



April 5, 2023

Reuben B. Collins, II, Commissioner President
Ralph E. Patterson, II, Commissioner Vice President
Gilbert O. Bowling, III, Commissioner
Thomasina O. Coates, Commissioner
Amanda M. Stewart, Commissioner
Board of Charles County Commissioners
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GENERAL COUNSEL

Dear Charles County Commissioners:

We are writing with grave concerns about the treatment of the Cedarville Band of Piscataway Indians regarding the County's troubling decision to evict the Cedarville Band from their land, tended by them for more than 40 years and inhabited by their ancestors for thousands of years. The Cedarville Band is a survivor of our nation's shameful history of genocide, dispossession, and discrimination committed by European colonizers, and continued throughout history by those in power.¹ As a Maryland State-recognized tribe,² the Cedarville Band should not be driven from their own lands, akin to the atrocities committed by European colonizers in the 17th Century, and continue to this day.

We urge you, in the immediate term, to halt the eviction of the Cedarville Band of Piscataway Indians from the land they have occupied and tended consistently for the past 40 years, which is their ancestral hunting grounds since before European colonizers stepped foot in Maryland.

The Cedarville Band of Piscataway Indians and the Piscataway Indian Museum and Cultural Center

From the moment Europeans made landfall in Maryland in the 17th Century, physical displacement, killing, cultural disruption, and denial of sovereignty began for "the People where the rivers bend," who call themselves the Piscataway. Today, the Wild Turkey Clan of the Cedarville Band of Piscataway Indians occupy a roughly 16-acre tract bordering

¹ <https://news.maryland.gov/dnr/2018/10/01/piscataway-conoy/>.

² <https://msa.maryland.gov/megafile/msa/speccol/sc5300/sc5339/000113/016000/016239/unrestricted/20130091e-001.pdf>;
<https://msa.maryland.gov/msa/mdmanual/01glance/native/html/01native.html>
<https://www.baltimoresun.com/maryland/bs-md-omalley-tribes-20120109-story.html>

Charles and Prince George's counties. They have held, helped restore, and reestablished their connection to the land at issue since 1979.

Natalie Standingontherock Proctor is the current elected Tribal Chair for the Cedarville Band, and Executive Director of the Cedarville Band's nonprofit, Cedarville Band of Piscataway Indians, Inc. The Cedarville Band has been leasing the land from Charles County and Tribal Chair Natalie Standingontherock has been taking steps to secure a land donation. The land they currently occupy, and the land of which they seek ownership, is their ancestral winter hunting grounds.

Since 1979, the Cedarville Band has used the land for religious ceremonies and cultural purposes, as well as historical documentation and preservation. The land has been a center for Indigenous culture, and they have shared their land and culture with the public through their biannual Pow Wows from 1982 through 2014, school field trips, and other public events. The Piscataway Indian Museum and Cultural Center, Maryland's only Piscataway-focused museum, is located there. The Cultural Center protects precious artifacts of Maryland's Indigenous history, from textiles to delicate paper records, as well as whole structures that cannot be moved. The museum displays, design, and construction have been created entirely by the hands of the Piscataway people and are extremely meaningful to the Cedarville Band.

The Cultural Center is a cultural gem for Maryland and Charles County. The Cedarville Band of Piscataway Indians has partnered with well-known museums and foundations who are currently invested in environmental, archival, and historical projects based on this land. For decades, the Cedarville Band, in partnership with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, has invested significant time and resources to help clean up the land, which used to be a federally owned Nike missile site that had left the land toxic.³ Because of the Cedarville Band's commitment to preserving the land, the land has been nearly restored. The Cultural Center is featured on tourism sites like visitmaryland.org and Travel Lens, the programs and events on their land have been celebrated by the local press and community, and they have drawn visitors and partners from around the world.

The dispossession of their land comes at an enormous cost: the Cedarville Band will have to permanently close the Piscataway Indian Museum and Cultural Center and abandon valuable sacred artifacts. The land itself is an artifact with deep historical, religious, and cultural significance. The County's threat of eviction has caused great hardship to the Cedarville Band who are trying to safely move delicate artifacts⁴, taking off work to dismantle the exhibits, seeking support from museums to temporarily house artifacts, and processing the emotionally devastating possibility that the cultural refuge that has served Indigenous people for generations will be destroyed on April 9.

³https://mde.maryland.gov/programs/LAND/MarylandBrownfieldVCP/Documents/Waldorf_Nike.pdf (The Cedarville Band was formerly called the Maryland Indian Heritage Society).

⁴ Attached to this letter, are photographs of items that the Cedarville Band will have to abandon because they cannot be moved.

The Lease Agreement and LandBack⁵

Prior lease agreements between the Charles County Commission and the Cedarville Band recognize the value of the land to the Cedarville Band, and even state in their preambles that the “Tenant [Cedarville Band], desires to **apply for permanent grant of the subject land, and the purpose of this Lease is to allow Tenant [Cedarville Band’s] current continued access to the subject land.**” The lease agreements between the County and the Cedarville Band also provides that the Cedarville Band lease the land for \$1 per year. It seems clear that the lease was only *pro forma*, and the true purpose was to provide the Cedarville Band access to the land until the necessary steps required for land “donation” were completed and the land could get back into the hands of Indigenous people.

The Cedarville Band has been seeking ownership of the land since before the federal government transferred the property to Charles County. Once the State recognized the Cedarville Band in 2012, legal transfer of the land to the nonprofit became an option, but in order to receive a land donation, the County required the Cedarville Band to jump through numerous bureaucratic hoops⁶ including insistence that the Cedarville Band pay a nonrefundable \$10,000 for a land survey, before the County will even consider the land transfer. Due to the County’s delay and inaction, the funding for the land survey was retracted, setting the Cedarville Band back in their effort to get their land back. Several community members sent letters of support to the County Commissioners in support of the land transfer.

The County has a process for transferring or gifting land “to a non-profit organization requesting the County gift them property which they may currently be leasing, and/or [if] the non-profit organization asserts a specific use for the property that would be of greater benefit to the public than the current use by the County.” Given that this land has been occupied by the Cedarville Band for 40 years and they have provided an invaluable contribution to their people and the people of Maryland through environmental restoration, cultural empowerment, education, and healing, it makes no sense that the County would continue the back and forth of lease agreements and land transfer delays. As contemplated in the preamble of the lease agreement, the land should be returned back to the Cedarville Band.

The very fact that the Cedarville Band is forced to lease this land that was forcibly stolen from them is offensive, let alone the impending eviction by the County. **Reversing course and stopping the eviction is the first step to recognizing the Cedarville Band’s humanity.**

In the longer term, **Charles County should “donate” the land to the Cedarville Band of Piscataway Indians,** so the land may be returned, and the Cultural Center, programming, and partnerships can continue. Returning the land would affirmatively recognize and show appreciation for the people who have been preserving American history and Indigenous

⁵ The LandBack movement fights to get land back into the hands of Indigenous people. <https://landback.org>.

⁶ These steps included gathering forms and Standard Operating Procedures, sending a letter of request to the County Council, submitting forms and paperwork, securing a \$10,000 grant from the Tri County Council for Southern Maryland to cover the cost of the land survey, and sending dozens of emails inquiring about the status of their request in between each step.

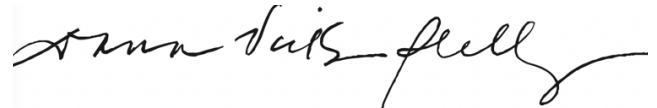
American culture on this land and allow them to continue cultivating and preserving traditions that have been nearly erased. Eviction of native people, from native land, is the tradition of genocide, not redemption.

We sincerely hope that the Commission can take this opportunity to be a part of the solution and recognize the humanity of the Cedarville Band of Piscataway Indians. Eviction is not the answer.

If you have any questions or would like to speak with us, please call 667-219-2613.

Sincerely,

AMERICAN CIVIL
LIBERTIES UNION
FOUNDATION OF
MARYLAND



Dana Vickers Shelley, Executive Director
American Civil Liberties Union of Maryland



Nick Taichi Steiner, Staff Attorney
American Civil Liberties Union of Maryland



Debra Gardner, Legal Director
Public Justice Center

Attachment: Photos

Cc: Wes Adams

The Cedarville Band of Piscataway Indians, the Piscataway Indian Museum and Cultural Center, and what will be destroyed if Charles County proceeds with their planned eviction:

