

# Bethesda Meeting House

## Newsletter

June 2024



Photographed By Allen C. Browne in 2006

Welcome to the third issue of the Bethesda Meeting House Newsletter. If you missed the first two issues, you can find them on our [Bethesda Historical Society website](#). There's a lot to talk about this spring. Let's dig in.

### The biggest news!

The Bethesda Meeting House Foundation received \$150,000 in funding as part of the the recently passed Maryland State Budget. We are enormously grateful to our local State legislators – Delegates Marc Korman, Sara Love and Sarah Wolek, and Senator Ariana Kelly – for their invaluable assistance in securing this grant. We've already earmarked the funds to pay for several expensive – but necessary – projects.

Two of these are:

an ALTA (American Land Title Association) survey which documents boundaries, easements, and the locations of all improvements on a property such as buildings, fences, utilities, and access roads. It's a requirement for anyone who might be interested in partnering with us, and to secure a building permit for future renovations. This survey was recently completed.

a Historic Structure Report which will detail just about everything that can be known about the Church and parsonage buildings, including their history, current condition, and preservation needs. Montgomery County expects us to have this professional Report prepared by architectural historians and engineers to guide future restoration work. We anticipate that the Report will be completed by the end of summer.

We've got water!

In the parsonage, at least, supplying a bathroom and an outside faucet. The Church, however, will for the foreseeable future continue its unbroken streak of 174 years without running water. Sigh.

Volunteer Sundays

Every second Sunday of the month, we welcome the Bethesda community to come help us clean up and beautify the Meeting House's three-acre grounds. It's a great way to see and enjoy this amazing site and help us restore it. You'll also have an opportunity to visit the inside of the Church and parsonage, and you don't want to miss that!



The next Volunteer Sunday is **June 9 from 1:00 pm to 4:00 pm**, weather permitting. Remember, you can access the entrance to the grounds only when driving south on Rockville Pike toward NIH.

## Special thanks to our Volunteer of the Month

We can't stress enough our gratitude to the community for helping us save the Bethesda Meeting House. In this newsletter, we're saluting the contributions of someone whose role isn't well known, but who was instrumental in our acquisition of the site last year and continues to be a great help.

The negotiations to purchase the Meeting House were complicated and prolonged, largely because the previous owner had unrealistic expectations of who would be interested in buying the property and how much they could sell it for.



We were very fortunate to have on our side one of the finest real estate attorneys in Montgomery County, Bethesda native and history buff Robby Brewer, along with his law firm of Lerch, Early & Brewer. Their skilled *pro bono* work on our behalf was instrumental in putting us in a position to finally purchase this historic site at a reasonable price.

Robby's invaluable help hasn't ended there, however. He and his firm handled the settlement on the property, and he continues to advise us on virtually every major Meeting House initiative, including our ongoing efforts to find a strategic partner for the site, our successful petition to substantially reduce the site's property tax bill (which was *very* high because it did not take account of restrictions on developing the land) and our efforts to complete the ALTA survey.

Whenever we face a major decision, Robby is one of the first – often the first – to get a call. And he always responds quickly, graciously and wisely. The community is indebted to him and his firm for helping us save the Bethesda Meeting House.

## The Adjacent Bethesda Presbyterian Church Cemetery

You may have caught a glimpse as you drove south on Rockville Pike of an old cemetery on the north (Rockville) side of the Meeting House site. This is the Bethesda Presbyterian Church Cemetery, also founded in 1820 and no longer being used for burials. The Church (now located on Wilson Lane near downtown Bethesda) retained ownership of the cemetery when it sold the Meeting House site a century ago, but has had difficulty maintaining it over the years.

This Cemetery is forever linked with the histories of the Meeting House, Bethesda, and Montgomery County. Prominent local families like the Wilsons and Magruders are buried there, along with the most famous pastor in the area during the 19<sup>th</sup> century and his family.



We've been working with the Bethesda Presbyterian Church to clean up, restore and figure out a future for the site that doesn't disturb existing graves. It's not easy -- burial records are incomplete and many of the tombstones have disappeared.



A recent ground radar survey of the property detected 160 underground “disturbances” that indicate graves - about 50 more than are recorded in the available records. Small pink flags now designate these spots. Several of them may be the graves of enslaved people - that would not be surprising since many members of the congregation were enslavers prior to the Civil War.

This will be a long-term project. We’ll keep you posted as plans (and work) progress.

So what’s the story of those three large crosses in the front of the property? Are they historically protected, too?



This is a great question, and one we're frequently asked by visitors to the site. As the crosses are fairly recent - they were erected after the site was added to the National Register of Historic Places in 1977 - they are likely not protected as historic.

Our set of three crosses is one of 1,900 in the United States, the Philippines and Zambia that were built and paid for by Bernard Coffindaffer, a West Virginia businessman-turned-Christian-evangelist. The Meeting House's set was probably erected in the late 1980s. Installation of new crosses largely ceased after Coffindaffer's death in 1993.

We haven't decided what to do with ours. A possible solution, since they've been a visible Bethesda landmark for some 40 years, is to keep but move them – the current location is likely to interfere with improved access to the site. As always, the issue is time and money.

#### Have a skill or expertise to volunteer?

We are always on the lookout for folks who can help us preserve and restore the Bethesda Meeting House and Cemetery. By way of example, we're currently looking for someone experienced in genealogy research to help us track down and trace the families of the folks buried in the cemetery, and for volunteers to read and transcribe old handwritten deeds and other records, and for individuals with gardening skills. If you are interested, please get in touch with us!

Please share this newsletter with others who might be interested. If you're not on our mailing list, send us a note.

And donations are always welcome (and tax deductible!) at:

<https://bethesdahistoricalsociety.org/donate-page/>

Our email address is easy: [BethesdaHistory@gmail.com](mailto:BethesdaHistory@gmail.com)

The Bethesda Historical Society, a 501(c)(3) organization started in 2019, formed the Bethesda Meeting House Foundation to assume ownership of the Bethesda Meeting House. The Bethesda Historical Society's website and this newsletter are edited by the Society's and the Foundation's Vice President, David Schardt.

# Support the Bethesda Meeting House Foundation by Purchasing Native Plants

The Bethesda Meeting House Foundation is raising funds through Garden for Wildlife native plant sales. This is a “feel good, do good” fundraiser that helps our organization not only earn much needed financial resources but it also helps our community!

The Bethesda Meeting House will earn 15 percent of all plant sales when you use our unique sales link:

<https://fundraising.gardenforwildlife.com/p43EXs>



**Garden for Wildlife**  
by National Wildlife Federation

**Support the Bethesda Meeting House Restoration!**

Join us in a win-win opportunity to help **restore both the historic Bethesda Meeting House AND** critical pollinator habitat by purchasing native plants!



**Why native plants?**

- Low maintenance perennials
- Support local wildlife for a healthier ecosystem
- Soil & water conservation

Bethesda Meeting House will **earn 15% of all native plant sales** when you use our unique sales link.



**Support our fundraiser today!**

Scan the QR code or visit:  
[fundraising.gardenforwildlife.com/p43EXs](https://fundraising.gardenforwildlife.com/p43EXs)

Got questions?  
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