

A TREASURE IN GEORGETOWN

Lisa M. Fager, Executive Director of Mt. Zion - Female Union Band Society

A wonderful treasure sits in Georgetown just past the corner of 27th and Q Streets. The glorious story of the Mount Zion Church and Female Union Band Society Cemeteries remains little known. However, the efforts of the Mount Zion/Female Union Band Historic Memorial Park Foundation, the organization responsible to manage the preservation and commemoration of these sacred sites, are generating awareness that may lead to the full reckoning of the historic contributions of African Americans to the development of our neighborhood and our nation.



The approximate three-acre property is composed of two roughly equal-sized halves, the Mount Zion Church Cemetery on the east and the Female Union Band Society Cemetery to the west. The northern and eastern property lines border Rock Creek Park, and the western line follows a ravine along the 27th Street, right-of-way (an unimproved public road) heading to Rock Creek. Historically called the Old Methodist Burying Ground, the cemetery originated as a churchyard burial ground in 1809.

On October 19, 1842, a tract of land along the western border of the Old Methodist Burying Ground was sold for \$250 to Joseph Mason in trust for the Female Union Band Society (FUBS), a mutual aid society founded by a group of free Black women. (Note – women during this time in history were legally unable to purchase property). In 1849, the establishment of Oak Hill Cemetery just to the west for “white-only” burials led numerous white families to transfer those buried at the Old Methodist Burying Ground. With declining use and costly maintenance, Mount Zion Church was granted a 99-year lease of the property and ownership was ultimately transferred to the church in 2017. There are an estimated 8,000-10,000 people interred in the cemeteries.



The cemeteries fell further into disrepair as burials ceased in 1950. An effort by commercial developers to acquire the property was forestalled by a local group led by fifth generation Georgetown native Neville Waters, Jr. (a descendant of several buried at the site) and historian and architect, Vincent de Forest from the Afro-American Bicentennial Corporation. On July 31, 1975, Judge Oliver Gasch issued a decision that nullified a previous order that would have disinterred bodies and sold the property. The Court's opinion stated that such an action would not only serve to deprecate the dead, but would also constitute “the destruction of a monument to evolving free Black culture in the District of Columbia.”



The property was then added to the National Register of Historic Places on August 6, 1975. Final legal issues regarding ownership were resolved in 2013 and I was named by the Foundation as its Executive Director in January 2019. I am passionate about our plan to preserve, re-imagine, and maintain care of this sacred space. Our valuable volunteer coordinator and East Village resident Patrick Tisdale, Jr has led an incredible volunteer program for general maintenance, headstone rehabilitation, and attacking our inva-

sive weeds. Our current priorities are to increase public awareness, site clean-up and stabilization, survey and documentation, restoration and maintenance, and fundraising.



The Foundation is intent on continuing to host educational programs and serve as a place for gatherings and reflection. Establishing a visitor center to tell the story of this important site and house research material and artifacts is part of the overall vision. A clear example of the site's historical significance is a still-standing structure for holding bodies awaiting burial that was a place of refuge along the Underground Railroad. Ironically, its location next to the once segregated Oak Hill Cemetery provides a stark and shocking contrast of inequality in our society. So our intent is to create sustainable financial support for this sacred space (it is not a dog park) and to respectfully acknowledge the contributions of African Americans to our history.

For more information about the Mt. Zion - Female Union Band Foundation and to make a contribution to support educational and community programs, landscaping and weed eradication, and planning future initiatives please visit www.blackgeorgetown.com.