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At 2 Georgetown Cemeteries, History in Black and White

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Mount Zion Cemetery in the Georgetown neighborhood of Washington, which contains the remains of 500 to 1,500 people.

WASHINGTON — It is a tale of two cities of the dead. Two historic cemeteries lie side by side in Georgetown, separated by an overgrown dirt road, a rusting chain-link fence and two centuries of racial history.

On one side is Oak Hill, a lush slope of well-tended graves of congressmen, publishers and cabinet members who were, with few exceptions, white. On the other side is the Mount Zion and Female Union Band Society Cemetery. There, broken gravestones lie in large piles and dogs and their owners have taken the place of mourners for the slaves, freedmen and mostly black citizens buried below.

“There’s a quote: ‘Death reflects life, it’s not separate and apart,’” said Vincent deForest, a civil rights activist turned preservationist who has fought since the early 1970s to rescue Mount Zion. On a recent morning, to underscore the immortality of inequality, he stood in the black cemetery and pointed to the white cemetery.

“There,” he said, “we have a perfect reminder.”

Mr. deForest knows better than most. As the president of the Afro-American Bicentennial Corporation, which promoted minority involvement in the 1976 bicentennial, and later as a special assistant to the director of the National Park Service, he helped put the cemetery and dozens of other sites of importance to African-

Americans on the National Register of Historic Places, at a time when there were virtually none.

Vincent deForest next to a building at the Mount Zion cemetery that may have been part of the Underground Railroad. Fleeing slaves are thought to have hidden in a squat brick structure built into the side of a hill, which during the winter held bodies awaiting burial after the spring thaw.

Almost a half-century later, those efforts have become a case study in the difficulty of preserving black history, even in a capital where African-Americans long constituted a majority and the National Museum of African American History and Culture which opened last month to widespread acclaim.

"This was an important place to Georgetown and blacks here," said Thornell Page, a developer who has worked alongside Mr. deForest. "Strategically, it was erased."

Their hope is that a restored Mount Zion could be a model for similar neglected sites across the country and become a small monument, Dr. Page said, "to what happened to black people in America."

Mr. deForest estimates that there are 500 to 1,500 people, including some whites, buried at Mount Zion, residents of an earlier Georgetown that was far blacker and more industrial than it is today.

The cemetery is technically two, about 1.5 acres each, brought together by mutual neglect. The dividing line is no longer visible.

Grave markers at Mount Zion. The cemetery is accessible through a littered parking lot behind an apartment building and known mostly to locals.

To the east lies Mount Zion Cemetery itself, named for the city's oldest black congregation, Mount Zion United Methodist Church, but founded in 1808 by a white church in need of a place to put to rest its congregants and their enslaved workers. To

the west lies what is called the Female Union Band Society Cemetery, which was founded in 1842 by a benevolent society of free black women.

Today, despite different ownership, the cemeteries are managed as one and frequently referred to collectively as Mount Zion.

The cemetery was probably part of the Underground Railroad. Fleeing slaves are thought to have hidden in a squat brick structure built into the side of a hill, which during the winter held corpses awaiting burial after the spring thaw. From there, escaping slaves could have descended a few hundred yards to Rock Creek, a route that would have taken them along the Potomac River and eventually to free territory in Pennsylvania.

Mixed burials largely came to an end there after the early 1850s, when Oak Hill was completed next door and descendants disinterred the remains in many of the white plots for reburial.

After the Civil War, Mount Zion became a grazing ground for the horses of Washington's Metropolitan Railroad, even as burials continued. The cemetery's slide into obscurity over the next century tracked roughly with that of Georgetown's black population, which found itself increasingly marginalized as the neighborhood gentrified and evolved into a largely upper-class preserve. Today, less than 5 percent of Georgetown's residents are black.

Alicia deForest, the daughter of Vincent deForest, a civil rights activist turned preservationist who has fought since the early 1970s to rescue Mount Zion. She has taken increasing responsibility for the project.

As descendants of the dead in Mount Zion scattered from Georgetown, the cemetery became an increasingly remote island in a sea of white. The last burial was in 1950. By 1953, Mount Zion was in such disrepair that the city health department ordered it closed. In the 1960s, developers were eyeing the property, and a city judge, at the request of the cemeteries' owners, signed off on a mass disinterment.

Such was roughly the state of things when Mr. deForest became involved.

“You could not even see the tombstones when I got there — any of them,” Mr. deForest said. “The bramble and trees and erosion had made them invisible.”

Under his group’s direction and with the support of the Mount Zion church, volunteers from schools and colleges across the city cleared the grounds. Impacted graves were filled in and grave markers relocated for regrading. Plans were drawn up for a full restoration and potentially a museum.

Then the project stalled amid legal disputes and a lack of funds.

Today the cemetery is accessible through a littered parking lot behind an apartment building and known mostly to locals. Many of the grave markers made of more valuable stone have been stolen, destined to be sanded blank and resold for future burials. In 2012, the D.C. Preservation League put the cemetery on its list of most endangered places.

A restoration and preservation plan developed last year calls for regrading the site, putting in erosion controls and making other repairs. It also outlines the potential for incorporating remaining grave markers into some sort of memorial where visitors could learn and reflect. So far, there is little money for the group’s ambitions.

“It’s an opportunity to be a place that can stand as a symbol to the blacks who were a huge part of the development of this community,” said Alicia deForest, 47, Mr. deForest’s daughter, who has taken increasing responsibility for the project. She helped recruit to the cause Carrie Hull, a professional fund-raiser, who said the project will require millions of dollars and at least several years to complete.

Mr. deForest, 80, said he long ago came to terms with the difficulty of being an advocate for a group that has been doubly marginalized — in death and in the color of their skin.

“I come out of the civil rights movement,” Mr. deForest said. “Things don’t happen overnight. It takes effort. It takes convincing a whole lot of folks that this is important.”

Many years ago, Mr. deForest found a cardboard placard nailed to a tree near the dirt road dividing Mount Zion from Oak Hill, anonymously inscribed with a poem. Standing a few yards off on a recent early fall morning, he recited it by heart.

“These cities stand together,

like Buda and Pest.

Here, it’s not water,

It’s the color test.”