
HISTORIC PRESERVATION REVIEW BOARD
Historic Landmark Designation Case No. 06-13

The Methodist Cemetery

Murdock Mill Road between River Road and 42nd Street, NW
Lot 1730, Lot 803

Meeting Date: April 24, 2008
Applicants: Tenleytown Historical Society and the Methodist Cemetery Association
Affected ANC: ANC 3E
Staff Reviewer: Anne Brockett

After careful consideration, the HPO recommends that the Board designate as a District of Columbia Landmark the Methodist Cemetery, located in Tenleytown at the intersection of Murdock Mill Road and 42nd Street, NW. It is further recommended that the application be forwarded to the National Park Service for listing in the National Register of Historic Places.

The Methodist Cemetery is the earliest known community burial ground in the area known as Washington County and contains the burials of many of the town's earliest settlers. Initially a distinct village, Tenleytown now possesses a rare quality as part of the urban fabric of the District while also maintaining its character as a historic country community. Along with other sites identified in the Tenleytown multiple property documentation form, the cemetery helps tell the history of this part of District of Columbia.

Property Description

The Methodist Cemetery occupies approximately one acre in Tenleytown at the triangular intersection of Murdock Mill Road and 42nd Street, NW. It is gridded into four sections separated by concrete paths and retains a high degree of integrity. The burials are largely uniform in arrangement, featuring family plots and individual burials whose head- and footstones generally face east.

The types of markers are indicative of available materials and popular styles at the time of each individual's death. Most of the 19th century markers are simple upright marble tablets, although there are several obelisks and cross-gable obelisks scattered throughout the grounds. Similarly, the symbolism on these markers is representative of typical aesthetic and sentimental views of Victorian and late-Victorian society. Gravestone decorations were selected to communicate the attributes of the deceased or the feelings of loved ones, such as oak leaves for strength, lilies for purity, and ivy for everlasting love. The broken column at Edward Stronger's grave symbolizes his life cut short while the lamb on the grave of Walter McIntosh, who died at the age of ten, symbolizes his youth and innocence. Twentieth century stones tend to be granite with machine cut lettering and more stylized decoration and symbology.

Despite losing a small "slice" of its original lot in 1940 and more modern introductions to its setting, the cemetery possesses a high degree of integrity.

Historical Background

With the establishment of John Tennally's tavern in the late 18th century at the intersection of River Road and the Georgetown to Frederick pike, the foundation was laid for the development of a crossroads community. Support businesses, such as blacksmiths and wheelwrights, sprang up to serve travellers transporting goods from outlying Montgomery County farms to the port of Georgetown. In 1791 the land surrounding Tenleytown was acquired for the District of Columbia. Below Boundary Street (Florida Avenue) was considered Washington City, while the outlying areas, consisting mostly of farms and a handful of crossroad hamlets such as Tenleytown, were part of Washington County.

The Georgetown-Frederick Road was macadamized by 1825 and tollgates were installed at Tenleytown in 1829. The hamlet was beginning to grow into a small village with a collection of frame houses, a church, school, and several businesses which served as the commercial and social center for the larger rural region. By 1850, there were 246 households in the greater Tenleytown area; a postmaster had been assigned in the village since 1846.

With this growth came the need for certain appurtenances, including a burial ground. Within Washington City, families were able to bury their dead in churchyards or one of the two public cemeteries – Eastern and Western – just beyond the city limits. In rural Washington County, however, like Montgomery, and Prince George's Counties, from which Washington County land was drawn, most opted for interments on the family's homestead.

The Methodist church was the first religious institution in Tenleytown, formed around 1832. In 1840, the congregation built Mount Zion Methodist Church – the first of what would be four Methodist churches on the site located at the intersection of Murdock Mill and River Roads just west of Wisconsin Avenue. Not surprisingly, the town's burial ground was placed behind the church building. The first known interment (although there may be others that predate it), was that of a Mrs. Murphy, who died in 1847. Several other burials took place here in the early 1850s.

The land was purchased and formally dedicated for cemetery use in 1855, when a group of Tenleytown citizens bought the land from William and Ellen Murdock, who had also made the land available for the church. Despite its name and location adjacent to what is now Eldbrooke Church, the Methodist Cemetery has always been operated independently, first by the original twelve cemetery organizers, then by their descendants who incorporated the Methodist Cemetery Association in 1928.

While burial was open to all denominations, the same was not true of all races. Despite the numbers of freed slaves that located around Fort Reno during and after the Civil War, the cemetery was used primarily, if not entirely, by whites. Such segregation among cemeteries was customary in both the city and county.

Most of Tenleytown's 19th century buildings are no longer extant. On Grant Road, there is a group of 19th and early 20th century houses and several individual examples, such as 3957 Fessenden Street, 4831 Nebraska Avenue, and 5013 Belt Road. In addition to these and the church buildings, the cemetery remains as one of the oldest surviving indications of Tenleytown's past.

Significance and Recommendations

The multiple-property documentation form for Tenleytown identifies the Methodist Cemetery as an institutional resource type, along with a number of churches. These resources “contribute significantly to the area’s built environment and its sense of history.” Along with these other identified sites in Tenleytown, the cemetery helps relate the history of this part of the District of Columbia.

The Methodist Cemetery is the only known community cemetery in what was Washington County. It is the earliest public cemetery in the area and contains the burials of many of Tenleytown’s earliest settlers. As a cultural landscape, the cemetery is as representative of the town’s formation as its churches, schools, taverns and other businesses. With them, it created the nucleus of a village independent from either the District or Maryland.

Because of its association with the earliest settlers of Tenleytown and their impact on the development of the village, the Methodist Cemetery is a significant site in the history of this community. The cemetery possesses the unique quality of having retained its purity as a small community burial ground and retains its ability to convey its significance as a regional representative of nineteenth century funerary art. Despite changes to cemetery’s size and surroundings, its integrity has not been compromised. Because it retains its organization of plots, headstones and footstones, and path configuration, the feeling that this cemetery imparts as one of the few remaining ties to Tenleytown’s history is inescapable.

The Board has previously designated a number of other cemeteries, including Congressional, Woodlawn, Mount Zion, Battleground National, Rock Creek and Oak Hill Cemeteries. Like those, the Methodist Cemetery meets District of Columbia designation criteria b, c, d, and g as follows:

(b) History: The cemetery is associated with development of Tenleytown as an independent village that served as a town center for residents of rural Washington County. It demonstrates the patterns of growth in the county that help us understand the development history of the District of Columbia.

(c) Individuals: The cemetery is the final resting place of many of Tenleytown's founders, who played an important role in the town's settlement and development.

(d) Architecture and Urbanism: The arrangement of the burials, marker types and motifs embody the distinguishing characteristics of a typical 19th century community cemetery. The Methodist Cemetery is an expression of a rural village cultural landscape little seen in the District of Columbia today.

(g) Archaeology: Because of the nature of the site, with its unknown number of burials, associations with earlier buildings on the site, and its link to Civil War history, archaeological consideration must be given. The cemetery is likely to yield information significant to our understanding of the District's history and/or prehistory.

The cemetery also appears to meet National Register criteria A and D as well as Criteria Consideration D (for cemeteries), which identifies as eligible cemeteries “possessing important historic associations from a community's early period of settlement, or which reflects important aspects of community history.”