



State Representative Dontavius L. Jarrells

June 13, 2024

The Honorable Mike DeWine
Governor of Ohio
77 S. High Street, 30th Floor
Columbus, OH 43215

Cc: various state agencies, elected officials

Dear Governor DeWine:

As the fundamental freedoms that would shape America were being drafted, our Founding Fathers declared that the People were “*endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.*”

The Founders understood that the democracy they were forming, and prepared to die for, was never meant to be a completed work. They envisioned it as an ongoing endeavor, a struggle that future generations would continue to fight for and never give up on. Today, this work is more crucial than ever.

To “*form a more perfect Union,*” we, as responsible citizens and leaders, must carry forward the dream of our Founding Fathers and push our great country and its people forward. This often requires us to acknowledge our failures, learn from them, and continue forging ahead together.

Our greatest mistake, America’s original sin, has been and remains—the enduring legacy of slavery. However, we occasionally have the chance to eradicate some of the roots of racism and correct history’s greatest wrongs. I find myself at the brink of such an opportunity, and I ask for your support.

The story of the Randolph Freedpeople and their place in Ohio history recently came to my attention, presenting an opportunity. For those unaware, let me briefly enlighten

you. Upon his death in 1833, John Randolph of Roanoke, Virginia, freed his roughly 400 slaves, stating in his will that he “give and bequeath to all my slaves their freedom, heartily regretting that I have ever been the owner of one.”

Randolph also provided the freedpeople, known as The Randolph Freedpeople, with land and the means to relocate. After a prolonged legal battle over his will, the Randolph Freedpeople finally began their exodus from Roanoke, Virginia, in June 1846 to what was to be their new home in Mercer County, Ohio.

After several weeks of travel, the Randolph Freedpeople arrived in Cincinnati, where they took boats north on the Miami Erie Canal toward their final destination. However, word had spread to the white landowners in Mercer County that the former slaves were traveling to their new home legally inherited by them. The residents of Mercer County resolved, “*we will not live among negroes, and as we have settled here first, we have fully determined that we will resist the settlement of blacks and mulattos in this country, to the full extent of our means, the bayonet not excepted.*”

This was hardly in line with the dream of unalienable rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness for all.

When the Randolph Freedpeople finally made it to the shores of Mercer County, they were met by mobs of white residents and their bayonets. Left with the choice of staying and risking their lives, the Randolph Freedpeople turned their boats around and headed south along the canal.

Like Moses leading the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt, the Randolph Freedpeople were denied entrance to their promised land and forced to wander. They eventually settled in parts of Shelby and Miami County, with many making Piqua, Ohio, their new home. For generations now, they have contributed to their community, to Ohio, and to America.

Considering this all happened in the years leading up to the Civil War, with a nation divided, the freedom promised to slaves in the North was anything but guaranteed. How Ohio handled this situation is a prime example. Despite being given their freedom, Ohio turned its back on the Randolph Freedpeople. Now is the time for Ohio to acknowledge its failure, learn from it, and move forward.

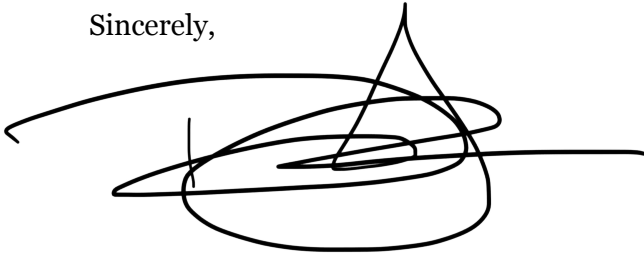
With the help of descendants of the Randolph Freedpeople and other local leaders, I am exploring legal and just means to right this wrong and I seek your support.

I propose identifying all options to address the injustices faced by the descendants of the Randolph Freedpeople. Ohio lacked the courage to do the right thing then, but I believe we have the courage today.

This is our opportunity to continue the work started by our Founding Fathers. We can recognize this dark, untold story from Ohio's past and write a new chapter that brings hope, closure, and the promise of a better future. The America we live in today does not have to reflect the one our ancestors lived in. We can seize opportunities like this one and, together, build a more perfect union, **for all of us**.

Thank you for your time and swift attention to this matter.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Dontavius L. Jarrells". The signature is highly stylized and cursive, with a large loop at the end.

Dontavius L. Jarrells
Assistant Minority Leader
1st House District