

ATAVIST

Burial Grounds

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This summer, on an industrial and commercial section of River Road near the Capital Crescent Trail in Bethesda, you can regularly find area musician Brian Farrow in the roadway playing “Potter’s Hornpipe,” a song written by Black composer Francis Johnson in 1816 in honor of a destroyed African American cemetery. Nearby, protestors hold signs that say “Black Ancestors Matter” and “Black Lives Matter from Cradle to Grave,” while Marsha Coleman-Adebayo of the Bethesda African Cemetery Coalition and Macedonia B Church leads chants of “Save Moses Cemetery!” Amid the national and local calls of “Black Lives Matter”

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these activists gather to insist that the Black lives in their final resting place at River Road not only matter, but continue to be honored. **Manage consent**

In April, Bethesda Self-Storage Partners LLC began construction on land adjacent to the historic African American cemetery on River Road. No one knows exactly where the boundaries of the cemetery are, how many people are buried in the cemetery, or where those once interred there now lie. Because of this, the BACC feels this construction “risks the desecration of these burial grounds,” according to a statement from Reverend Segun Adebayo of Macedonia Baptist Church, and must be stopped immediately. The Montgomery County Planning Department, which is part of the Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission, and BSSP disagree, however, and see no need to stop construction.

Contention regarding the delineation of the cemetery, questions about what parcels of land people are actually buried in, and rampant development that either didn’t recognize or disregarded the cemetery’s existence have persisted for years after the centuries of enslavement, oppression, and segregation in Montgomery County. The request to stop construction arises from what the BACC feels is morally right and its mistrust of the developers, the County Council, County Executive Marc Elrich, and Montgomery Planning’s intent to “do the right thing,” says Joshua Odintz, the pro-bono lawyer for the BACC.



Brian Farrow, local musician. Credit: Darrow Montgomery

This stretch of River Road two miles northwest of D.C. was once home to a tight-knit Black community that turned to each other for support in the face of segregation. In 1869, just five years after Maryland abolished slavery, African Americans began buying and renting property on River Road, some living in cabins where they had formerly lived while enslaved. The River Road School was one of 15 segregated schools in Montgomery County funded by philanthropist Julius Rosenwald, the county, and donations from the community, even though they already paid for public schools through taxes. At The Sugar Bowl, the local tavern, men who worked as caddies at the nearby Whites-only golf courses could have a drink after work. The neighborhood had homes, a church, and a burial ground.

Jeremiah Botts' 1912 burial is the first recorded in Moses Cemetery, although oral histories say that burials took place on the land before the cemetery was officially established. At his time of death, Botts was living with his wife Cora in the Reno subdivision of Northwest D.C., in what is today Tenleytown.

In 1911, a Black benevolent association, White's Tabernacle No. 39, bought two parcels of land on River Road that would become the cemetery. Developed in the same vein as mutual-aid organizations across the

African diaspora in the Americas, White's Tabernacle promoted Black empowerment. At a time when Jim Crow segregation limited where Black people could be born, go to school, eat a meal, and even be buried, organizations like White's Tabernacle defrayed burial costs or provided a place for members to be buried, provided assistance to sick members, and put on celebrations like Emancipation Day parades. A similar organization, Morningstar Tabernacle No. 88 in Gibson Grove, near Cabin John, hosted dances, dinners, and meetings with liturgical readings.

One reason White's Tabernacle specifically wanted to establish a cemetery on River Road was because the first Moses Cemetery in D.C. was under threat of development. Its leaders wanted to transfer those buried in that cemetery to the new plot of land they bought on River Road. Historian David Rotenstein, who compiled a report on the history of Moses Cemetery, writes, "there were no subsequent reports on whether the graves in the Tenleytown cemetery were actually excavated and the markers and bodies relocated," meaning people could still be buried under what is today Chevy Chase Parkway NW.

Although death notices in the *Washington Star* note Jeremiah and Cora's place of burial as Moses Cemetery, their gravesites and those of the others buried there would be impossible to find without substantial archeology, including ground-penetrating radar and digging test trenches, according to a 2017 report by The Ottery Group.

Today, Macedonia Baptist Church is shadowed by a massive, 19-floor residential building called The Kenwood. When Coleman-Adebayo first saw Macedonia, she recalls, "to me, it just looked like a little Black church." She knows that it may look out of place next to the larger buildings that dominate this part of Bethesda. But now that she knows the history of the area, she says, "The question should be, 'What are these businesses doing here?'"



Marsha Coleman-Adebayo, leader of the Bethesda African Cemetery Coalition, conducts multiple weekly protests with participants of all ages. Credit: Darrow Montgomery

Harvey Matthews, who grew up on River Road where a Whole Foods stands today, has shared his experiences with the community's displacement by development and regularly speaks during the Moses Cemetery protests, which now take place multiple times a week. He remembers when the bulldozers came to start construction on the Westwood Tower Apartments in the 1960s. In 1958, White's Tabernacle sold the cemetery property. The full terms of the sale are not known, Rotenstein notes in his report, so whether the graves were supposed to be moved is also unknown. When developer Laszlo Tauber built Westwood Shopping Center and Westwood Tower, Rotenstein tells *City Paper*, "the presence of graves or a cemetery was not an issue" for Montgomery County or the developers.

Community members knew it was an issue. Witnesses say dirt was moved from the cemetery to other parcels of land and that whistles on the construction site blew as human remains were found. Matthews remembers the construction of the parking lot that now covers part of the cemetery and recalls seeing gravemarkers pushed underground. He says predatory real estate agreements and developers "beating the people out of their homes" led to the destruction of the community. Coleman-Adebayo sees it as illegal land theft. As the Black community in this part of Montgomery County shrunk, development grew.

Montgomery Planning's current vision for lower River Road would bring more businesses and development to the neighborhood. In 2014, they began working on the Westbard Sector Plan with a vision to create a "vibrant village center" with more stores, offices, restaurants, housing, and green space. Gwen Wright, director of the Montgomery County Planning Department, says Sterling King, the former pastor of Macedonia Baptist Church, "came to a number of the meetings. He came to the planning board work sessions on the master plan, testified at the county council public hearing, and spoke to our staff on a number of occasions."



Karen Wilson-Ama'Echefu has written songs in honor of the cemetery. Credit: Darrow Montgomery

As the Westbard Sector Plan moved forward, King left Macedonia Baptist Church and Coleman-Adebayo, a member of the church, became concerned that Montgomery Planning was not properly taking the area's historic Black community into account. She attended a planning meeting and says, "they started talking about the sector plan, and that there were 'rumors' [of a cemetery], that it was an 'alleged' cemetery." She spoke with community and church members about the history of the area, and found the idea that the cemetery was no longer there impossible to believe. She talked to Matthews and what he told her brought her to tears. "I kept asking, 'You mean they put a parking lot on top of our community?'" she says.



Harvey Matthews, who regularly speaks at the Moses Cemetery protests. Credit: Darrow Montgomery

In 2015, Montgomery Planning Senior Planner for Historic Preservation Sandra Youla's research confirmed that two parcels of land, designated as numbers 175 and 177, had been owned by White's Tabernacle and used as a graveyard, and that Washington Suburban Sanitary Commission's sewer construction in 1930 and the 1960s and the construction of the Westwood Tower and parking lot all disturbed the area to such an extent that burials may have shifted from the original cemetery land onto adjacent parcels.

Early in the development planning stages, Montgomery Planning seemed unwilling to admit this. Emails from a 2017 public information request revealed that during a 2015 tour of the Westbard Sector Plan area, employees of Montgomery Planning wanted to avoid bringing up the cemetery, even though they were aware of Youla's research showing the cemetery's historic location and the possibility that there may have been graves on adjacent land.

The approved Westbard Sector Plan and Appendix have conflicting statements about the existence and location of the cemetery. While the Sector Plan states, "the cemetery is no longer extant, the land having been sold in 1958," Montgomery Planning acknowledges in the Appendix that the land was sold, but the cemetery

could very much still be in existence, writing “there is potential for human remains to be located within the proposed project area” and that the Parks Department “recommends that a cemetery delineation be conducted.” It goes on to state that the Maryland Historic Trust’s best practices recommend “these surveys take place as early as possible in the planning process.”

After compiling his report, Rotenstein also believes that the massive amount of ground moving in the area disturbed the burials. “It’s not improper to think there are burials outside of the cemetery proper,” he says. He also points out that “the cemeteries of the people of African descent are perceived and interacted with in different ways.”

“The dirt and the associated space is sacred space,” he says.

By February 2017, as part of the Westbard Sector Plan development, the Montgomery Planning Board was willing to compel developer Regency Centers to complete a “cemetery delineation and archeology assessment.” The assessment was supposed to include ground-penetrating radar, an archeologist or team experienced in “African American burial practices to investigate potential unmarked grave locations,” and engagement with the BACC. This would have only been on parcel 175, however, since the other part had been sold. If remains were found, “further archeological assessments will be required.”



Macedonia Baptist Church. Credit: Darrow Montgomery

Macedonia Baptist Church and the BACC wanted an expert archaeologist to monitor the work. They contacted Michael Blakey, the National Endowment for the Humanities Professor of Anthropology and American Studies at the College of William & Mary, who worked as the scientific director at the New York African Burial Ground Project, and Rachel Watkins, an associate professor of anthropology at American University. Blakey says they would have been there to make sure that the ethical standards of the field would be met.

However, in June 2018, Regency Centers dropped the cemetery land from their development plans, which meant they would not have to conduct the archeology assessment. Even though multiple reports and expert opinions made it clear that Regency’s development on adjacent lots could uncover remains or funerary objects, a cemetery delineation was no longer going to happen.

“We understand historic cemeteries sometimes didn’t have perfect boundaries,” Wright says, but “we, as the government, cannot go onto private land and do archaeological work at our discretion.”

At the same time, she admits the planning office could have conceivably asked the private property owners for permission to do the delineation. “What we were trying to do was to actually make that investigation a requirement of their ability to get any kind of development on the property,” she says.

During this debate in 2017, BSSP submitted an application for the development of a storage unit. Located behind a McDonald’s and between the Capital Crescent Trail and the Willett Branch, the land included parcel 177, part of the land originally owned by White’s Tabernacle, and adjacent plots, where the BACC believes burials have taken place or where burials could have shifted during the construction of Westwood Towers.

When the planning department and community members brought up in public hearings and statements that parcel 177 was a known part of the cemetery, BSSP decided to deed that land to Montgomery Parks and agreed that if any human remains were found, they would stop construction, per Maryland law. In 2019, after they deeded the land, Montgomery Planning determined that BSSP needed to hire an archeologist to monitor drilling on the piece of land closest to the cemetery, but did not require cemetery delineation or ground-penetrating radar.

The lack of cemetery delineation means that the stakeholders cannot agree on a basic fact of the case. The BACC points to oral histories stating that graves were present on the east side of the Willet Branch, where construction is happening. Furthermore, internal and external reports, including from Rotenstein and Youla, state that the area had been disturbed, the current state of the cemetery is undetermined, and “burials may extend beyond the formal lot lines of these four parcels,” according to Montgomery Park’s Dominic Quattrocchi in a 2017 document. The four parcels refer to the two parcels owned by White’s Tabernacle and two parcels that include Westwood Towers, a parking lot, and a wooded area.

While the BSSP knew about the history of the area and the cemetery, “the research, the digs that we’ve done in partnership with the planning commission suggest that we are not on the Moses Cemetery,” says Jarvis Stewart, a spokesperson hired by BSSP.

Alexandra Jones, an archaeologist whose doctoral dissertation focused on the African American community in Gibson Grove and who was hired by BSSP for archaeological oversight, agrees that the current construction is not on a burial site. She says part of the cemetery next to the Willet Branch was sold in 1930 for the construction of a sewer line.



Segun Adebayo, pastor of Macedonia Baptist Church. Credit: Darrow Montgomery

“You’re not going to sell land where your brothers and sisters are buried,” and allow for that desecration, she says. For that reason, she thinks that there wouldn’t be any burials to the east of the Willet Branch. She does believe that two parcels adjacent to the cemetery, numbered 238 and 240, “need to have extensive archeological work.” Those parcels are now paved over.

The descendants of Morningstar Tabernacle No. 88, whom Jones has worked with for 10 years, also feel that the narrative put forth by the BACC about Moses Cemetery is not accurate. In a letter published on Aug. 10 of this year, they write that the BACC “provided no documentation to support their narrative or their denouncements of current research on the River Road site.”

The BACC disputes this, and Coleman-Adebayo responded in a letter, writing that Moses Cemetery “contains the souls of esteemed and beloved members of Macedonia Baptist Church including the Burley, Rivers, Brown, Jackson, Thomas and Clipper families.”

On July 29, volunteers with the BACC took photos of large slabs of rock, which they felt could be memorials indicative of a cemetery. The official archeology report from Wetlands Studies and Solutions Inc., the company hired by BSSP to conduct archeological work on-site, states, “the curbs are rough-cut weathered rock, like granite and local bedrock. No markings or inscriptions are present on the stones.” Jones says slabs like these are not the types of headstones found in African American cemeteries in Montgomery County.

Another issue the BACC has brought up throughout the course of development in the area is the lack of transparency from Montgomery Planning, Montgomery County, and BSSP. They call the 2015 emails about the project obtained through a public information request a “cover up” and believe vital information about what is happening on the land is being kept from them.

On the same day the stones were photographed, Tammy Hilburn, an archeologist working with the BACC, captured photos of workers looking at glass bottles. Elizabeth Crocker, a cultural anthropologist and volunteer for the BACC, says, “glass bottles like that are incredibly common funerary objects in African diaspora burials in places like America, South America, and the Caribbean.”

These bottles were not included in the archaeology report, which Crocker says is, “highly suspicious and unprofessional.” When asked about this omission, Stewart told *City Paper* that Jones and Boyd Sipe, the archaeologist from WSSI, said the bottles were “found alongside other objects, including mid-20th-century beer cans and mixed fill deposits associated with prior 20th-century demolition and construction.” They felt that these bottles alone were not indicative of a burial site.

When the BACC held an interfaith press conference at the construction site on July 6, Odintz, the lawyer working with the BACC, said they didn’t know if archaeologists were present on-site or whether any of the soil was being sifted for human remains or funerary objects.

According to Stewart, the archaeologists were present on-site starting on April 27, and have been providing weekly reports on their archeological findings. On July 18, Stewart provided an archeology report that mentioned bones to *City Paper*. While it clearly states that, “no funerary items, human remains, or evidence of a grave feature were observed during excavation or screening” on any day of construction, it reports that on July 2, two bone fragments were discovered. After examination by skeletal biologist Dana Kollman, they were “confirmed to be a non-human faunal remain.”

By July 20, the BACC said that report had still not been shared with them.

“They should theoretically send the report to us, but we have not seen it,” Odintz said at the time. “They have decided not to send reports to stakeholders in the community.”

He added, “just looking at the bones is insufficient. Further testing has to be done in a laboratory.”

During a heated Montgomery Planning Board meeting on July 23, when BSSP needed approval to amend their construction plan, many community members submitted oral and written statements demanding that construction cease immediately. Elrich, the county executive, submitted a written statement suggesting that BSSP “allow an archeologist chosen by the descendant community to have an opportunity to review the process of excavation” and that a small number of people “be allowed to be present on site so that they can observe the soil as it’s being removed.” (Elrich did not respond to multiple requests for comment.)

At the end of the hearing, the board did not vote to stop construction, but said that BSSP “must provide to an archaeologist chosen by the Bethesda African Cemetery Coalition, for review and comment, all archaeological reports and documentation ... as well as reasonable access to physical artifacts discovered” on the property, at the discretion of the WSSI archeologists.

Although this was not what the BACC wanted, it seemed like a step in the right direction. But, as the archaeologist selected by the BACC, Blakey says he has not been able to comment on the reports or the artifacts. “I have not been given access to the site except under unacceptable conditions such as that the Coalition gives up its First Amendment right to protest and that I come only at a limited pre-agreed time every other week,” he says.

The planning board’s decision further escalated tensions among community members, the developer, and the government. On July 26, someone entered the construction site and “used rocks or a hammer to damage construction equipment and spray-paint obscenities on heavy-duty machinery, dumpsters, trailer doors, and the retaining wall,” according to BSSP. BSSP then increased private security on-site, and police presence has become more regular.

During a press conference at Macedonia Baptist Church on Aug. 12, at least one Montgomery County police officer was present at the site while no protestors were present. In response, the BACC asked National Lawyers Guild Legal Observers to monitor the police for unconstitutional behavior.

“We have compelled [BSSP] to dedicate a large portion of [the land] to the public so that it will be in public ownership forever after and we can appropriately study and commemorate the history of that piece of land,” Wright says.

Stewart says BSSP has “not only met the requirements of the County and the Planning commission, we’ve exceeded them in many ways.” They are not legally required to stop construction, he says, and instead, they want to have their archaeologists meet with Blakey and be “fully transparent.”

“We’re not doing it for any optics, we’re doing it because it’s the right thing to do,” he says. “The developers want to do the right thing, and honor this admirable site.”

But a meeting with community stakeholders, the archaeologists, and property owner has not yet been scheduled, and the members of the BACC continue to feel that BSSP, Montgomery County, and Montgomery Planning are not doing the right thing.

“It is unethical to make a community that cares about its cemetery stand on the other side of a construction fence in a McDonald’s parking lot, becoming more and more upset that they are not even being informed about whether or not their ancestral remains are being disturbed, and whether or not what they are looking at is the desecration of their sacred sites,” Blakey says.

As construction continues, the protests have been growing in size.



Credit: Darrow Montgomery

“Time and time again, our communities are decentralized and dislocated, and forgotten about, and cities and city officials want to improve everything but don’t know the history of the land, and people’s histories get dug up and tossed aside,” says Farrow, who doesn’t want to see yet another Black cemetery paved over.

Coleman-Adebayo believes that a moral accounting has to take place.

“The land should be returned back to Macedonia Baptist Church,” she says. “It was stolen from the community. It should be returned back to the community.”

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