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Tracing a Bethesda, Maryland, African American Community and Its Contested Cemetery

BY DAVID KATHAN, AMY RISPIN, AND L. PAIGE WHITLEY

River Road is the approximately 18-mile artery that historically connected Tenleytown in Northwest Washington, D.C., to Seneca, Maryland. The relatively short portion that runs northwest from its beginning at Wisconsin Avenue NW to Little Falls Parkway in Maryland is lined with low-scale residential buildings. A mile beyond Western Avenue, the boundary between Washington and Montgomery County, Maryland, the houses give way to a combination of commercial structures, gas stations, two high-rise apartment buildings, and a tall radio tower. The Capital Crescent Trail, a hiker-biker trail on the abandoned Georgetown Branch of the B&O Railroad right-of-way, passes overhead. Known today as Westbard, this area of everyday suburban commercial activity was once home to a small community of African American families. In 2017 none of those families and their descendants remain, yet evidence of their community lingers in the form of Macedonia Baptist Church on River Road and Clipper Lane.

What cannot be seen is another remnant, the historic River Road Moses Cemetery. Named after the African American benevolent society that established it nearby in 1911, the cemetery became a subject of controversy in recent years when historians for Montgomery County and community

activists (including the authors of this essay) began researching its history. Using historic maps and records, they discovered that the cemetery lay under a parking lot next to Westwood Tower Apartments, located opposite the Westwood Shopping Center off Westbard Avenue, which was developed in the 1960s during a burst of commercial construction. Yet no one knows what happened to the cemetery or whether the bodies still remain interred therein.

The mystery of the Moses Cemetery is the latest chapter in the story of the River Road community, which has its roots in the first European and African settlement in the area more than three centuries ago. An examination of this community through land deeds, oral accounts, maps, and other primary documents uncovers networks of family, work, faith, and mutual support that bound the residents to each other and to the land, as well as to other African American communities nearby. This article traces the origins of the River Road community and how it developed and flourished after the turn of the 20th century and then, with intensified commercial development in the 1950s and 1960s, dwindled until only the “Little Church on the Hill” and the mystery of the community’s cemetery remain.

A modest house, presumed to have been a slave cabin, once was home to African American workers on River Road. From the end of the Civil War through suburban development of the 1950s, a small African American community thrived in what was working-class Bethesda.



River Road, Bethesda, looking west towards Potomac, Maryland. At left is the Westwood Tower Apartments. For nearly a century, this area was home to a small community of African American families. *Photograph, 2017, by L. Paige Whitley*

European and African settlement in the River Road area dates to 1713, when Englishmen James Stoddert and Thomas Addison received a grant for the 3,124-acre “Friendship” tract, straddling Montgomery County and part of the area that would be designated as the District of Columbia in 1791. Stoddert’s land extended north from what is now Fessenden Street NW to Edgemoor Lane in Bethesda, spanning River Road and Wisconsin Avenue. Stoddert sold large portions to other white families, many of whom remained for generations.

At first these families grew tobacco. Before the American Revolution (1776-1783), the luxury crop doubled as currency (land leases in Maryland and Virginia often were written with payments in tons of tobacco). Consequently planters, who relied on enslaved African labor, preferred tobacco, even though it depleted the soil of nutrients to the point where tobacco would no longer grow. River Road, which dated back to the Seneca trail of Indian times, was called a “rolling road” for the barrels of tobacco that were rolled from Maryland farms to High Street (today’s Wisconsin Avenue)

and then generally downhill to the Port of Georgetown for export to Europe.¹

By 1830 the population of Montgomery County was 19,816, of which 38.9 percent was of African origin. Most of the population was engaged in agriculture. However soil degradation and falling tobacco prices spurred many Maryland tobacco farmers to move on to fresh fields in other states. From 1830 to 1840 the county population dropped by more than 22 percent to 15,456, and land prices had fallen off significantly as well.²

During this period the Shoemaker and Counselman families, who would dominate land ownership in upper Northwest D.C. and southern Montgomery County, arrived from Pennsylvania. In 1832 Samuel Shoemaker, a Quaker of German extraction, purchased 102 acres in the southern part of the county. He and his wife Elizabeth (Ellis) brought their large family of eight sons and two daughters with the intention of renewing the tobacco-depleted land with truck farming, growing fruits and vegetables for market. “The way I heard it,” his great-great-granddaughter Lillian (Shoemaker) Brown later recalled, “was that he

Population of Montgomery County, Maryland³

	WHITE	ENSLAVED	FREE BLACK	% BLACK	TOTAL POPULATION
1810	9,731	7,572	677	45.8	17,980
1830	12,103	6,447	1,266	38.9	19,816
1840	8,766	5,377	1,313	43.3	15,456
1860	11,349	5,421	1,552	38.1	18,322
1880	15,608	—	9,150	36.9	24,758
1900	20,393	—	10,054	33.0	30,447
1950	153,804	—	10,330	6.3	164,401

came to Washington because he had read in the newspaper that the city of Washington was growing so fast, and there wasn't enough food for the people. And he had farmed up in Pennsylvania. 'Well, that's for me. I'm going down and I'll have those people fed.'⁴

Truck farming was not labor intensive and typically did not rely on enslaved workers. Eventually most of Shoemaker's sons purchased land nearby and established their own farms, both in Montgomery County and in Northwest D.C. When the Rockville Turnpike was completed in 1828, the River Road crossing in Tenallytown (today's Tenleytown) and other crossroads became important intersections, attracting businesses catering to farmers and travelers. Among those attracted was Hillary Ball, who purchased land from Shoemaker's son Isaac and built a house and blacksmith shop at today's Wisconsin Avenue and Somerset Terrace in Bethesda.⁵

By 1850 John Counselman owned a plantation of 444 acres inherited from his father Samuel, a veteran of the War of 1812 who had brought the family to Maryland from Bucks County, Pennsylvania. To the east, straddling the D.C. line, lived his brother Charles, and to the northwest, his brother William and sister Rachel. John Counselman's plantation faced River Road from the northeast and extended northward from the Little Falls Branch as far as the land now occupied by the Kenwood Country Club.⁶ His property would figure in the later development of the River Road African American community.

Smaller landowners Benjamin and James Ray were grandsons of Captain John Ray, Jr., a veteran of the Revolutionary War with colonial Maryland roots. At a tax auction in 1850, the Ray brothers purchased 17 acres facing River Road and bordering six acres owned by their widowed sister-in-law Elizabeth Jane (Loveless) Ray.⁷



In 1850 these plantations and farms, located in today's Bethesda and Chevy Chase, Maryland, dominated the River Rd. portion of the Friendship tract. The authors located them on a current Google map. *Courtesy, Paul Rispin*

Just south of the Ray brothers was acreage owned by Nathan Loughborough, an early acting comptroller of the treasury. Loughborough came to Washington when the government arrived from Philadelphia in 1800. He would serve as president of the Washington Turnpike Company, which built the Rockville Turnpike. In nearby Northwest D.C., then called Washington County to distinguish it from Washington City (downtown), he established "Grassland," a tobacco plantation on what now includes American University and the site of NBC4's television studio on Nebraska Avenue NW. By 1838 he had assembled land for "Milton," his 251-acre plantation just to the west of River Road



Loughborough's "Milton" mansion, west of River Road, photographed in 1935. *Courtesy, Library of Congress*

and north of the District line. Using granite quarried from his land, he built a mansion that still stands, incorporating a 17th-century Indian trading post for his second wife Harriet (Dunlop) Thomas.⁸

In 1837 Peter D. Posey bought his 300-acre "Springfield" plantation from the heirs of Samuel C. Busey. The extended Posey family was descended from English planters who had settled originally in St. Mary's and Charles Counties, Maryland. Springfield shared part of its eastern boundary with the Ray family property. Thus by 1850 three large plantations comprised nearly 1,000 acres along River Road. Even though the conversion from tobacco to wheat meant fewer enslaved workers were needed, the owners had not substantially reduced their holdings by the eve of the Civil War. In 1861 John Counselman and Harriet Loughborough each owned seven enslaved people, while Peter Posey owned twelve.⁹ After the Civil War ended in 1865, many formerly enslaved people established homes near the farms and plantations where they had been held in bondage. Throughout Montgomery County small settlements appeared. Often, as historian Nina Clarke noted, land was affordable for them because it was either "marshy, wooded, or poor soil unfit for farming." Freedmen and women "took this uncultivated soil and made it produce enough food for their families." Such was the case in the fledgling River Road African American community. Black farmers purchased the southern triangle of Counselman's land and most of the Rays' acreage, all of which, in addition to being hilly, was prone to flooding from many springs, the Little Falls Branch, and a stream eventually called Willett Branch.¹⁰

Without slave labor, large plantations could not be maintained, and owners began selling off parcels.

The first recorded purchases by African Americans took place in late 1869, when Francis (Frank) Gray and John Hall jointly purchased six acres of "Friendship" from James Ray. The land lay between River Road and Peter Posey's estate to the west. By 1873 six more African American families, some of whom were related, had purchased land nearby. Jane Rivers, Henry and Mary Jackson, and Nelson and William Warren bought additional two- or three-acre lots from the Ray brothers in 1870, 1872, and 1873 respectively; their lots were positioned south of the land purchased by Hall and Gray. On the east side of River Road, landowner and former slave owner John Counselman sold two-acre lots to Nelson Wood in 1872 and John and Mary Burley in 1873.¹¹

Not all of the land was sold to African Americans. Blacksmith Jehu Willett and his wife Edith (Shoemaker) Willett bought land from Widow Ray, including the Spinning Wheel Inn and Tavern that once operated at the southwest corner of today's Ridgefield and River Roads. Polish immigrant and Library of Congress translator and cataloguer Louis C. Solyom purchased property from John Crown opposite Milton in 1875, and Prussian immigrant Jacob Wilbert bought 25 acres abutting the Burley property from John Counselman in 1877.¹²

In addition to these new landowners, free African Americans also rented from, or possibly were housed by, employers along River Road. The African American Botts family lived opposite the Loughborough estate on River Road at "Atalfa," owned by Louis Solyom, a white man. By 1870 William Botts, his wife Marsie Ann



This 1879 map recorded the new African American landowners who settled along River Road at the junction of the Counselman, Loughborough, and Posey plantations: Mary Brown (widow of John Hall), Frank Gray, Nelson and William Warren, Henry Jackson, Mary Burley, and Nelson [Wood]. Two black squares and "BS, Sh." near a stream on the Willett property marks the blacksmith shop of Jehu Willett.¹³ Hopkins Atlas, courtesy, Library of Congress

444
 Exp. 1866
 3 Oct 1873
 at the request of Jane Rivers the following Deed was recorded the 3^d day of August 1870. To wit:
 This Deed made this third day of August, in the year Eighteen hundred and seventy, by Benjamin Ray and James Ray, of Montgomery County, in the State of Maryland Witnesses, That for and in Consideration of the sum of One Hundred dollars, the said Benjamin Ray and James Ray, do grant unto Jane Rivers (col^d) of the County and State aforesaid, all that piece or parcel of land situate and lying in the aforesaid County and adjoining the lands of William Warren Mary Jackson and a lot of land known as Traud Gray's Lot, contained within the metes & bounds, Courses & distances following, to wit:
 Beginning at the Northwest Corner of the land belonging to the said Mary Jackson in the West line of the whole tract, and returning thence with said

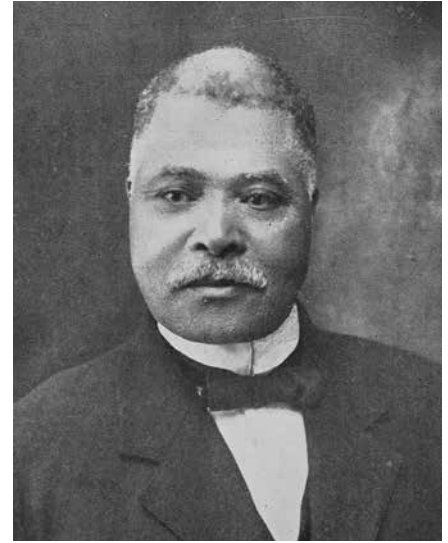
An 1870 deed recorded Jane Rivers' purchase of land from Benjamin and James Ray. Following contemporary practice, the clerk also recorded that she was "colored" with the note "(col.^d)" Courtesy, Maryland State Archives

(Harris) and two daughters lived next to Solyom. In 1880 William, his son William Jr., and 63-year-old patriarch Pascal, or Pasco, Botts lived at the site. Next door Pascal's 25-year-old daughter-in-law Cora (Parker) Botts, wife of his son Jeremiah, lived with the Solyom family as a domestic servant.¹⁴

Accounts record the presence of River Road area slave cabins that outlived slavery. In 1911 Margaret Cabell Brown Loughborough, wife of James Henry Loughborough, wrote that the enslaved people of Milton "were given land on the edge of the property." Cleveland Clipper, Jr., an early 20th-century River Road resident, remem-



This rare 1895 photo shows the cabin of Pascal Botts on the Solyom estate, circa 1895. Photograph by Herbert Solyom, courtesy, Stephen Lane



Rev. William Armstead Jones, ca. 1922. Courtesy, The History of the American Negro, Washington, D.C. edition

bered old-timer William Brown, second husband to Mary Hall, as having “lived (across the tracks) in a slave house up there across from Jacob Wilbert.” The Botts home, which closely resembled the documented slave cabin of the “No Gain” plantation in Chevy Chase, was likely to have been a former slave cabin.¹⁵

The origins of these new African American landowners and renters are often unrecorded, but some may have been former slaves. In 1867, three years after emancipation in Maryland, the General Assembly moved to seek compensation from the federal government for slave owners who had remained loyal to the Union. In order to make the case, the legislators ordered the compilation of names of all slave owners and their enslaved property as of November 1, 1864.¹⁶ Unlike District slave owners who were paid thanks to the D.C. compensated emancipation act in 1862, the Montgomery County owners received nothing. Nonetheless the resulting documentation recorded valuable information. For example, slave owner B. T. Hodges, who owned properties both in Montgomery County and in Washington County, D.C., filed a claim in 1867 for a slave named John Burley, age 25. The 1870 census lists a John Burley in the River Road area, age 28. Likewise slave owner Louisa Vinson of Montgomery County filed a claim in 1867 for compensation for a slave named Henry Jackson, age 30. The 1870 census records a Henry Jackson, age 32, living near John Counselman.¹⁷ Other documents and a 1941 *Bethesda Journal* article noted that Mary Ann (Martin) Wood, wife of

Nelson Wood, had been enslaved by John Counselman and when young had been loaned out to Charles Shoemaker for work.¹⁸

In the decades after the Civil War, most newly freed African Americans in the River Road area were farm workers or laborers according to census records from 1870, 1880, and 1900. The community also included Nelson Wood, a blacksmith, and an extended Warren family whose younger members worked along the C&O Canal, which had been completed as far as Cumberland, Maryland, in 1850 and functioned until 1924.¹⁹

Throughout the county, black communities were establishing churches, schools, benevolent societies, and other supporting institutions. The River Road community also developed networks through family ties with nearby African American settlements, particularly Washington’s Tenleytown. The connection to the Tenleytown settlement offers clues to the puzzle of what would become the River Road Moses Cemetery.²⁰

In the 1870s the area of Tenleytown that had been occupied by Fort Reno was subdivided for a new development called Reno City. The modest lots and houses attracted a racially mixed population. Established D.C. African American churches and white congregations soon founded missions or sister churches there. Rock Creek Baptist Church was established in 1872 by the African American Vermont Avenue Baptist Church. River Road community founder Charlotte Gray’s adopted son William Armstead Jones became the church’s

third minister in 1902 and firmly connected Tenleytown to the River Road community. River Road families, including the Nelson Wood family, attended and helped serve at Rock Creek Baptist Church. In his own words, Reverend Jones “baptized, married, christened and buried (the) church” during his 47 years of service to the congregation. He doubled Rock Creek Baptist Church’s membership and frequently officiated at weddings and funerals of River Road families.²¹

Not far from Rock Creek Baptist Church and bordering Reno City was a cemetery for African Americans owned and maintained by a benevolent organization, White’s Tabernacle No. 39 of the Ancient United Order of the Brothers and Sisters, Sons and Daughters of Moses. After the Civil War, numerous secret or benevolent societies arose in response to the refusal of white-owned insurance

companies to offer coverage to African Americans. White’s Tabernacle No. 39 aimed “to mutually benefit the members, care for the sick, bury the dead, and otherwise aid members of the society who may be in need or distress.” The difficult mission embraced by benevolent societies, wrote historian W.E.B. Du Bois, was “made attractive by a ritual, ceremonies, officers, often a regalia, and various social features.” Members drew benefits and found leadership opportunities in local lodges.²²

The Reno City lodge met in the meeting hall located behind the Rock Creek Baptist Church. The lodge owned the cemetery, established in 1881, and during the 1880s it was tended by Tabernacle Trustee Robert Dorsey, who served as sexton, or caretaker. While the cemetery was officially listed as “Christian Cemetery” in city directories and on death certificates, historian Paul Sluby



The Rock Creek Baptist Church, the social hall where White’s Tabernacle No. 39 met, the Reno Colored School, and an African American graveyard supported Tenleytown’s Reno City in 1907. Baist Real Estate Atlas, 1907, courtesy, Library of Congress

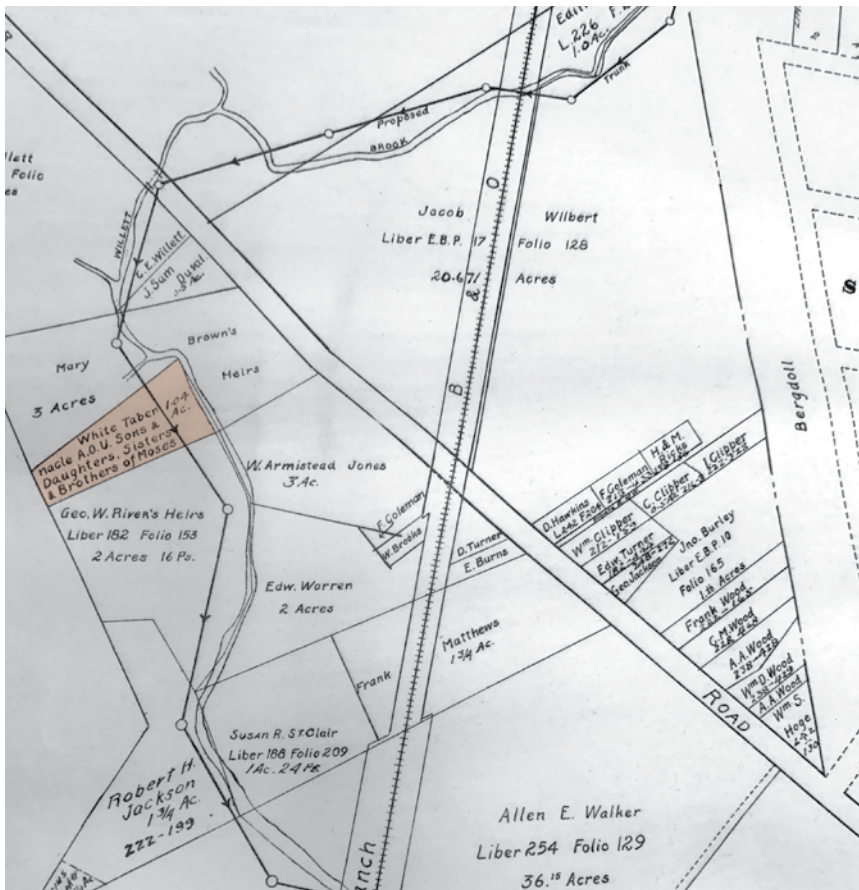
noted it was also called the “Moses Cemetery,” a reference to the Order of Moses, the parent group for White’s Tabernacle No. 39.²³

In 1910 White’s Tabernacle No. 39 sold the graveyard to the Chevy Chase Land Company for the development of 37th Street between Reno Road and Connecticut Avenue. (This street has since been renamed Chevy Chase Parkway.) The following year, the lodge purchased land along River Road from Frank and Katie Dodson, heirs to Charlotte Gray, to use as a cemetery and re-inter remains from Tenleytown. Subsequent maps show that White’s Tabernacle No. 39 owned the River Road property.

The move wasn’t easy. Soon after the purchase, the *Montgomery Press* noted, “a petition was received [by County Commissioners] from James H. Loughborough [a local magistrate and heir to the Milton estate] and others protesting against the establishing of a cemetery on River Road near Bethesda for colored persons from the District of Columbia.”²⁴ D.C. law forbade digging up or moving human remains, so an act of Congress was required for the cemetery’s removal. City commissioners wrote a

report recommending that Congress pass legislation approving the cemetery’s move: “Though the owners of the cemetery desire to transfer the bodies to a new location in Maryland, the laws of the District make this impossible without a special act of Congress. . . . Since this cemetery is a cemetery of an established fraternal order, there would seem to be no objection to allowing the removal of the remains of those members who have been buried in the District to such other cemetery as may be established by the order.” Congress ultimately passed legislation to move the remains in 1921. Presumably, White’s Tabernacle No. 39 removed the bodies and re-interred them in the River Road Moses Cemetery in short order.²⁵

Unfortunately, despite a review of District reinternment permits and contacts with funeral homes, no records of the movement of the bodies have been located to date. However death notices filed between 1910 and 1935 show that there were new burials at the Moses Cemetery in Maryland. The funeral announcement for Tabernacle trustee Charles H. Brown, who died 1912, invited members to the burial in the “Moses Cemetery, Friendship.” The 1935 death notice for Cora Botts, widow of trustee Jeremiah Botts and then living on Landry Lane off River Road, also invited lodge members to attend her funeral service at Rock Creek Baptist, led by Rev. Jones, and interment at the Moses Cemetery. Oral history also confirms the use of the cemetery. Harvey Mathews grew up



BOTTS, CORA. On Monday, February 4, 1935, at her residence, River rd., Bethesda, Md. CORA, the beloved wife of the late Jerry Botts and devoted aunt of Cassius, William and Bernard Parker, Mrs. Agnes Masterson and Mrs. Daisy Carrington. Remains resting at the above residence. Funeral Thursday, February 7, at 1 p.m. from the Rock Creek Baptist Church, Rev. W. A. Jones, pastor. Interment Moses' Cemetery.

BOTTS, CORA. All members of the A. U. Order of Moses are requested to attend the funeral of Mrs. CORA BOTTS, at Rock Creek Baptist Church, Tenleytown, Thursday, February 7, 1935, at 1 p.m. Visiting tabernacles are invited.

E. FRAZIER, W. S.
G. V. DENMONE, Rec. Secy.

Evening Star death notice for Cora Botts, February 6, 1935. Courtesy, DC Public Library

Left: The Moses Cemetery lot, labeled “White’s Tabernacle,” appears somewhat imprecisely on this 1917 real estate map. The African American land owners are noted, including the Clipper brothers and the Wood family, as well as remnants of the Loughborough plantation. Deets and Maddox Atlas, courtesy, Montgomery County Historical Society

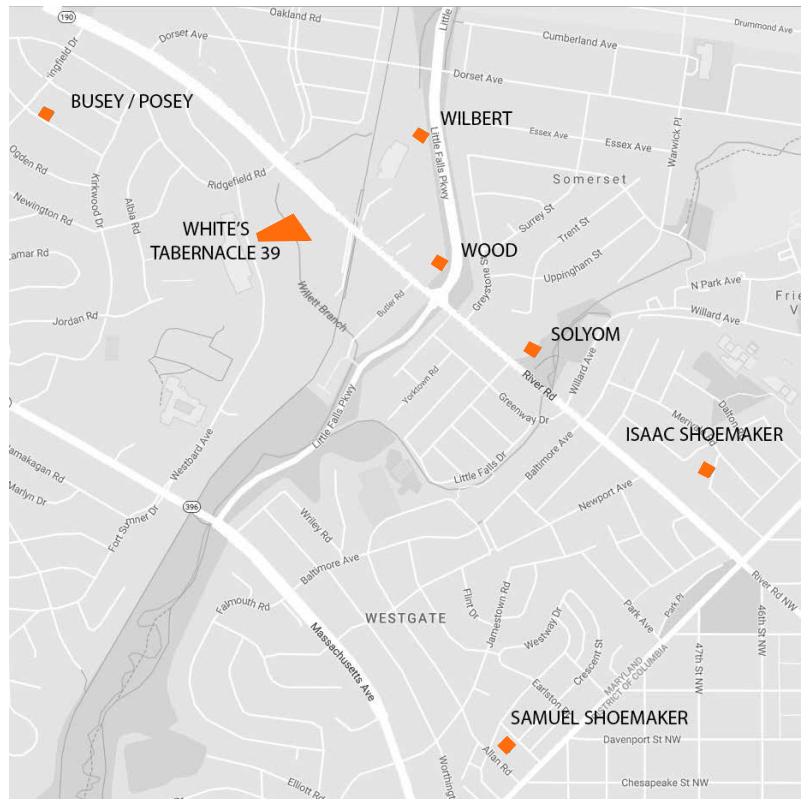
on River Road and attended the River Road Colored School in the 1950s. Mathews recalled playing among the cemetery's gravestones as a child and sledding down the cemetery hill. In interviews with William Offutt, Cleveland Clipper, Jr., also described the cemetery along the Willett Branch.²⁶

Long before the lodge's land purchase on River Road, area families already buried their dead in plots on their property. At least six local family burial plots, both white and African American, have recently been located on maps and in deeds in a one-mile radius of the River Road community. The plots served the families of Samuel Shoemaker, Isaac Shoemaker, Jacob Wilbert, Nelson Wood, Louis Solyom, and Samuel Busey. At this writing, Montgomery County was in the process of adding them to its official cemetery inventory. In addition archival evidence points to the existence of an earlier African American community burial plot predating and on the site of the River Road Moses Cemetery.²⁷

Next to the Moses Cemetery in the late 1930s was the Macedonia Baptist Church. The congregation first met in a private home in Scotland, a small settlement near Potomac, Maryland, in 1920. In 1928 the Reverend William A. Mason purchased property for the church on Elm Street near Arlington Road in Miller's Additions, an early Bethesda subdivision that ran between Wisconsin Avenue and Arlington Road along Bethesda Avenue. The chapel was close to the Georgetown Branch railroad and several coal and building materials businesses where African American workers were employed.²⁸

The church moved to the south side of River Road as a house church in the late 1930s. It then moved in 1945 to its current location on the north side of River Road at the corner of Clipper Lane. Its building, originally erected in 1912 by community resident William Clipper as his home, was renovated and expanded under the leadership of Rev. William Mason after 1945. Known as the "Little Church on the Hill," the Macedonia Baptist Church today serves members from throughout the capital area as it represents the River Road African American community it once served.²⁹

Education was a pillar of the River Road community. As early as 1867 Montgomery County's African Americans had acquired land to build schools for their children. In 1872 the Maryland General Assembly passed the first legislation for black public education, appropriating



Recent deed and map research recorded on a current Google map show the Moses Cemetery and small family burial plots established during the 19th century nearby. *Courtesy, Paul Rispin*



Macedonia Baptist Church still stands at 5119 River Road in Bethesda. *Photograph, 2016, by Amy Rispin*



The River Road Colored School operated from 1926 until 1955, when Montgomery County closed extra facilities in the wake of the *Brown* desegregation order. This photo of a PTA group touring the designated schools captured some of the African American community's homes at left. *Courtesy, Washington Star collection, DC Public Library, © Washington Post*

\$50,000 to support “colored” schools and stipulating that \$532.05 would be paid quarterly to Montgomery County. The Montgomery County Board of Education then decided there would be one colored school per election district, and in 1880 the Cabin John Colored School was established near Seven Locks Road to serve the seventh district, which included the River Road area. By the late 1880s, a delegation of River Road parents petitioned the Board of Education to furnish a school closer to home, and the board agreed to pay for teacher salary and incidentals, though not the building. Cleveland Clipper, Jr., spoke of an old “slave school” on the Loughborough property that his Aunt Stella [Estelle (Warren) Harris], born in 1884, attended. In 1912, Clipper noted, the board paid River Road resident Frank Wood, son of Nelson and Mary Ann Wood, for the use of his home as a school, and the county provided a teacher and supplies.³⁰

In 1925, after decades of repeated requests, the school board purchased 1.85 acres of land to which Cleveland Clipper, Sr., and the Turner, Burns, Brooks, and Harris families all donated additional

adjacent property. With cash contributions from the Rosenwald Fund, which supported the building of more than 5,000 schools for African American children during this period, the two-room, three-teacher River Road Colored School was completed in 1926. Overall the River Road community contributed \$500 in funds and the donated land; the county contributed \$4,580 in land, while the Rosenwald Fund contributed \$900. The school board named Cleveland Clipper, Sr., as trustee.³¹ Today the school's site is occupied by a radio tower behind a McDonald's on the south side of River Road.

In 1904 the Montgomery County Board of Education passed an order effectively limiting the education of black children to fifth grade, but by 1939 the River Road Colored School included sixth and seventh grades. Students interested in high school had to travel to Rockville (Colored) High School or find a way to enroll in D.C.'s colored schools, which were known for their superior quality. Young Cleveland Clipper, Jr. and neighbor Gerald Hatton went to D.C. schools by registering with addresses of D.C. family or friends. As Hatton recounted,

after completing seventh grade in about 1932 at the River Road Colored School, he attended Francis Junior High School in Georgetown. He would walk to the intersection of Wisconsin and Western Avenues, then take a three-cent streetcar ride to Georgetown. "D.C. schools, even segregated, were better quality than the system in Maryland," he recalled. "Francis Junior High . . . had chemical labs, (and) science; I learned to type in the 8th grade. . . I skipped grades at River Road and went to Howard [University] at 16." One year after the 1954 Supreme Court ruling in *Brown vs. Board of Education* declared school segregation illegal, the Montgomery County Board of Education closed the River Road Colored School, and the African American children of the community walked or were bused to integrated schools.³²

In September 1955 Margaret A. Wood, granddaughter of Nelson and Mary Ann Wood, was among the first African American teachers to be assigned to the formerly white Clara Barton Elementary School after desegregation. Wood was in the first class to graduate from Montgomery County's first colored high school, established in 1927 in Rockville.³³ She taught at the Brickyard Colored School near Potomac, Maryland, the Cabin John Colored School, and finally the River Road school before it closed.

The River Road area began as a farming community, but like the rest of rural Montgomery County it began to shift toward light industry with the transportation innovations of the late 19th century. Passenger and freight railroads had begun serving D.C. the area in the 1830s, but dramatic change to River Road followed after 1890, when James Henry Loughborough of Milton promoted the construction of the Metropolitan Southern Railroad, the Georgetown Branch of the B & O Railroad. Right-of-way deeds soon were executed between the railroad and landowners Loughborough, Nelson Warren, William Warren, and others. Construction of the freight railway began in 1892, enhancing the commercial and industrial value of adjacent land. When completed in 1910, the Metropolitan Southern carried coal and building materials between Georgetown and Chevy Chase and Bethesda, Maryland. (It made its last run in 1985, and in 1996 the old 11-mile rail bed became the popular Capital Crescent hiker-biker trail.)

To move people, the Georgetown and Tenallytown Railway Company incorporated in 1890 with streetcar service along Wisconsin Avenue

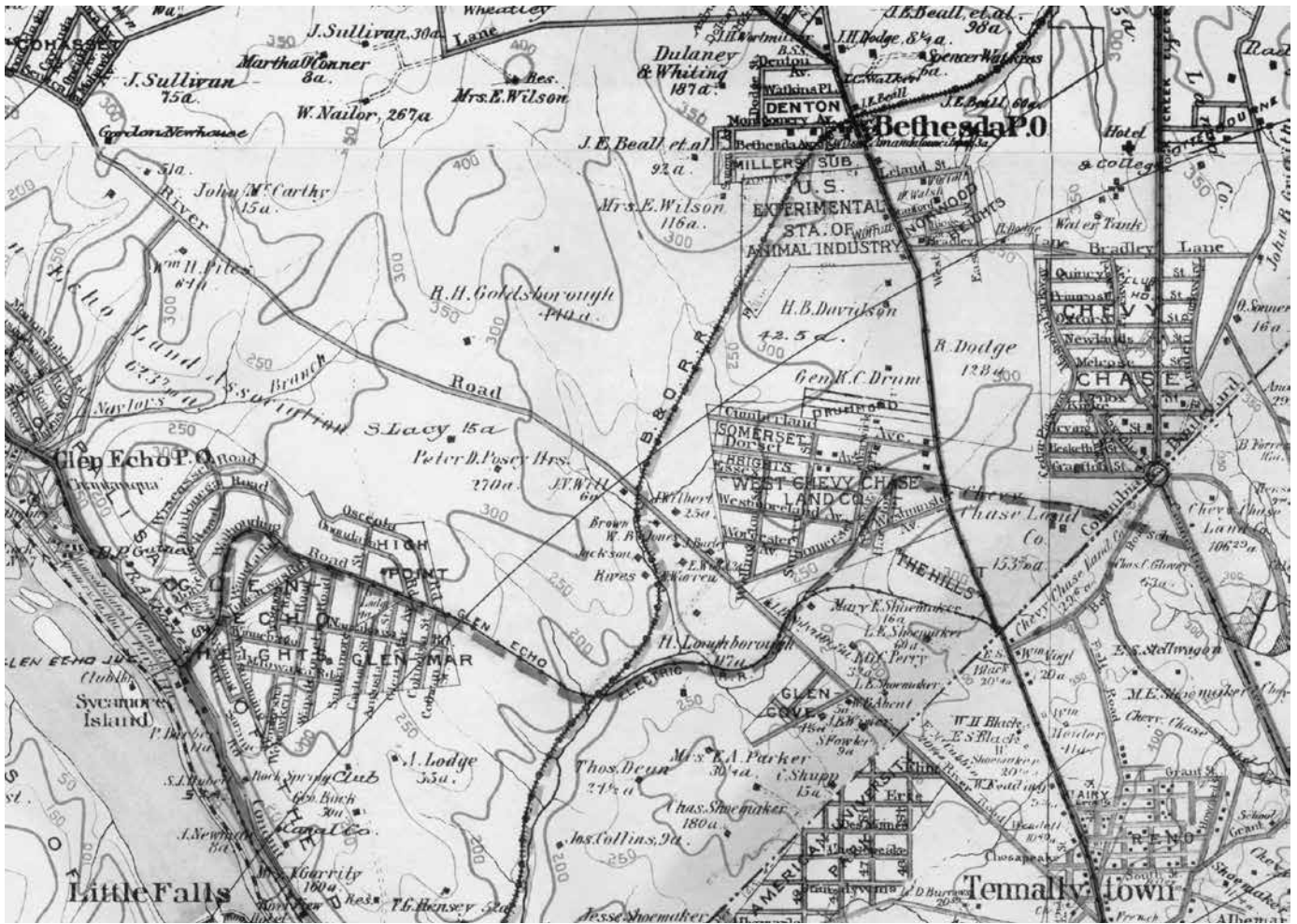


An electric streetcar of the 1890s that ran along Wisconsin Ave. from Georgetown to Western Ave. promoted area development. Courtesy, estate of Gladys Smith

from 32nd and M Streets NW to the D.C. boundary. By 1900 the Washington and Rockville Electric Railway Company (later the Washington Railway and Electric Company) had extended service from the boundary to Rockville. For those who could afford the cost of commuting, the streetcar opened employment opportunities in Washington City. The Rockville service shut down in 1923, but the line to Georgetown continued.

As streetcars gave River Road residents new access to jobs, they also made this formerly agricultural area attractive to developers of housing for white families eager to leave downtown Washington for American University Park in far Northwest (1899) and such Montgomery County suburbs as Somerset (1899) and Friendship Heights (1901). The Glen Echo Electric Railroad opened in 1891 and reached Cabin John in 1900, passing through Loughborough and Solyom land north along what is now Willard Avenue in Friendship Heights before the tracks were moved north to Somerset. The Glen Echo line shared a terminal in Friendship Heights at Wisconsin and Willard Avenues with the Georgetown-Rockville system.³⁴

Improved transportation spurred economic development in southern Montgomery County, including the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Experimental Station of Animal Husbandry (or Industry). The Experimental Station opened in Bethesda in 1897 after being driven from its origi-



This 1904 map captures the transformative B&O Railroad, Glen Echo Electric, and Washington Railway trolley lines and the U.S.D.A. Experimental Station of Animal Industry north of River Road. Baist Map, courtesy, Library of Congress

nal National Mall location by concerns about diseased animals. The facility aimed to breed domestic animals for optimal stamina and health and to defend against livestock diseases. It offered convenient employment to the River Road community. Between 1910 and 1930 the Experimental Station employed at least six River Road community members, including William and Cleveland Clipper, Frank Mathews, George Coleman, David Hawkins, and William Brooks. After closing in 1937, the station became part of the Beltsville [Maryland] Agricultural Research Center. All that remains of the former 50-plus-acre experimental farm is the Renaissance Revival brick-and-stone former laboratory and administrative offices at Norwood Park.³⁵

Local African American men such as Cassius Parker also worked for Allen E. Walker's Bethesda Blue Granite Company, which opened in 1916 on

the site of the old Loughborough quarry. They quarried granite for use as headstones and building materials and shipped the stone via the adjacent railroad or by truck along River Road.³⁶

River Road residents also worked at the Washington Accessories Fuel Company, which in 1923 built a large gasoline storage facility on former Loughborough property southwest of the rail bed to supply the growing car and truck market. Three years later, the George E. Fuller Stone Plant established its stone fabrication factory north of River Road next to the railway. There community men such as William Anderson Warren worked as watchmen or cut the imported Indiana limestone used to build the U.S. Supreme Court Building and the Washington National Cathedral.³⁷

The new job opportunities attracted additional settlers to the African American community.



Clipper Family patriarch Jack, second from right, with other Seneca Quarry stonecutters ca. 1890. *Courtesy, Shirley Shields*

Among the early arrivals were three brothers, Isaac, William, and Cleveland Clipper, who came in 1907 from Seneca, Maryland. Their father, John “Jack” Clipper, grew up enslaved in Hanover, Virginia, and received his freedom from Union troops after a nearby battle. Jack soon left and eventually found work as a stonecutter at the Seneca Stone Quarry. Jack married Martha Johnson from Big Pines near Potomac, and together they had 13 children. His three younger sons migrated to the River Road community after their parents’ deaths. William married Blanche Warren, daughter of longtime resident Nelson Warren, Jr. Isaac worked as a hostler for the U.S. Naval Observatory. William and Cleveland worked at the Veterinary Experimental Station. According to William’s son, also named Cleveland Clipper (and referred to here as Cleveland Clipper, Jr.), these were good steady jobs with occasional free meat or milk. Today Clipper Lane off River Road recalls where the three brothers purchased land and settled alongside each other.³⁸

Cleveland Clipper, Jr., played on the community’s recreational baseball team, the River Road Lions, which flourished in the late 1920s. The Lions played on a field next to the Fuller Stone Plant and traveled to play other “colored” teams.

“We went all up in there, to Olney, Maryland, and Mt. Zion,” Clipper recalled. “They had a diamond up there like they had at the Griffith Stadium almost, with a scoreboard in the outfield. We played down in Georgetown, 37th and Prospect, and way out on 61st Street at Huntsville.” Each team kicked in money for a prize, winner take all.³⁹

With the onset of the Great Depression in 1929, some residents started selling their land to white real estate brokers and land speculators, and the black community began to contract. The number of lodgers renting living space increased, partly due to their inability to buy property in the new, racially restricted communities nearby, and some long-time residents moved south to the District or north and up-county. For example, 1930 and 1940 census records indicate some former River Road families moved to the Scotland community in Potomac. Employment opportunities also shifted with the closing of heavy industries such as the George Fuller Stone Plant, which employed manual laborers. As World War II dawned, defense contractors Briggs Filtration (also known as the Briggs Clarifier Company) and Gardner Labs took over near the former baseball field.⁴⁰

Commercial development and the county's modernizing plans catalyzed much of the community's eventual displacement. Small businesses catering to suburban homeowners sprouted on former Warren, Gray/Hall, Jackson, Wilbert, and Loughborough lands. These included gas stations, the notorious Sugar Bowl beer joint, auto body shops, Talbert's Ice & Beverage, a DGS Grocery, furniture repair shops, and garden stores. Most of Nelson Wood's two-acre property was purchased by the Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission in 1952 for eventual construction of Little Falls Parkway. Hot Shoppes (progenitor of the Marriott Corporation) bought and renovated the old Fuller Stone Plant in 1955 for its corporate headquarters. That building now houses the Washington Episcopal School.⁴¹

In 1956 developer Laszlo Tauber and his associates purchased part of the nearby former Posey plantation to build the Westwood Shopping Center (1959) and the Westwood Building (1963) on Westbard Avenue. The Washington Suburban Sanitary Commission obtained rights-of-way through the Moses Cemetery land and other properties to straighten the Willett Branch in 1956–1957. Other real estate agents were purchasing and bundling small parcels. Local real estate investor William Carrigan bought the former River Road Colored School property in 1958 from the Montgomery County Board of Education. He then purchased the remaining small lots surrounding the school. At the same time, trustees for White's Tabernacle No. 39 sold the cemetery land to Dr. Leo Furr, a nephew of Carrigan, who later transferred it to his uncle.

The county's widening of River Road and the completion of Little Falls Parkway led to further change and disruption. By 1963 the last of the original African American family land holdings were sold to developers. Margaret A. Wood relinquished the family property in 1961 to Martin T. McCarthy. (The Kenwood Condominium, originally built as apartments in 1967, now stands at the corner of Little Falls Parkway and River Road.) And in 1963 the remaining heirs of the original Jane Rivers property sold to developer Laszlo Tauber.⁴²

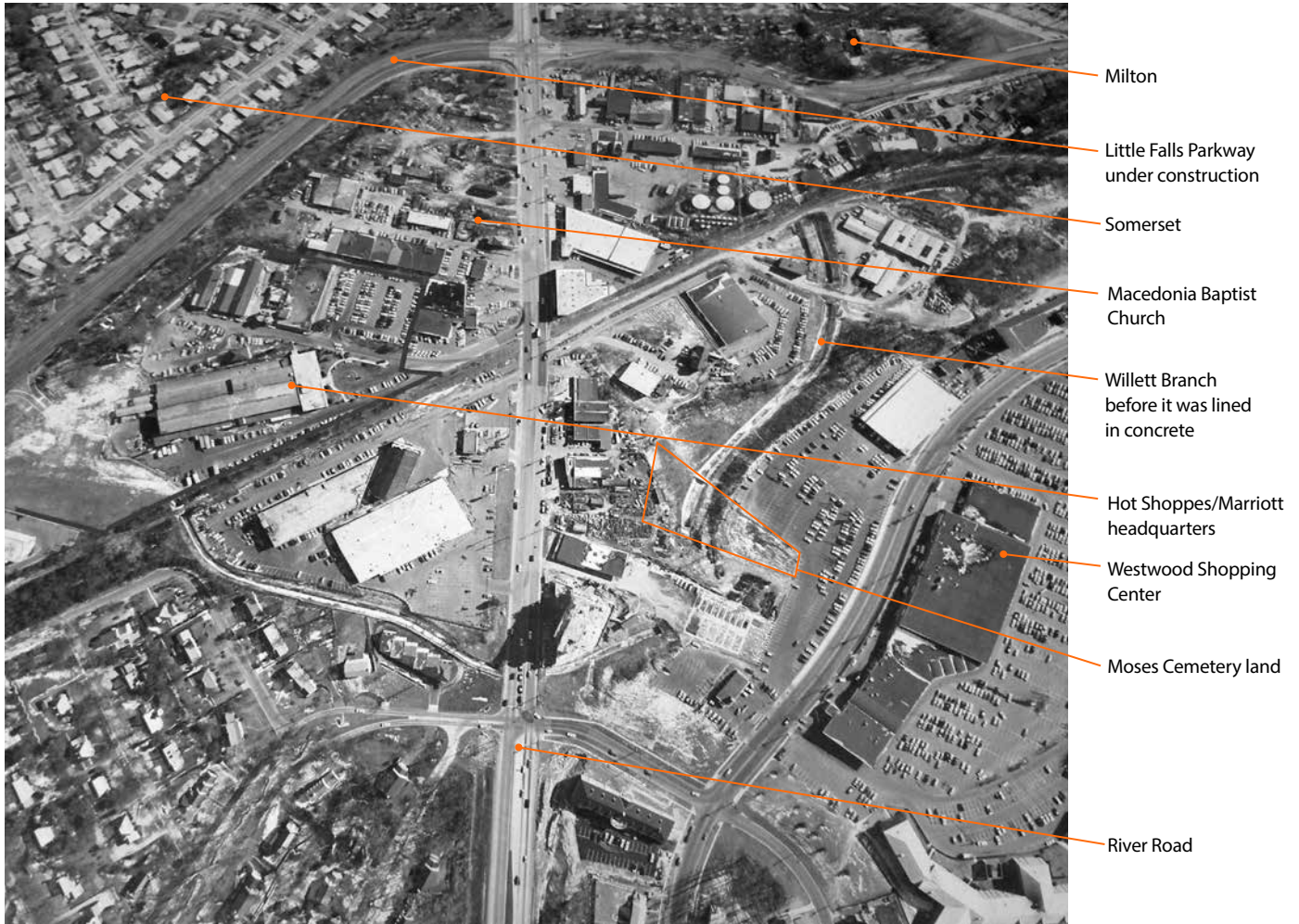
Pressures from the commercialization of River Road and construction near the Willett Branch led to the demise, disturbance, and possible desecration of the River Road Moses Cemetery. WSSC sewer construction in the 1930s and the channeling through concrete trenches and culverts of the Willett Branch (1959–1963) had disturbed ceme-

tery land. After purchasing the Rivers property in 1963, Laszlo Tauber and his associates began developing the area to the west of the Moses Cemetery across the street from the shopping center. A 1963 aerial photograph suggests that fill was placed on top of the cemetery. "When they dug them hills out to make Westover [sic]," recalled Cleveland Clipper, Jr., "they dumped all that dirt in there." In 1967 Tauber's group leased the cemetery land west of Willett Branch from William Carrigan to build the Westwood Tower at 5401 Westbard Avenue. The cemetery land was then paved over to expand the parking lot for the building. (Tauber would later purchase the cemetery land in 1988.)⁴³

What happened to the bodies in the cemetery? According to Cleveland Clipper, Jr., and historian Judith Helm, graves from the cemetery were moved to the Lincoln Park Cemetery or another cemetery west of Rockville, near Route 28, but to date these moves have not been confirmed by state or county records, funeral home records, or cemetery records.

The mystery deepens. Eyewitnesses suggest that during construction, at least some remains were never removed. According to the *Washington Post*, Tim Bonds, whose father operated a gas station near the Moses Cemetery, recalled that during the excavation of Westwood Tower, "when they found a body, they'd blow a whistle and they'd shut the job down." He described how "the men (talked) about human remains being pushed back under the dirt, down a steep slope toward a storm sewer, so excavation could resume more quickly." Arnold d'Epagnier, son of the architect of Westwood Tower, John d'Epagnier, remembered riding a pickup truck with his father and a family priest, "taking burlap bags with bones" from the construction site to Howard Chapel, a historically black cemetery in rural northern Montgomery. He also reported that Laszlo Tauber believed paving over the cemetery was the best way to keep any human remains in place, and Tauber directed drainage to be designed so that later erosion would not uncover human remains.⁴⁴ D'Epagnier later retracted his statement.

The history of the River Road African American community parallels the history of many African American communities. After the Civil War, families and friends purchased marginal land and established a working community built on the pillars of faith, education, and mutual



Recently discovered at Washington Episcopal School, this circa 1963 aerial photograph looks southeast towards Tenleytown.
Courtesy, David Schuessler

support. In time demands for this land brought outsider speculation and perhaps other opportunities, and the community moved on. Today Macedonia Baptist Church and Clipper Lane are the only tangible reminders of this forgotten community. The mystery of what happened to the graves of the River Road Moses Cemetery remains as well, and in the wake of new area development challenges, it is imperative that the mystery be solved and respect given to those who occupied this land in both life and death.

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