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Democracy Dies in Darkness

While working to restore two historic Black cemeteries, she discovered a construction crew digging on burial grounds



Headstones in Georgetown's Mount Zion Cemetery in Washington. (J. Lawler Duggan for The Washington Post)



By [Theresa Vargas](#)

Columnist

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Lisa Fager uses the word “appalling” three times as she pans her phone’s camera across a strip of land that was once part of one of the oldest Black cemeteries in the nation’s capital.

In front of her, men in orange vests stand alongside a dirt path pocked with newly dug holes, showing where they’ve disturbed the earth and who knows what else. Fager, still holding her camera up, sounds shaken and angry as she explains what she’s seeing: a construction crew working on a bike path, even though it sits on a burial ground that never saw bodies disinterred.

“It’s a cemetery for God’s sake!” she says. “. . . I have pictures of the church doing baptisms at the water. How close were the bodies? What have they dug out?”

Fager recorded that scene two weeks ago and [posted it on social media](#) along with the words: “DISTURBING BUT NOT SURPRISING.”

What has happened since then offers a glimpse into the struggle historic Black cemeteries can face when it comes to restoration and recognition, and what needs to happen to change that.

When Fager began asking questions about the construction work, she discovered that the two cemeteries she and others have been striving to save were literally left off the map and out of the conversation.

Fager is the executive director of the Mount Zion-Female Union Band Society Historic Memorial Park, the foundation that is overseeing the preservation of two adjoining Georgetown cemeteries that served as the burial grounds for thousands of enslaved and free African Americans. That soil is rich with history. The first Black men in the country to vote are buried within it, Fager says. So, too, is a little girl named Nannie who still gets visitors and birthday cards.

[*Someone keeps leaving toys and birthday cards at a 7-year-old’s grave in a historic Black cemetery. No one knows who.*](#)

A building on the grounds, which was once used to hold bodies in the winter, is said to have served as a stop on the Underground Railroad.

If city or federal officials held plans to dig into the surrounding ground, Fager expected them to notify her or someone with the foundation. But, she says, she knew nothing about the construction project until she saw the workers and the holes Sept. 25. “I wanted to cry,” she tells me when I call her on a recent evening. “I was like, ‘What are they doing? What have they disturbed? Who have they disturbed?’ ”

That land was used by Native Americans before the first African American person was buried there in 1809, she says. Within that soil displaced by the construction work she

found intact shells and now wonders if someone long ago purposely placed them there to mark graves. She also saw old bricks tossed aside.



Lisa Fager discovered construction work being done on burial grounds Sept. 25. (Lisa Fager)

“Everyone keeps talking about these cemeteries that used to be,” she says. “We’re right here, right in front of your eyes, and we’re falling apart. And no one is noticing. Everyone wants to talk about what we lost. Well, we’re losing the Mount Zion and the Female Union Band Society cemeteries.”

The construction comes as the foundation and volunteers have been trying to restore headstones in the cemeteries and piece together the stories of those who are buried there. The foundation has also been trying to save the land from erosion, a problem Fager and others say was brought to the city’s attention decades ago.

Since discovering the digging in two different locations on the burial grounds, Fager has spoken and met with National Park Service officials in an attempt to figure out who was in charge of the digging, why the foundation wasn’t notified and what measures were taken to ensure no bodies were disturbed at those locations.

Rock Creek Park Superintendent Julia Washburn said the work to improve the multiuse path is part of a D.C. Department of Transportation project being done in collaboration with the Park Service. The digging that occurred, she said, was within the section of the burial ground that the federal government took control of in the early 1930s.

She said the agencies took the steps required by the National Environmental Policy Act and the National Historic Preservation Act, but within that process a “mistake” was made. The foundation should have been contacted as a consulting party, she said. “They should not have been caught off guard,” she said. The foundation should have been on DDOT’s stakeholder list when the information about the construction went out, she said. “And I honestly don’t know why they weren’t.”

DDOT officials did not respond to a request for comment.

On Friday, Washburn met with Fager and toured the burial grounds with an Park Service archaeologist. Washburn said the work was halted soon after the agency heard from Fager and it doesn’t appear any graves or funerary artifacts were disturbed during the digging that took place. An archaeologist had previously conducted a survey of that section of the trail and “shovel tests” had been done. But now, she said, the Park Service plans to conduct ground-penetrating radar studies and keep an archaeologist on-site during construction work.

The agency also plans to work closely with the foundation toward preserving the cemeteries and telling their stories.

“I’m looking forward to a really strong partnership,” Washburn said. Standing on those burial grounds, she said, she could see neighboring Oak Hill Cemetery, a pristine swath of land filled with the graves of once-prominent White D.C. residents, and how it differs from those Black cemeteries.

[They were names on headstones until the pandemic. Then they became reminders that ‘Georgetown was Black.’](#)

Vincent DeForest, a foundation board member, architect and former assistant to the director of the Park Service, participated in the early phone calls Fager held with officials. After them, he says, he hoped DDOT, the Park Service and the foundation could find a way to work together on a “larger, more comprehensive, historic plan” for the area.

If a person visits the city and sees only the memorials on the National Mall and some well-known historic sites, they leave with an incomplete view of the region’s history, he says. They leave not knowing entire people and places existed.

“It’s like reading a book about history, but you want to start in chapter three,” DeForest says.

Fager says Park Service officials have apologized to her and she hopes they can work together to improve conditions at the cemeteries, including stopping the erosion of the land.

“I’m so sick of hearing we would of, should of, could of,” she says. Preserving those cemeteries, she says, benefits everyone. “It’s not just my history. It’s our history. It’s American history.”

During her conversations with Washburn, at one point a map of federal parkland in the city was pulled out. Oak Hill was on it. The two Black cemeteries were not. Washburn says she’s contacted a staff member and that will change early next week. Those two cemeteries will, finally, be put on the map.