

The HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF HARFORD COUNTY, Inc.

Preserving Our Past For Your Future



143 N. Main Street
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Society News

March / April 2018

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The Historical Society of
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JAMES ARMISTEAD LAFAYETTE

by Jacob Bensen

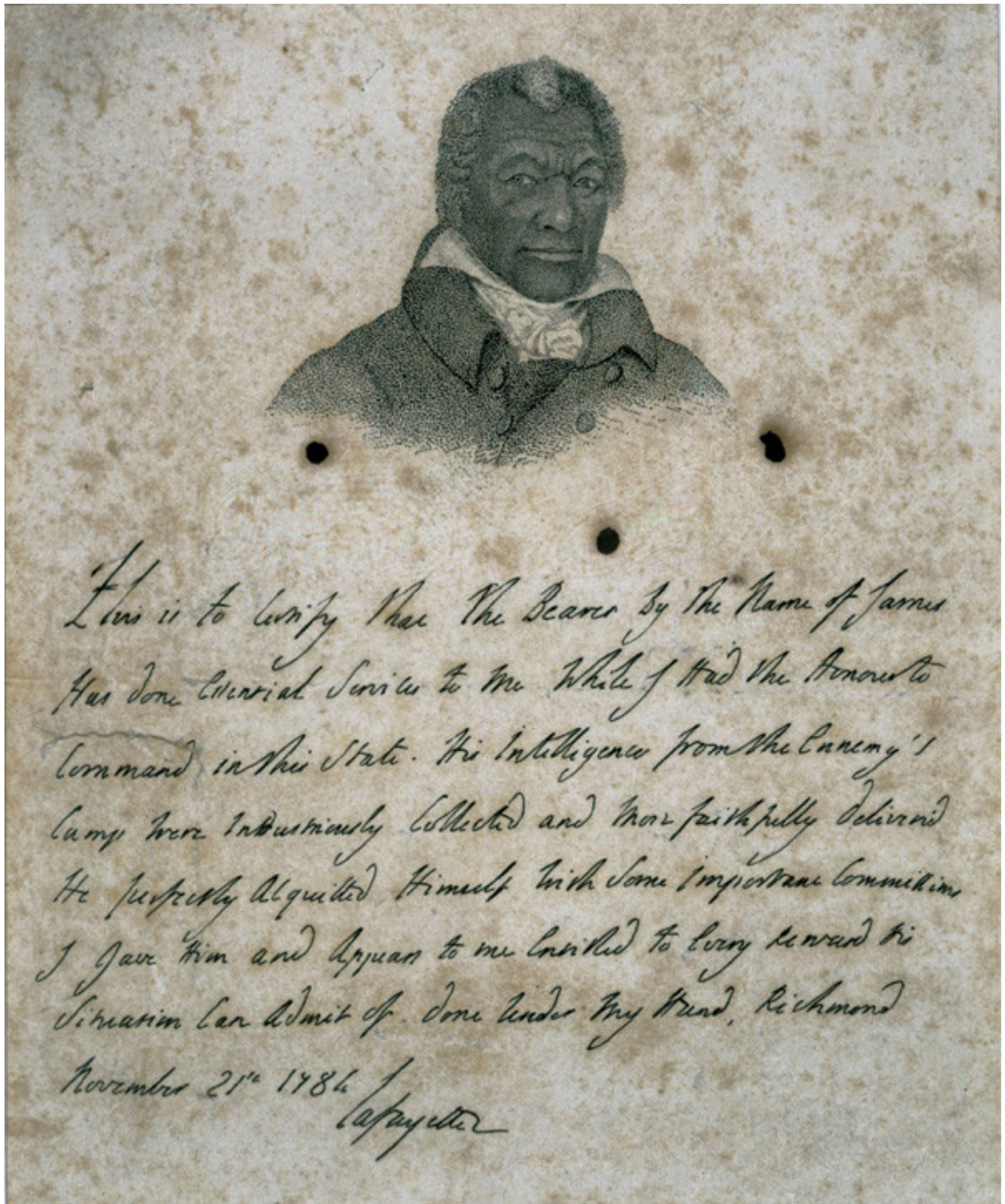
In late 2014, I began a project for The Historical Society of Harford County, researching the publication of J. Alexis Shriver's 1931 book *Lafayette in Harford County*. As part of my research I discovered that a set of printing plates within the Society's collections, used in the production of Shriver's book, were originally produced for the 1907 book, *An Account of the Life of Marie Joseph Paul Yves Roch Gilbert Dumotier Marquis de La Fayette*. The book, which Shriver consulted during his research, was compiled by George P. Tilton of the Towle Silver Manufacturing Company to advertise a La Fayette pattern of silverware.

While this discovery solved the mystery of the Society's printing plates, further study of the Towle Company's book created a new mystery. Amongst the book's illustrations (although not one of the illustrations used by J. Alexis Shriver) is a drawing of a man of African descent wearing 18th century-style clothing, accompanied by a letter from the Marquis de Lafayette and dated 1781. The image is labeled "Portrait and Letter by La Fayette from the Original in the Capitol, Richmond," with no further mention of the portrait or letter in the book. Who was this man? What was his connection to the Marquis de Lafayette? I was unable to find any clues to the mystery man's identity in any of the other information that I had found on Lafayette or the American Revolution.

The answer would finally reveal itself while I was reading the Winter 2018 issue of *Trend & Tradition*, the magazine of Colonial Williamsburg. The image that I had puzzled over from the Towle book was reproduced in high quality, this time with a detailed label. The "mystery man" was James Armistead Lafayette, who had served as a spy under the Marquis de Lafayette during the American Revolution. Although the drawing was a later addition to the letter, based on an 1824 portrait by John B. Martin, the letter itself was written by the Marquis de Lafayette in 1784, giving his support to

(cont'd on page 2)

(cont'd from page 1)



Engraved portrait of James Armistead Lafayette, c.1759-1830. (Image: Virginia Historical Society)

James Armistead Lafayette's manumission. James Armistead Lafayette is a new addition to the Colonial Williamsburg Nation Builders program and is portrayed by interpreter Stephen Seals.

James Armistead Lafayette was born into slavery in 1748 in Virginia, where he became the manservant of William Armistead Jr. while they were both still children. Growing up alongside his young master, James learned to read and write in both English and French, skills which would benefit him greatly during the Revolution. James likely joined the Patriots' spy ring as a means of gaining freedom for himself and his wife, Sylvia.

Moving back and forth between the American and British encampments, likely under the guise of a runaway slave, James brought information about British troop movements and battle plans to the Marquis de Lafayette. The Marquis, who only referred to James as an "honest friend" when writing about his work, would then present the information to General George Washington. The intelligence collected by James, and other members of the Marquis' spy ring, was vital to the American victory at the Battle of Yorktown.

Despite the important role that he played in the American Revolution and the support of the Marquis de Lafayette, James remained enslaved until 1787. In honor of the Marquis' trust in him during the Revolution and his assistance in petitioning for James' freedom, he adopted for himself the surname of Lafayette. After gaining his freedom, James purchased 40 acres of land in Virginia, making his living as a farmer. James also was able to purchase some of his enslaved family members, likely with the intention of protecting and freeing them. In 1818, James began receiving his pension of \$40 per year as a veteran of the Revolution and in 1824 he used donations from the public to be able to visit the Marquis de Lafayette in Richmond during the Marquis' grand tour of the United States. James died in 1832 at the age of 72.

It is thanks to the work of researchers and interpreters like Stephen Seals that Colonial Williamsburg can tell a more complete version of the Revolutionary War, going beyond generals, armies, and battles. Since reading the article in *Trend and Tradition*, I have written to the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation and informed them of my discovery in the Historical Society's library and thanking Mr. Seals for bringing the story of James Armistead Lafayette to life. I will be sending Mr. Seals a copy of J. Alexis Shriver's book and the Towle Silver text to add to his personal reference library. I hope to be able to travel to Colonial Williamsburg and see Mr. Seals' portrayal of James Armistead Lafayette myself soon and encourage anyone planning a trip to the site to do the same.

NEW MEMBERS

Mrs. Alicia Batterton

Jan Beane

Lorrie Chieffo

Brian Chisholm

Daniel Cole

Tierra Cotton-Kellow

Terri DeVor

Judith Eagan

Tom Fitzpatrick

Brenda Furches

Tod and Sophie Hayes

Patrick Luft

Alicia Menefee

Julia Ruhnke

Stephen P. Smith

Mr. and Mrs. John W. Stump

Charles Tylander

Jeanne Doged Weiss

CASSANDRA SMITHSON GOVER

by Elizabeth Lehmann

Who was Cassandra Smithson Gover?

A painting holding a place of prominence at Hays House for many years is a portrait of Cassandra G(over) Smithson Gover painted in 1853 by renowned artist Alfred Jacob Miller.

Miller, best known for his paintings of Native American scenes of the late 1800s, also was commissioned to paint portraits of many prominent Baltimore area residents of his era. Many of Miller's works are in the Walters Museum collection in Baltimore, and his Western scenes are in numerous prestigious museums. His catalogue raisonné lists a number of portraits painted for Gover family members in the 1850s including for George P. Gover, Robert Gover, T.H. Gover, "Mrs. Gover", and "Infant child of Girard (sic) Gover", all painted for fees he recorded as ranging from \$35 to \$150.

Harford County records show Govers living in the area dating back to the 1700s. Govers owned land and slaves at Deer Creek Lower Hundred and Susquehanna Hundred in the late 1700s, and many of them served in the Revolutionary War. Gerard Gover and Philip Gover were brothers who were prominent in financial circles in Baltimore in the mid-1800s. Directories from the time list Gerard and George P. Gover working for a banking and brokerage firm in Baltimore in the 1850s-1860s but living in Harford County. Records at the Maryland Historical Society also list Gover as participating in several other Baltimore financial institutions.

Gerard Gover built Gover's Mill in 1854 on Deer Creek near Trappe Church. This flour mill was sold to Benjamin Noble in 1869 and was subsequently known as Noble's Mill. Also from MHS records, it is believed that this is the Gerard Gover who married his first cousin Cassandra G. Smithson in 1850.

Cassandra G. Smithson Gover was born in Harford County in 1824 to William Smithson, a veteran of the War of 1812, and Margaret Hall Lee. According to the obituary printed in *The Aegis*, she died at her home in Fountain Green on June 28, 1920 at the age of 96. She was survived by three daughters, Misses Bessie and May



Cassandra Smithson Gover portrait by Alfred Jacob Miller that hung in the Hays House for many years.



Portrait believed to be of Gerard Gover.

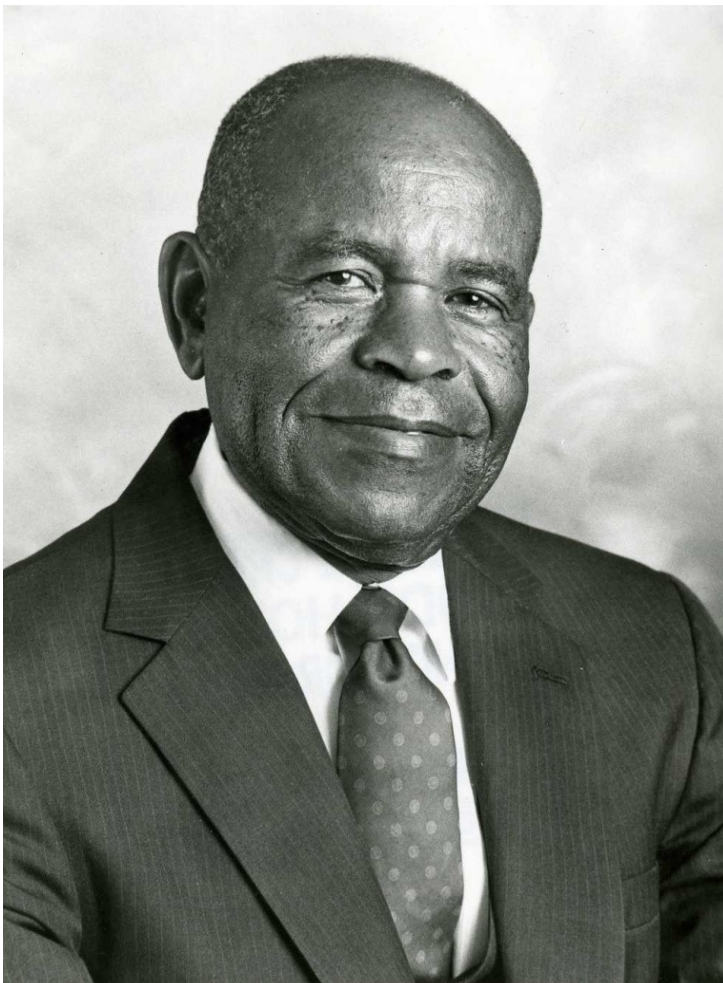
Gover, Mrs. George D. Patterson, and one son, Harry Gover. As is often the case with women's history, little else is known about Cassandra G. Smithson Gover.

Another portrait in the archives of the Harford County Historical Society is believed to be of Cassandra's husband Gerard. Although its provenance is not as compelling, it may also be one of the Gover portraits attributable to Alfred Jacob Miller.

Both Gover portraits, and their frames, need restoration. Cassandra's portrait hung over the mantel in the Hays House Dining Room for many years. Moving it to paint the house interior revealed the delicate condition of its frame not permitting it to be rehung in its current condition. The portrait believed to be of Gerard has been in storage as both the painting and the frame need repair. Restoration of these paintings with a cost estimate of several thousand dollars is on the Society's wish list. Cassandra's presence watching over Hays House docents and visitors is sorely missed.

DR. PERCY V. WILLIAMS, 1914 – 2009

by James E. Chrismer



Dr. Percy V. Williams (Photo: HCPS.org)

Percy V. Williams was a giant in the field of public education in Harford County, Maryland. Despite being raised in a rural county where segregation was the norm, and ambitious Black students received only an eight-grade education, Percy Williams went on to become a certified teacher, a principal, supervisor, member and president of the county Board of Education, and an Assistant State Superintendent of Maryland Schools.

Percy Williams personified the work ethic ascribed to Booker T. Washington and the notion of the Talented Tenth of W. E. B. DuBois. The oldest son of ten children born to subsistence farmers, Vandella and Hattie Williams of Perryman and then Havre de Grace, young Williams travelled daily by train to Elkton MD to attend a high school. Unable to afford the then-private Morgan College, he attended Bowie State Normal School for two years to earn a teaching certificate.

Much of Percy Williams' early life was spent in travel. While teaching for ten years at the segregated Havre de Grace Elementary School, he spent summers completing his

Bachelor's and Master's degrees at Virginia State University (1938) in Petersburg and Temple University (1941) in Philadelphia. He later went on to earn a doctorate at New York University as the State of Maryland prohibited Blacks from attending its graduate schools. In 1943 the 29-year old Williams was drafted into the Army, graduated from Officer's Training School, and spent three years in the military, serving in both the European and Pacific Theatres of War.

Returning to segregated Harford County in 1946, School Superintendent Charles Willis appointed Williams Supervisor of Colored Schools, a post he held until 1950 when he became the first principal of the new Central Consolidated School, Grades 1-12 (now Hickory Elementary). It was during the subsequent twelve years that Dr. Williams began to quietly grapple with Dr. Willis and the Board of Education over its continuing segregationist policies despite the Supreme Court ruling in *Brown vs. Board of Education* (1954).

In 1962 Percy Williams became Assistant State Superintendent of Schools. Focused especially on Early Childhood Education, he also dealt with programs in compensatory education, urban education, and programs for the state's gifted and talented students. Dr. Williams officially retired from the state school in 1982, as the highest-ranking State Education Department official in the history of Harford County.

Despite retirement, Percy Williams continued to serve the interests of the county's public-school students. In 1984 Governor Harry Hughes named the 70-year old Williams to the Board of Education of Harford County. He served two 5-year terms, including two years as president, becoming the first African American in county history to hold the position. While on the Board, Dr. Williams sought to rid the county system of any vestiges of racial or sexual discrimination. In 1999 *the Bel Air Aegis* Newspaper named Dr. Percy V. Williams one of Harford County's Most Influential Persons of the 20th Century.

In the spring of 2017, members of Dr. Williams' family met with the Historical Society's director, Maryanna Skowronski, to discuss the possibility of donating his papers to the Society. At the close of the discussion it was decided that the Society would become the repository for the educator's personal and professional files.

The papers, having been in storage since Dr. Williams' passing were in compromised condition having suffered water damage and in need of professional archival conservation work in a manner beyond the capability of the Society. A grant was written requesting funds for the project. The Society was honored to receive funding in the amount of \$6000 from the National Endowment for the Humanities to be used for the first phase of the project. At this writing the collection is currently at the Conservation Center for Art and Historic Artifacts in Philadelphia where work has already begun.

This NEH grant is the first to be awarded by the organization to the Society and was given in recognition of the national significance and importance of Dr. Williams' papers.

HELP WANTED

Artifacts: Volunteers are still needed to Sort, Organize and Move boxes of Artifacts. This is a one-day (a few hours) job. Boxes are numbered but unorganized. They need to be put in proper order and readied for inventory. Volunteers must be able to carry medium weight boxes. The day of the project would be coordinated according to the volunteer's schedule.

Court Records: Volunteers are needed to work with the Court Records Committee to help organize and inventory the court record books in the Society's possession. This committee meets on Tuesdays 9 am – 3 pm.

Smithsonian Exhibit: A volunteer is needed to photograph the Society's collection of Harford County panels created for a Smithsonian exhibit and to develop an inventory binder describing each panel.

Bookkeeping Assistant: A volunteer is needed to develop and maintain a spreadsheet to track Society income and expenditures for general administration activities, grants, and events. Time is flexible.

If you would like to volunteer but need more information, we would be happy to speak with you about a volunteer position that matches your interest and availability. We hope to hear from you and welcome inquiries.

COMING EVENTS

Brown Bag Lunch Series (12:30 P. M.)

- **March 13** - *Saving Toodles: Stories of Daring Wildlife Rescue and Dedication*; Speaker - Scott McDaniel.
- **April 10** - *Farming, Hunting and Fishing: Exploring the Mainstay of Early Harford County*; Multiple speakers.

Genealogy Workshop

March 14th - Historical Society Headquarters; Chris Smithson talks about the Maryland State Archives; 7:00-9:00 P.M.; Fee \$10

Volunteer Open House

March 24 - Visit headquarters for a tour and hear about volunteer opportunities; 10:00 A.M.-2:00 PM

Genealogy Fair

March 24 - Reckord Armory, 37 N. Main Street, Bel Air; 8:15 A.M. - 4:30 P.M.; free admission.

Hays House

In March, Hays House Museum will open for the 2018 season with a full calendar of upcoming events. An exhibit of antique clothing will be on display for the season including a Civil War era wedding dress along with many other historic garments from the historical society's textile collection.

The Hays House Learning Bee Series gets underway on **March 11**. At 1:30 pm, Lizanne Smith, long-time member of the Warped Weavers Guild, will present a program entitled *Hand Weaving: Interpreting Old Designs for Today's Style*. An experienced weaver, she will talk about the design of several coverlets in the historical society's collection and demonstrate historic weaving techniques adapted for today's use.



On **March 25**, also at 1:30, doll collector Barbara Park will display and discuss Nancy Ann Storybook Dolls, a popular collectible for girls in the post-World War II era. Many of us "of a certain age" will fondly remember these dolls in their white box decorated with pink or blue polka dots. If you still have one, bring it along.

Join us in a walk through historic Bel Air on April 25 when Capt'n Jim McMahan talks about his childhood memories of visiting the Hays House with a program entitled *The History of Hays House through the Eyes of a Child*.

These special events are \$5 for adults and \$3 for seniors and students. Children under 4 are free as is parking adjacent to the museum. All events include a guided tour of the 1788 house, the oldest home in Bel Air.



Quarterly Lecture and Tea

April 21 - *Environmental Dilemma: Conowingo Dam's Impact on the Bay*; speaker Ted Evgeniadis; 2:00 - 4:00 P.M.; \$10, Reservations requested.

RESERVATION FORM

<u>Date</u>	<u>Event</u>	<u>Fee</u>	<u># Tickets</u>	<u>Amount</u>
Mar 14	Genealogy Workshop; Chris Smithson talks about the Maryland State Archives	\$10	_____	_____
Apr 21	Lecture & Tea: with Ted Evgeniadis - <i>Environmental Dilemma: Conowingo Dam's Impact on the Bay</i>	\$10	_____	_____

(Brown Bag Lunch Series is free. Hays House events are ticketed at door, no reservations required.)

TOTAL AMOUNT ENCLOSED \$_____

Name: _____ Ph. or E-Mail: _____

For more information, check the Society's website at www.HarfordHistory.org, www.Facebook.com/HarfordCountyHistoricalSociety or call 410-838-7691. Return your Reservation form to the Historical Society, 143 N. Main Street, Bel Air, MD. 21014.

*The Historical Society of Harford County is supported in part by a grant from the
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HISTORICAL SOCIETY and GIFT SHOP HOURS

Tuesday
COURT RECORDS
9:00 A.M. - 3:00 P.M.

Wednesday
ARCHIVES
9:00 A.M. - 3:00 P.M.

Thursday
RESEARCH LIBRARY
9:00 A.M. - 3:00 P.M.

Fourth Saturday
ARCHIVES and
RESEARCH LIBRARY
10:00 A.M. - 2:00 P.M.