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Buckhead church, cemetery recognized nationally

by Staff

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In a news release Monday, the Buckhead Heritage Society announced Sardis Methodist Church and Cemetery, located at 3725 Powers Ferry Road in Buckhead, was listed in the National Register of Historic Places Oct. 9.

The church and cemetery (now known as Sardis United Methodist Church) are located on a relatively quiet 5-acre site. The society sponsored the nomination and prepared the nomination materials, with the assistance of the owners.

The first incarnation of Sardis Methodist Church on its current site likely dates to the 1840s, around the same time the nearby settlement of Irbyville came to be known as Buckhead. Most of the adjacent Shady Oaks Cemetery, which likely pre-dates 1869, was deeded to the church in 1888 and 1894. (The name Shady Oaks was not used after the 1930s.) Church records indicate that there may be more than 750 burials, many in unmarked or crudely marked graves.

The church, built in 1927, is a good example of a Colonial Revival church that was designed in a prevalent style of its era, but in a simplified version with little ornamentation, except for the steeple (now a reconstructed copy of the original).

The central tower gives it a rural vernacular aesthetic, which reflects the parishioners' desire to connect with their heritage as one of Buckhead's oldest sustained congregations. The architect for the church was Owen James Trainer Southwell (1892-1961), who practiced in Georgia from 1919 to 1931. While Southwell designed more than 30 churches in Louisiana, Sardis is his only known church in Georgia.

The cemetery is one of Buckhead's earliest cemeteries, as well as the only remaining place associated with several of the first white inhabitants. Burials include Henry Irby (1807-1879), Wesley Collier (1824-1906), and Napoleon Cheshire (1843-1921), who each owned large tracts of land that formed the core of the Buckhead community. The cemetery contains a diverse collection of grave markers representing the evolution from a simple rural cemetery to one that reflects more urban characteristics.

With a congregation dating to circa 1848, the 1927 church is at least the third religious building on the site. The current edifice sits prominently on a rise on the southeastern portion of the property. The cemetery is on another hill that occupies the northwestern part of the lot. The church has a symmetrical brick exterior with a central projecting tower on the front. This tower serves as the entry foyer and is topped by a squat wood steeple with classical details. The tower is flanked by one-story appendages with hipped roofs. The main body of the church is a one-story rectangular mass topped by a moderately pitched front-gabled roof. It has modest Colonial Revival details.

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