

Mount Zion & Oak Hill From the trails of Rock Creek Park to its sacred grounds

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Students explore the grounds of Mt. Zion Female Union Band Society Historic Memorial Park

Approached from the streets of Georgetown, the burial grounds lie tucked behind a row of townhouses and a narrow-shaded street. Along the other side of the perimeter, near the main entrance, runs a dirt road, dividing the cemetery from the tall iron gates of its neighbor. Hanging from a post and short double chain, a wooden sign announces the site:

Mt. Zion Cemetery (Old Methodist Burial Grounds) Female Union Band Cemetery

Beneath the sign, framed by metal posts about three feet in height, is a bronze plaque. It designates the grounds—two cemeteries—as landmarks of importance on the ***National Register of Historic Places***. A map etched into a brass medallion pinpoints their location in Georgetown.

Large stone flower pots surround the plaque and sign. A dirt path winds behind them into the grassy expanse of the cemeteries. It was from this vantage point that I encountered Mt. Zion Female Union Band Historic Memorial Park for the second time in my life. It was the summer of 2020, and I was meeting three of my top English students, accompanied by dozens of other young scholars from Washington area schools, to conduct research on the interred in these historic cemeteries—Mount Zion Cemetery and Female Union Band Cemetery.

The research effort was led by Mt. Zion Female Union Band Historic Memorial Park Foundation Executive Director Lisa Fager, President Neville Waters, lead researchers Garrett Lowe and Tom Duckenfield of Bethesda's Eagle Eye Tutoring, and facilitator Adelaide Barret. Leaves from the cemetery's broad-branched oak trees provided respite from the heat and humidity, but the air still vibrated with the energy of high school students gathering in person for the first time since the pandemic had closed their schools.

They formed an idyllic scene behind the cemetery's entrance. They had gathered to learn, honor, and preserve American history and heritage. In the wake of recent nationally broadcast incidents of

racial injustice, they recognized in the painstaking process of archival research the opportunity to honor Black lives past and present. As a documentarian's camera snapped away, these young, bright, optimistic, and photogenic students traveled the grounds exuding interest and reverence.

The first time I made acquaintance with Mt. Zion Female Union Band Memorial Park was on a bike ride with my father in the late 1990s. We frequently rode into DC from Bethesda on weekend adventures, and one of my father's favorite routes took us through Rock Creek Park and adjacent spaces.

We had been riding the trail for several miles when it descended beside a steep terraced hill protected by a chain link fence. "This is a historic African-American cemetery," my dad explained as we coasted alongside its perimeter. "Some of the gravestones are over a century old." I slowed down to peer through the links of the fence. Stone markers leaned at odd angles in the grass and wildflowers, seemingly frozen in a slow motion tumble.

My father explained that the headstones had shifted as sections of the hill eroded and were not adequately reinforced. The cemetery's historical significance had not guaranteed its perpetual upkeep. It would be over a decade before I fully understood the mechanics of structural racism, but I knew my dad and I had the same feelings about that scene. It was a wrong I had perceived before, one whose contours I had yet to understand.

When I couldn't wrestle an abstraction or put a name to a feeling, I inevitably turned to my dad. He was good at helping me understand things—not just by explaining them, but by talking them through, making me an equal partner in the enterprise. He was an expert listener, too: his eyes and smile radiated interest and reflection. Over the years, the topic of race arose in our conversations as a result of national news and from moments in my parents' lives, either recent or resurfaced in memory. Living in a community of near-homogenous racial demographics, I relied on my mom and dad's anecdotes and broader awareness of institutional racism to fill in the gaps of my own experience and education. My dad was the first to explain redlining to me, the process that resulted in greater racial and economic segregation in his home city of Chicago. He also recounted stories of colleagues who had been obliged to respond to others' racist comments and did so with savvy and dignity. These episodes helped my dad understand the additional burdens of advancing professionally as a person of color, and they deepened his respect for these colleagues.

When I learned the intertwined stories of Mt. Zion Cemetery and Oak Hill, the neighboring cemetery my family was considering for my dad's final resting place, I hesitated. When Oak Hill opened in 1853, many White families disinterred their ancestors who were laid to rest in Mt. Zion's grounds as members of the multiracial Montgomery Street Methodist congregation. This congregation, later known as the Dumbarton United Methodist congregation, comprised White and free and enslaved Black Georgetowners. It preceded Mt. Zion United Methodist Church (then known as Mt. Zion) and the Female Union Band, an African American mutual aid society, as owners

of the cemetery. These disinterments were a particularly disgraceful form of White flight but no less familiar than other instances in our country's past and present.

My older sister suggested that we connect with Mt. Zion Female Union Band Society Historic Memorial Park as members of the Oak Hill community. Ms. Fager, Mr. Waters, and their counsel John Seiver, accepted our proposal to meet and discuss a fundraising partnership.

As a result of this collaboration, our family and friends have helped us donate more than \$10,000 to Mt. Zion's innovative programming and development. Oak Hill published a story about my father and Mt. Zion in its fall 2020 newsletter. And my students and I were welcomed to the inaugural research project of Mt. Zion and Eagle Eye tutoring, amplifying Washingtonians' knowledge of their antecedents.

The students' work led them through an array of historic news posts, census records, and other documents that told the story of African American Georgetowners—of individuals who secured their freedom before the Civil War, whose former captors were compensated for their “loss of property,” who maintained and thrived with their families in the years following emancipation, and whose biographies gained greater dimension in the time students had to pursue their inquiry.

My appreciation of Mt. Zion's enduring historic and cultural significance may not have grown beyond my troubled first impression of its rear slope—at least not as soon—had my sister not urged our outreach in recognition of the cemeteries' shared history. The weathered gravestones had told me little of substance about the cemetery when I was a child, but the context my father provided helped fix that moment in my memory. Over twenty years later, it prompted my family's conversation about the implications of his burial in a historically privileged cemetery whose existence, regardless of its intentions, had negatively impacted its neighbor.

Watching my students, on that sunny and clear day, peer at the gravestones in the cemetery's main yard and marvel at the history and possibility behind their inscriptions—who was Nannie, the 8-year-old whose memorial still moves visitors to leave gifts at her gravesite? And John Francis, an infant who passed away in 1920? What is the meaning of the double-scrolled symbol chiseled into a concrete headstone?—a fuller picture surfaced, and I was grateful for the moments that had led me there: that uncomfortable first glimpse, my family's reckoning with history, and our effort to bridge part of that historical divide.

My father pursued knowledge his entire life: he seemed to intuit that his grasp of the world and its people would never be complete, that there would always be more to learn. This instinct was a source of humility and occasionally anxiety for him: he cared deeply about friends and loved ones and often worried at great length about how well he was supporting them. He had a sensibility for connecting with strangers: he tried to discover commonality with genuine interest and deference, never assuming a shared experience or worldview, but probing hopefully, ingratiatingly, for common ground. Catalogued in my memory is a lifetime of smiles my father brought to the faces of strangers we encountered in the course of a grocery store trip or doctor's office visit: people whose hometowns he had visited, whose first languages he recognized from travel abroad, who shared his

interest in classic cars, biking, writing, trains, Mario Lanza, the outdoors, history, solar power, self-driving cars, travel...

My sister, faced with our dilemma, wondered as I did how my dad would feel about his final resting place. Her father's daughter, she immediately dug deeper, discovered an opportunity, and made a connection. I am grateful for the courage, optimism, and pragmatism she inherited from our dad.

At the cemetery, my students discussed the lives of Washingtonians from a different era, individuals who confronted challenges and experienced rewards unique to the time they inhabited—before, during, and after the Civil War—and to their experiences as African Americans in Georgetown and in the country as a whole. The lives of the interred were ones of unique struggle. They were in crucial ways different from my father's, but they were also lives of optimism, courage, and joy.

My father would have treasured the opportunity to return to Mt. Zion Female Union Band Society Historic Park with me. We'd have discussed its history and paused to read the headstones we had once pedaled by. I am grateful that my dad's friends and family have honored him with their support of the park and its educational programs.