the Meeting. Others maintained their enslaved workers, who were emancipated upon the death of the enslaver. Sandy Spring is also renowned as home to a large, prominent, and well-established free Black population dating back to at least the early 1800s. Rumored to be a place through which enslaved people passed on their journey to freedom, this site is also associated with Dred Scott, who is said to have been housed here during the 1857 *Dred Scott v. Sandford* case, in which the Supreme Court ruled that the Constitution did not extend citizenship to people of African descent.



The term "Sandy Spring" refers to a region beyond the actual town itself. Local lore stated that if you could travel on horseback to the Quaker Meeting House and return home before dark, you were residing in Sandy Spring. Thus, the region of Sandy Spring was defined as any population area that was located within 6 miles of the Sandy Spring Meeting House, the physical location where members of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) met on a monthly basis.

Sandy Spring's Black population, comprised of both free-born individuals and formerly enslaved people, established many independent thriving communities in the area. These included communities such as Cincinnati, Holly Grove, and Mount Zion, and totaled about fourteen distinct communities in northeastern Montgomery County.

While the white and Black communities were socially segregated, their economic lives were deeply intertwined. Our archives reveal that Sandy Spring's white families, whether enslavers or not, relied almost exclusively on Black labor for their farms, homes, and various goods and services. These interactions are preserved in nineteenth-century documents found in archives across the Eastern Seaboard, including dozens of relevant store, farm, and medical ledgers housed in the museum's own archives.



The Road to Equity

The groundwork for *Equity in Metadata* began in 2019, when a generous benefactor anonymously provided the funds necessary to digitize the museum's historic archival collection. With this support, Sandy Spring Museum digitized nearly our entire archives and partnered with Digital Maryland—a collaborative, statewide digital preservation program of the Enoch Pratt Free Library/Maryland State Library Resource Center—to host our collection in its digital content management platform.

The process of digitization led to the realization that there existed a depth and breadth of Black community history within the archives that was previously unrecognized and unacknowledged by the museum. Historically, racially skewed cataloging practices in heritage institutions have perpetuated white-dominant narratives. As we digitized SSM's archives, staff became acutely aware of various forms of inequity.

1. **Difficulty in finding Black history:** Information on Black history was far harder to locate than that on white history. By cataloging resources only based on the name of the white author, Black history was unfindable if we adhered to standard cataloging practices.
2. **Biased cataloging language:** Conventional vocabularies often failed to represent Black lives with accuracy and respect. Metadata specialist Shel Burton worked with a local African American Descendant Advisory Committee to refine language. For example, "African American" proved inadequate for pre-1868 records, leading to the more historically accurate term "Free People of African Descent."



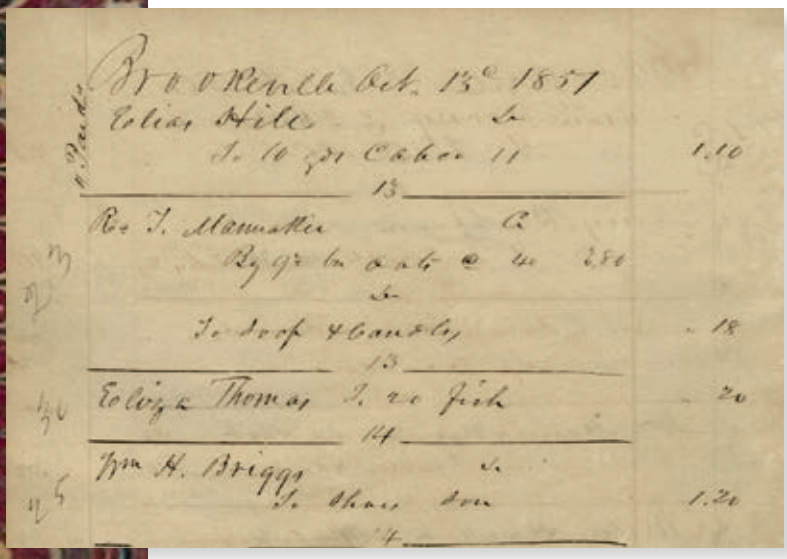
This project mined the archives for evidence of the area's extensive Black history.

3. **Unfindable historic inequities:** Crucially, historical inequities detailed within the documents themselves remained undiscoverable due to existing cataloging practices.

To redress the racially skewed cataloging practices that buried the stories of the underrepresented yet equally integral and present Black men and women in Sandy Spring's history, the *Equity in Metadata* project evolved. Under the direction of Archives and Collections Manager Lydia Fraser, staff became intimately familiar with the content of nearly 100,000 pages of digitized materials, which include minutes for some of the oldest continually meeting social clubs in the United States, holdings from the first rural hospital established in the country, manumission papers documenting the release of enslaved people, and many other items of local, regional, and national significance. Within these documents, staff discovered, were thousands of references to the Black men and women who lived in Sandy Spring, living socially segregated lives but interacting constantly with their white neighbors, and contributing to our town's history in ways that deserve to be chronicled and remembered.



To be clear, it is not that this information on Black history was hidden; we just were not looking for it. For four decades of the museum's existence, we were satisfied with telling the story of only part of the community—the ancestors of the people who founded the museum, whom we aided in crafting a story that was favorable to their side, leaving out the complexities of living in a community in which enslaved people, free Black people, white enslavers, and non-enslavers lived side by side. Over time, the town became regionally renowned for this dominant story, which centers on the narrative that Quaker residents freed those they enslaved several decades before the Civil War, earning the community a reputation for tolerance and progressive thought. While not untrue, this was a partial truth that deliberately excluded crucial nuances that painted a much more complex story, and one that was less favorable to the Quaker town founders.



Example ledger entries documenting Black residents and commercial interactions.

Mining the Metadata

While digitizing the archives expanded online access, it did not automatically make Black history more discoverable on its own. Take, for example, the 1851 Brookeville Store ledger, a record of commercial purchases from a local store, which shows that in a single day, customers included two free Black residents of Brookeville, seven white enslavers, and six white non-enslavers. We also know that some customers who were listed by first name only were enslaved at the time of making their purchases.

However, if you visited the museum's digital archives, the only way to find information on these individual customers would have been to track down the document and search page by page, line by line. That's because the standard way to tag this kind of digital content is with descriptors based on the perspective of the item's creator. (In the case of the store ledger, that would be "Brookeville Store.") This effectively rendered the stories of Black men and women almost undiscoverable, burying them in the pages of ledgers, journals, and daybooks of white landowners, doctors, and business owners.

Recognizing this, Fraser sought a new approach to cataloging that would make Black history as easy to access as white history. The system she conceived involves identifying the pages on which the individual Black histories are recorded and grouping these pages by the person's name to create new virtual archival items. In creating these new digital items, SSM can then apply the same depth of descriptive metadata for an individual free Black laborer as for the white Quaker landowner for whom he labored, thus the project's name, *Equity in Metadata*.

To implement this practice, we received permission from Digital Maryland staff to create new digital items from content already existing on their platform. As it turned out, they not only supported us in doing this, but suggested sharing our process with other institutions, recognizing the potential impact on discovering Black historical narratives.

Before and After

Imagine this research scenario before the *Equity in Metadata* project:

In 2021, you visit SSM's digital archives looking for information about your ancestor, William Bowen. You enter "William Bowen" in the Digital Maryland search bar but no matches turn up. You contact SSM's staff because you are certain that Mr. Bowen, a Black man, lived and worked in Sandy Spring in the mid-1800s. SSM's staff asks you if you know who William Bowen worked for because the museum's archives are cataloged according to the white landowner/property owner/store owner and not according to the names of laborers. In fact, this is standard descriptive practice, cataloging items according to the "owner" or author. Staff advise you to try your search again if you can determine who Mr. Bowen worked for.

As luck would have it, one of your relatives remembers that Mr. Bowen worked for Joshua Peirce. You revisit SSM's digital archives, type "Joshua Peirce" in the search bar, and discover that there are two Joshua Peirce ledgers, totaling about 600 pages. To find information on William Bowen, you will need to scroll through 600 pages in hopes of finding a mention of him.

There is no mention of William Bowen in the catalog record seen below. This metadata belies the ledger's documentation of the labor of many Black men employed by Joshua Peirce, the majority of whom were paid not in cash but through material equivalencies set by Mr. Peirce. This standard cataloging practice perpetuates the oft told, yet skewed narrative of the supremacy of the white Quaker role in Sandy Spring's origin stories.

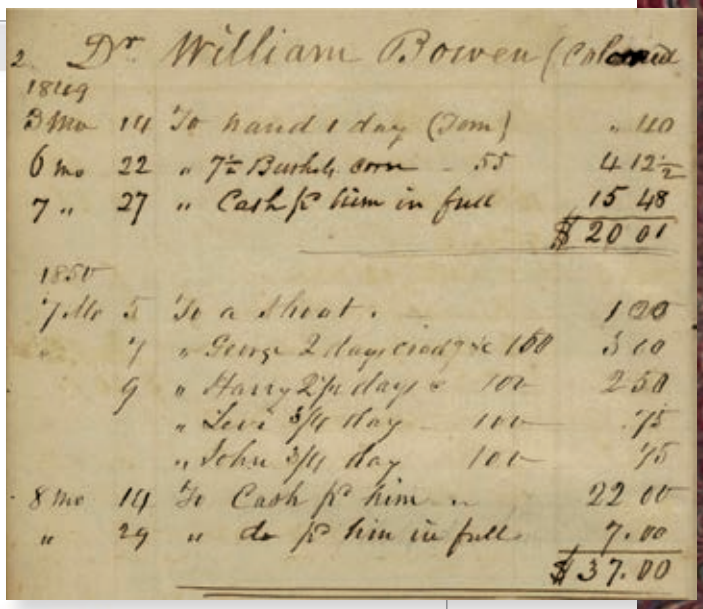
This scenario resulted because almost everything in SSM's collection was authored by a white person and, therefore, cataloged with terms associated with the item's owner, a white person. The catalog record says nothing about Mr. Peirce employing Black laborers. Because standard cataloging practices for this kind of digital content privileges the perspective of the item's creator, in effect it makes the stories of underdocumented people all but undiscoverable, burying them in the pages of ledgers, journals, and daybooks of white landowners, doctors, and business owners. Because you do not have time to peruse 600 pages of information to search for William Bowen, you decide to put this research project off until retirement.

Now, imagine this research scenario after the *Equity in Metadata* project has made its impact:

You return to SSM's digital archives after reading about their *Equity in Metadata* project and skeptically type "William Bowen" into the search bar of Digital Maryland. The first three matches that appear are your William Bowen, describing work that he performed for Joshua Peirce and also George Ellicott Lea. The first match shows information from one of Mr. Peirce's lengthy ledgers that stymied you before, but now you can jump right to the page referencing William Bowen. You've discovered more about Mr. Bowen's life and have a new research lead in Mr. Lea.

Object Description

Identifier	smpa_82-02-27
Title	Ledger: Joshua Peirce and Edward Peirce, 1849-1885.
Creator	Peirce, Joshua, 1781-1863; Peirce, Edward, 1820-1916
Subject	Peirce family Peirce, Joshua,--1781-1863--Archives Peirce, Edward, 1820--1916--Archives Riverton (Brookeville, Md.) Fairfield (Brookeville, Md.) Farms--Maryland--Montgomery County--19th century Farmers--Maryland--Montgomery County--19th century Farm management--Maryland--Montgomery County--19th century Farm management--Records and correspondence Finance, Personal--Maryland--Brookeville--19th century Brookeville (Md.)--History--19th century Farms Farmers Farm management Finance, Personal Agriculture Brookeville (Md.)
Description	Accounting ledger dated from 1849 through 1885 and kept by Joshua Peirce and his son, Edward. Entries pertain the management for their properties Brooke Black Meadow (subsequently known as Riverton) as well as Fairfield (built by Edward in 1856) in Brookeville, Maryland. Ledger shows names of suppliers, customers, tenants, laborers, items or services traded, purchased and sold, and prices.
Holding Institution	Sandy Spring Museum - 1982.0002.0027 (Gift of Deborah Iddings Willson)



Catalog record for Peirce ledger, and the ledger entry for William Bowen.

Partnering with Descendants

As we embarked on our work, we quickly realized we had overlooked an element of bias in our project. During the first public meeting after the project launched, a meeting attendee named Natalie Thomas, who traces her ancestry to some of the first Black residents in Sandy Spring, expressed that she did not want her ancestor's nineteenth-century medical records available through Digital Maryland. Prior to her voicing this concern, we hadn't understood the capacity for harm that sharing this information publicly could present for descendants. In retrospect, it's clear that personal medical information is inherently sensitive, especially when it could be misused by those with their own agendas. Indeed, the nineteenth-century medical ledgers of Dr. Caleb Edward Iddings are filled with racially biased descriptions of his patients' health, using different terms depending on whether the patients were white or Black.

To proactively identify such issues, Ms. Thomas agreed to establish the Sandy Spring descendants Advisory Committee. This committee, composed of community mediator and social activist Rachel Watkins, PhD, and about ten women whose families have resided in Sandy Spring for generations, provided the invaluable perspective that we were lacking, addressing questions like: How do Black descendants want to use the museum's archives? What terms would they use to search for information about their ancestors? Are there circumstances under which SSM would allow a researcher access to sensitive documents that we would not otherwise publicize? Will any information in the archives be traumatizing to readers? If so, should that information be redacted, or should we precede it with a warning statement?

The Descendant Advisory Committee prepared the following statement that provides truthful and necessary context when viewing our digital archives:

While our Black ancestors living in Sandy Spring, Maryland in the late 18th and 19th centuries were unable to leave the same prolific documentary evidence of their lives as could their white counterparts, they were equally active in shaping the story of Sandy Spring. They tilled, planted, and harvested the land and kept the houses of whites; they owned property, ran businesses, and paid taxes; they built a socially and intellectually active community celebrated beyond its boundaries. Despite racism and discrimination, they persevered and liberated themselves and others while living under the shadow of slavery surrounding them here in Montgomery County. Buried in the tens of thousands of pages of documents in Sandy Spring Museum's digital archives of historic documents mostly authored by white males are whispers and echoes of the unheralded but equally significant Black stories and contributions.

With an estimated 7,000 pages from relevant documents to go through, contained in about 43 collection items, this is very much a work in progress. But to date, we have identified 450 Black men and women whose stories are now easier to discover in the museum's archives. We are also seeking funding to expand our archives by digitally connecting to other institutions that own items relevant to Sandy Spring, so we can digitize their records and apply the same process to create new cross-institutional digital items centering Black histories and applying the same degree of descriptive metadata that the white creators of documents have.

While many archivists are engaged in equity projects, including reparative metadata and cataloging (i.e., using terminology that no longer favors a white, colonial perspective), we are not aware of others who are *extracting* Black history that is dispersed throughout white documents in this way. Nor are we aware of others creating new digital items by extracting pages that reference specific people. We were able to come up with this approach because we were singularly focused on centering and providing access to the Black stories by leveraging all the tools afforded us on a digital platform without



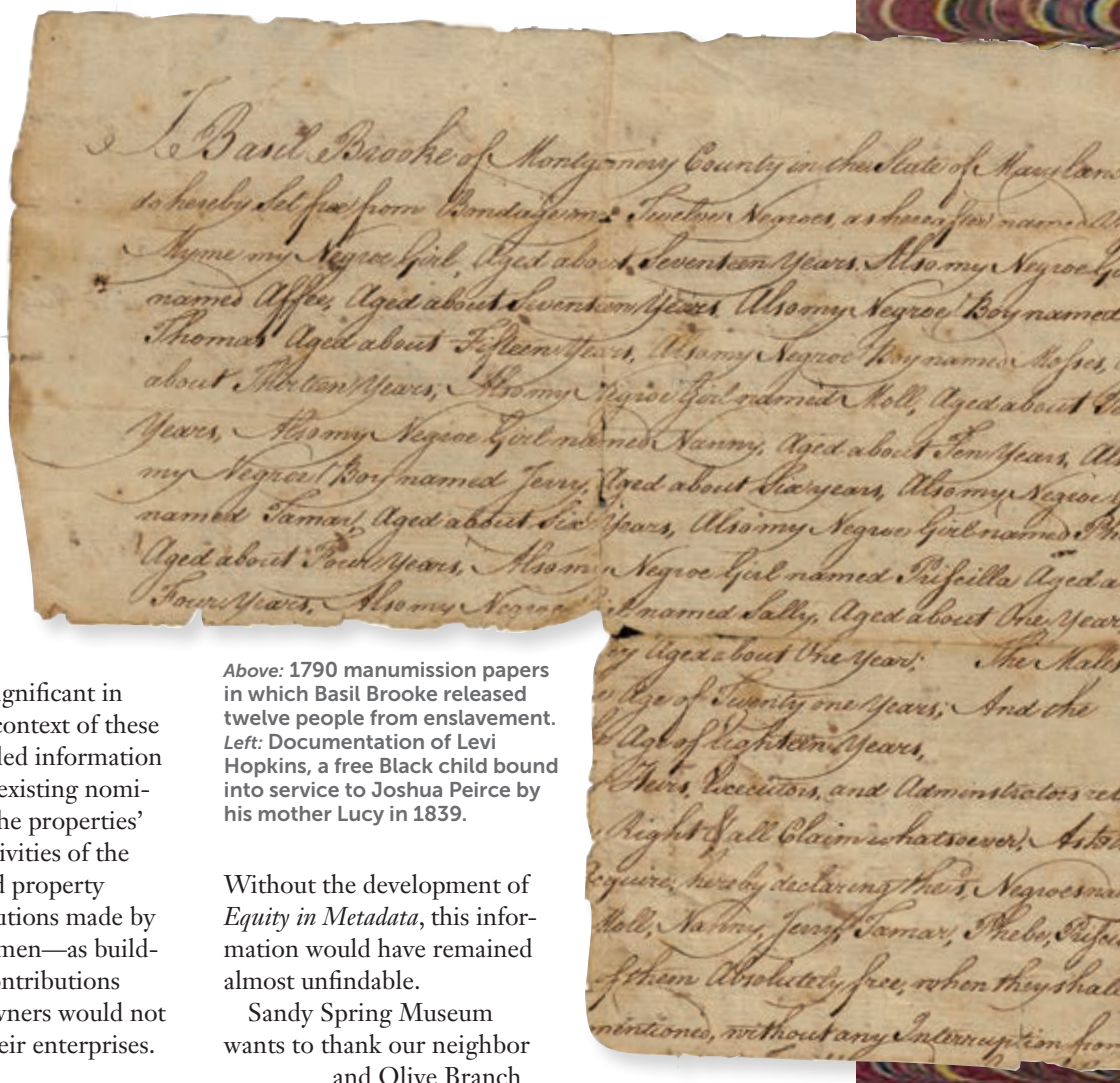
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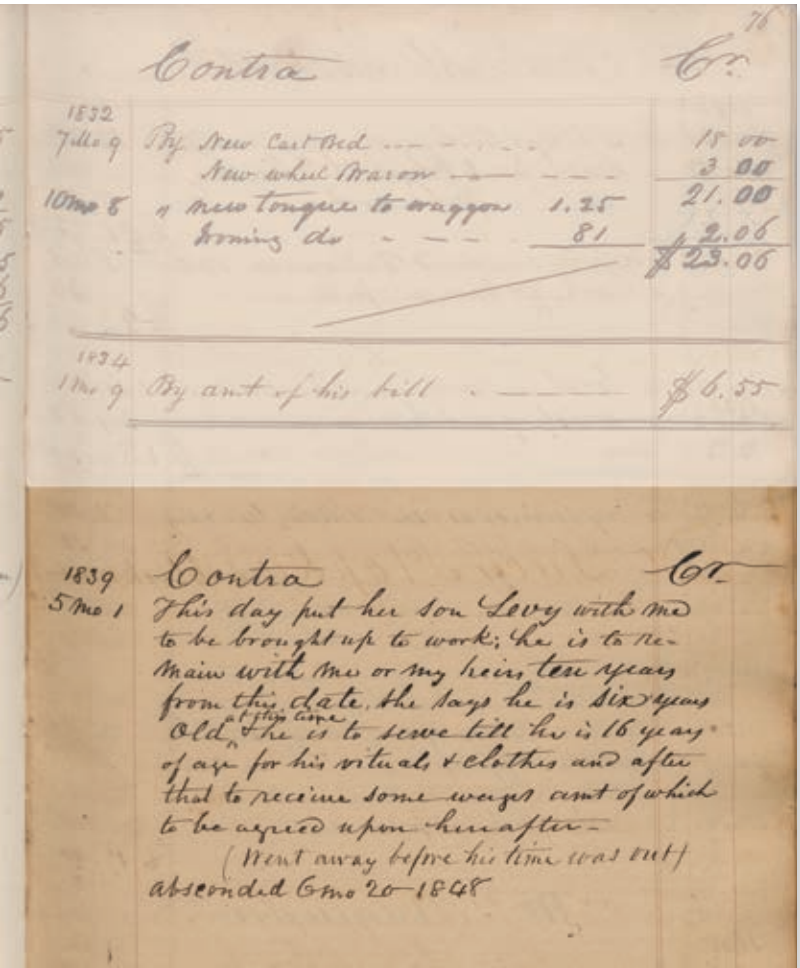
This statement, crafted by descendants, appears in catalog records containing medical data.

In this country, medicine has a long history of abusing Black people without their knowledge and often against their will, sometimes under the guise of furthering science. Dr. Caleb Edward Iddings treated many Black people in the Sandy Spring, Maryland community between 1879 and 1904. His account ledgers provide valuable information of interest to a broad public. The ledgers also contain harmful language that compromises dignity and privacy when describing Black people. As descendants of Dr. Iddings' patients, we have identified and redacted the harmful content on this publicly accessible platform. Permission to access the original, unaltered documents will be reviewed on a case-by-case basis by the Sandy Spring African American Descendant Committee.

being encumbered by "standard archival practice." It also helped that our collection is limited in scope, both geographically and numerically.

Implementing *Equity in Metadata* has revealed information about local Black history that can benefit everyone's understanding of the region's built environment as well. For example, we are currently developing addendums to the National Register of Historic Places Nomination Forms and/or Maryland Historical Trust State Historic Sites Inventory Forms for local properties previously identified as historically significant in order to enhance the socio-cultural context of these sites by incorporating recently revealed information about local Black history. While the existing nominations focus almost exclusively on the properties' architectural significance and the activities of the white property owners, the enhanced property descriptions will include the contributions made by free and enslaved Black men and women—as builders, laborers, and housekeepers—, contributions without which the white property owners would not have been able to successfully run their enterprises.


I Basil Brooke of Montgomery County in the State of Maryland do hereby set free from Bondage Twelve Negroes as shewn by their names Thyme my Negroe Girl, Aged about Seventeen Years. Also my Negroe Girl named Affee, Aged about Seventeen Years. Also my Negroe Boy named Thomas Aged about Fifteen Years. Also my Negroe Boy named Moses, about Thirteen Years. Also my Negroe Girl named Moll, Aged about Years. Also my Negroe Girl named Nanny, Aged about Ten Years. my Negroe Boy named Jerry, Aged about Six years. Also my Negroe named Tamar, Aged about Six Years. Also my Negroe Girl named Aged about Four Years. Also my Negroe Girl named Priscilla Aged Four Years. Also my Negroe Girl named Sally, Aged about One Year Aged about One Year. The Male Age of Twenty one Years. And the Age of Eighteen Years. Heirs Executors and Administrators Right & all Claim whatsoever require, hereby declaring that Negroes Moll, Nanny, Jerry, Tamar, Phebe, Priscilla Them Absolutely free, when they shall mentioned, without any Interruption


Contra Cr.
1832 Feby 9 By New Cart Bed — 15 00
New wheel Barrow — 3 00
10mo 8 " new tongues to waggon 1.25 — 21.00
Ironing do — 81 — 2.06
$23.06
1834 1mo 9 By amt of his bill — $6.55
1839 5mo 1 Contra Cr.
This day put her son Levy with me to be brought up to work; he is to remain with me or my heirs ten years from this date. she says he is Six years old & the 13th inst he is to serve till he is 16 years of age for his victuals & clothes and after that to receive some wages amt of which to be agreed upon hereafter—
(Went away before his time was out)
absconded 6mo 20 1848

Above: 1790 manumission papers in which Basil Brooke released twelve people from enslavement. *Left:* Documentation of Levi Hopkins, a free Black child bound into service to Joshua Peirce by his mother Lucy in 1839.

Without the development of *Equity in Metadata*, this information would have remained almost unfindable.

Sandy Spring Museum wants to thank our neighbor and Olive Branch Community Church elder Jefferi Lee for planting the seed for our work. When we shared with him that we wanted to make information about Black history as accessible as information about white history, he commented on the importance of simply recognizing that "we were there, too." To us, that recognition starts with ensuring that every person of color who is mentioned in the museum's collection, no matter how briefly, deserves their own records, with their own points of access. For forty years, Sandy Spring Museum and archival practices were unconsciously overlooking half of the community's history, but this project demonstrates the possibilities and rewards of taking action to restore these essential stories.



Allison Weiss is Executive Director of Sandy Spring Museum. She sees museums through the lens of a community builder and has made a career of transforming local museums into centers of community engagement. Contact her at aweiss@sandyspringmuseum.org.