



The Black Georgetown Foundation

Segregation in life often meant segregation in death. The Black Georgetown Foundation is a 501(c)(3) tax-exempt organization incorporated in 2005 to jointly manage the preservation and commemoration of the Mt. Zion and Female Union Band Society Cemeteries. Active from 1808 to 1950 and historically African-American, the two cemeteries share a three-acre plot in Georgetown, Washington, D.C. Despite being steeped in history, like many other African-American cemeteries nationwide, perpetual neglect is rampant. The Foundation was established to preserve the stories and historical artifacts associated with the interred individuals and to educate future generations about their significant historical context.

Forgotten No Longer

The transatlantic slave trade displaced an estimated 12.5 million Africans over the 17th to 19th centuries. In the U.S. alone, individuals arrived from Mali, Guinea-Bissau, Senegal, Gabon, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Angola. When the nation's capital was uprooted from Philadelphia to D.C. in 1800, an additional surplus of slaves was needed to ramp up infrastructure construction. By this time, John Adams made the White House his home in that same year, and nearly one-third of D.C.'s population was African-American.

Through The Black Georgetown Foundation's efforts, a host of incredible stories have already been unearthed. For example, Franklin Jennings, retired United States Colored Troupe and interred at the Mt. Zion cemetery, was the son of Paul Jennings, slave to President James Madison and the author of the preeminent book, "A Colored Man's Reminiscences of James Madison."

William Doughty, known as the first Chief Architect of the U.S. Navy and recognized as the designer of three of the best Navy ships ever built (USS Delaware, Ohio, and Carolina), was a white abolitionist who, along with a handful of other Methodist families, was also interred.

The Route to the North

Arguably, one of the more fascinating findings occurred just recently. By the 1950s, the cemetery was overgrown with dense thickets, brush, and sadly, trash. This is not unlike the plight of a host of African-American cemeteries throughout the country. However, on the northeast side of the hill descending to Rock Creek Park, an inconspicuous brick vault still stands. Measuring roughly

eight-by-eight feet, the windowless structure was used to store bodies and coffins during the winter or rainy months when caretakers could not safely bury the deceased.

While very few documents exist that indicate the exact locations of Underground Railroad stops, according to historians, not all inhabitants in this specific burial vault moved on to their respective afterlives. The eight-by-eight shelter was also likely a hiding spot, a clandestine safe site on the Underground Railroad for runaway slaves seeking their freedom. Oral history indicates that these individuals were sometimes hiding amongst the deceased in this small building for weeks until they could secure safe passage to their next stop and ultimately to their freedom in the north.

The Great Unearthing

Through the preservation, restoration, and creation of a research and education center, The Black Georgetown Foundation joins forces with a powerful movement spearheaded by UNESCO and the *Georgetown Memory Project* aimed at what many are referring to as the “great unearthing.”

“The more you know of your history, the more liberated you are.”

– Maya Angelou

Giant swaths of time in our nation’s history are “alive and well,” but simply buried beneath a cloak of uncomfortableness. When the *Georgetown Memory Project* undertook its ambitious endeavor to tell the story of 272 slaves sold by the university to avert bankruptcy in 1838, public interest peaked. Men, women, and children had all been shipped south to Louisiana plantations, and university folklore maintained they had perished without a trace. Yet, nearly 100 survived the Civil War, and thousands of their descendants (7,115) are alive today.

A tour of Thomas Jefferson’s Monticello estate regales visitors with the nation’s third President’s intellectual curiosity, avant-garde tendencies, and his role in drafting the Declaration of Independence. But now, and again in line with the great unearthing, the tour formally acknowledges the basement, windowless room that Sally Hemings once occupied, the enslaved woman, and Jefferson’s concubine, who bore six of the former President’s children. Thanks to a host of individuals and institutions alike, we are now seeing more public programming at historic sites like the Hemings exhibit.

Protecting One of America’s Historic Treasures

Despite being part of *Cultural Tourism D.C.’s African-American Heritage Trail*, the Mt. Zion and Female Union Band Society cemeteries struggle to communicate their significance not only to historically Black Georgetown but to the founding of this nation. These sites are national treasures with unparalleled narratives of awe-inspiring stories and anecdotes. The men, women, and children lying in eternal rest chronicle unforgotten community memories. They are iconic figures in this nation’s history, representing attributes that are innately American – a struggle for acceptance, freedom, and a better life for future generations.

The Black Georgetown Foundation has received initial support to begin researching and chronicling approximately 15 percent of the interred. As part of the preservation and restoration of the two cemeteries, the objective will be the creation of a Memorial Park, which will house a research, programming, and education institute. An initial endowment will be structured to ensure that

maintenance and operational expenses are consistently covered, and a second endowment aims to provide financial support for future research fellowships.

As the *UNESCO International Symposium* (in conjunction with Georgetown University) revealed, scholarly interest in the sociological and psychological effects of the slave trade is active. The first step is to put a face and story to these individuals, and Virginia is already allocating funds to preserve and restore two African-American cemeteries. Many southern states have a long history of funding preservation projects for historic Confederate cemeteries. Now, interest has broadened to uncover, research, and compile the other side(s) of the historical narrative, which number in the tens of thousands, buried just beneath the surface.

Your Support

As an organization, our objective is to chronicle over 150 years of overlooked African-American history and contribute to the robust intellectual conversation that is beginning to take shape. The Foundation's Memorial Park and research, programming, and education center will be a leader in this sphere, hosting panel discussions, promoting dialogue, and, most importantly, advancing a nuanced and mature understanding of historical events and their impact on this great nation.

Figures removed for confidentiality.