

MT. OLIVE CEMETERY: HISTORIC AFRICAN AMERICAN CEMETERY THREATENED WITH DEVELOPMENT

Benjamin Franklin once said “Show me your cemeteries and I will show you what type of people you have.” But attitudes about cemeteries have changed since Mr. Franklin’s time. Beginning with the creation of Mt. Auburn Cemetery outside Boston, Massachusetts in 1831, cemeteries were originally intended to serve as a central gathering place for members of the community. In fact, cemeteries were once such popular recreational spots that they gave rise to the modern public park system. But few people think about heading to the local cemetery for a picnic today. And there are many different reasons for this shift in attitude, but much of it can be blamed on the more transient nature of current society. Many people no longer live where they were born, which means they are not around to care for their ancestor’s burial grounds. And Mt. Olive Cemetery is really no different in this regard, but the displacement of the Mt. Olive descendants is a bit more complicated than a voluntary geographic relocation.

In the late 1800’s, emancipated African-Americans established Mt. Olive Methodist Episcopal Church near the entrance to present day Frankie Allen Park on Pharr Road. Mt. Olive Cemetery was located adjacent to the church. In 1921, developer John Owens created a subdivision near the church called Macedonia Park to house the many African Americans who worked as farm laborers and domestic help for the white families in Buckhead. The 1936 Atlanta City Directory lists fifty families living in Macedonia Park. Undoubtedly, many of these residents were member of Mt. Olive Church.

As Atlanta continued to grow, Macedonia Park was soon surrounded by the neighborhoods of Peachtree Hills, Peachtree View and Garden Hills. In the mid-1940s, Fulton County launched a major initiative to increase the number of public parks and Macedonia Park was identified as a possible location for such a park. In support of the park idea, area residents came before the Fulton County Commission with a petition requesting that the County take steps to “condemn and remove” Macedonia Park. In support thereof, the residents cited the unsanitary conditions of the stream running through the neighborhood along with “loud and boisterous noises” emanating from the neighborhood.

In 1944, Fulton County passed an ordinance authorizing the public condemnation of Macedonia Park. And between 1945 and 1953, Fulton County acquired all of the homes in the neighborhood by negotiation, forced purchase or eminent domain. By 1952, all of the families were gone from Macedonia Park and the homes were razed to make way for the new park. Mt. Olive Church was sold to the Garden Hills Woman’s Club and torn down to make way for a new community center.

On the site of the former Macedonia Park neighborhood, Fulton County built a roughly 21 acre public park and named it Bagley Park after a prominent resident of Macedonia Park, William Bagley, who is buried in the cemetery. In 1952, Bagley Park became the home of Buckhead Baseball. And in the early 1980s, Bagley Park was renamed Frankie Allen Park after a popular baseball umpire who worked games at the park.

Over the years, Mt. Olive Cemetery has suffered through multiple incidents of vandalism. To add insult to injury, Fulton County began assessing property taxes against the cemetery due to a clerical error in 1999. When the taxes went unpaid, Fulton County placed a tax lien on the property and sold it in 2006 to a Stone Mountain developer, Brandon Marshall. Mr. Marshall subsequently filed an Application with the Atlanta Urban Design Commission to remove the cemetery, which is still pending with the Commission.

On September 10, 2009, William Bagley's granddaughter, Elon Butts Osby, filed a lawsuit in Fulton County Superior Court to stop the removal. Ms. Osby argues that Mt. Olive Cemetery has been dedicated to the public to be used as a cemetery and, therefore, cannot be used for any other purpose. Mr. Marshall, on the other hand, claims Mt. Olive is a private cemetery and can be removed pursuant to the Georgia law permitting the relocation of private cemeteries.

Although the fate of Mt. Olive Cemetery hangs in the balance, most people agree that human remains should not be treated as commodities to be bought and sold. And for this reason, Georgia law strongly disfavors the removal of cemeteries. But for Ms. Osby and historic preservationists in Buckhead, this is small solace. While waiting for a ruling from the court and the Atlanta Urban Design Commission, Buckhead Heritage has been exploring the possibility of restoring Mt. Olive Cemetery with various interested parties, including Buckhead Baseball. Whether there will be a cemetery left to restore, however, remains to be seen. But this much is certain, the public outcry against moving the cemetery confirms that the preservation spirit is alive and well in Buckhead. And regardless of the outcome, issues like Mt. Olive illustrate the need for a strong historic preservation ethic in our communities.

Mr. Mitchell is President of the Buckhead Heritage Society and a labor and employment attorney at Constangy, Brooks & Smith, LLP. Mr. Mitchell would like to thank Susan Conger for her contribution to this article.