

## Reclaiming Community Identity through Opera: Voices of Zion

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Community resilience rests on shared experience and history. And while lectures, historic markers, and walking tours commemorate what has come before, only the arts can bring those events—and the people who made them happen—back to life.

Voices of Zion—a new opera staged last month in Washington DC at Georgetown’s historic Dumbarton Methodist Church—underscored the role that artistic endeavors can play in this process. Featuring an original libretto written by Jarrod Lee, and music composed by 20-year-old UDC student and Duke Ellington High graduate Ronald “Trey” Walton III, Voices of Zion drew an audience of several dozen Washingtonians—young and old, White, and Black, theater buffs and community griots—to behold the coming back to life of spirits long forgotten in the city’s history.

The opera bears witness to the remarkable lives of a number of nineteenth-century African Americans who lived, worked and worshipped in Georgetown (Mary Burrell, Matilda Cartwright, Gracy Duckett, Mother Nancy Diggs, Hannah and Alfred Pope, Mary Beckett, and Charles Turner) as well as an Englishwoman named Mary Billings who labored to bring educational opportunities to every member of the community in that era.

The connection between these extraordinary and largely-forgotten lives can be found in the “Zion” of the opera’s title, which refers to the adjacent (and segregated) Black cemeteries of Mt. Zion United Methodist Church and the Female Union Band Society that the African-Americans in the opera helped to establish in Georgetown’s early decades.

These cemeteries have long been in a state of neglect and disrepair, and restoring the place of those buried in them in historical memory is at the center of the opera’s endeavor.

## **Troubled Souls, Troubled Songs**

The premise of *Voices of Zion* is deceptively simple: Lee and Walton call forth the spirits of the cemeteries to testify about the lives they lived in city where slavery and discrimination were institutionalized.

Yet this conceit opens up the opportunity for audience members to reflect on a vast repository of difficult history that still resides in quiet corners of a bustling neighborhood of the nation’s capital.

The souls summoned in the opera have become distressed that their lives and achievements have been overlooked in a Georgetown that no longer values community. They are joined in the piece by the spirit of Billings, who opened the first school for Black children in Washington, DC in 1810., She is troubled that the headstones for the children she once taught have been destroyed.

No Washington neighborhood has had as rich and varied an African American history as Georgetown, a port town that predated the establishment of the capital city. Slave and free, Georgetown’s Blacks established schools, churches, libraries, civic associations, and successful business of all kinds.

The story of the cemeteries at the center of *Voices of Zion* is a vivid illustration of this history, and that its performance was situated at Dumbarton Methodist Church is not happenstance. One of the world’s oldest Methodist congregations, Dumbarton was founded in 1772. The current sanctuary was consecrated in 1849 with a parade of prominent Washingtonians, including Abraham Lincoln, praying in its pews over the years.

Georgetown's Blacks, however, could only sit in the balcony of the church. Consequently, in 1813, members of the African American community set off to establish their own Mt. Zion Church.

One of the two Black cemeteries belonged to the Mt. Zion congregation; the other burial ground was established by a society of African American women – The Female Union Band Society. The society was formed to establish corporate ownership of the land at a time when women regardless of race were prohibited from owning property. The burial vault of this cemetery served as a station for slaves escaping along the Underground Railroad.

## **Tracing the Names**

The creative team of Voices of Zion searched out the names of those buried in these neglected sacred places on broken-down tombstones, researched their biographies, and set their stories to Lee's libretto and Walton's score. The life of Alfred Pope is among the tales retold. Pope, who worshiped at Mt. Zion, had been the leader of the ill-fated attempt by over 70 slaves to escape to freedom on the schooner "The Pearl" in 1848.

The opera also provides a corrective to the narrative established about the African American community in Georgetown and elsewhere in the city over centuries. Cancellation, erasure, and replacement have been occurring in Washington, D.C. for decades. African American communities and their histories have been displaced, replaced, ignored, and canceled from the city's understanding of itself with appalling regularity.

White supremacist Senator Francis G. Newlands of Nevada and his partners, for example, formed the Chevy Chase Land Corporation to cash in on newly established streetcar routes in the 1890s. Few noticed or cared that their plans required the destruction of the long-standing African American Belmont settlement.

When Federal officials fretted over photos showing African American slums standing within the shadow of the Capitol that were circulating in Soviet Cold War propaganda, few cared to improve the lot of those living there. Instead, urban renewal programs mobilized around plans conceived by I. M. Pei and others for a modernist-inspired cityscape.

In one notable instance, the 30,000 displaced poor, largely African American residents of Southwest Washington, in the words of the Washington Post, would have to get used to it for the common good of bringing "suburban wholesomeness with urban stimulation" to downtown.

## Reclaiming a Legacy

Unlike feverish screeds now appearing on the internet every day, these cancellations, erasures, and replacements in the saga of Washington, DC are historical facts. Their wounds require recognition to begin to be repaired. Indeed, the spirits of Voices of Zion return in part to scold living audience members seated in Dumbarton Methodist Church for having made such a muddle of the legacy they left behind them in Georgetown.

Indeed, the neighborhood on which the opera is centered fell on hard times by the turn-of-the-twentieth century. Georgetown became predominately African American by the Depression of the 1930s.

Eventually, as African Americans lost their majority within the city's population, well-meaning Washingtonians have taken belated notice. Historic markers have gone up; African American-themed walking tours have become popular. Street muralists regularly memorialize noteworthy African Americans and their institutions in neighborhoods that have become majority white. Cancel culture – the cancellation of African American history by newly arriving Washingtonians – indeed took root in Washington.

Historic preservationists charmed by the district's antebellum architecture created one of the first urban conservation districts in the nation simultaneously with similar efforts in Charleston and New Orleans. Resulting restrictive zoning regulations essentially outlawed the neighborhood's African American community of large extended families and non-related boarders. By the 1970s, upscale Whites had reinvented Georgetown as an elite redoubt. Neglected African American landmarks—such as the Mt. Zion United Methodist Church and the Female Union Band Society cemeteries—faded from memory

The reclamation of these sites in Voices of Zion is an act of acknowledgement of the city's history. Yet acknowledgment is only the beginning. Healing these wounds is a necessary step towards nurturing the community resilience that will be required to meet the challenges of climate change already looming ahead.

In recent years, volunteers and local history buffs cleared away the underbrush and erected signs pointing to the cemeteries celebrated in the opera, now hidden behind 1950s-era apartment buildings spread along Q Street heading to the Buffalo Bridge over Rock Creek Park. The new opera gives voice to long forgotten souls resting eternally in the Georgetown soil.

Successful communities need the emotional balm that performances such as Voices of Zion provide. Thanks to Lee, Walton, and their artistic partners, the spirits of those who once animated Black Georgetown have come back to life.

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***Photo Credit:** Lloyd Mallory as Charles Turner and Ayana Ogunsunlade as Hannah Pope in 'Voices of Zion.' Photo by Erika Nizborski, used with permission of DC Theater Arts.*