

Bethesda Meeting House Newsletter

September 2024



Welcome to the fourth issue of the Bethesda Meeting House Newsletter. If you missed the first three issues, you can find them here on our [website](#).

Summer has ended but work at the Bethesda Meeting House thankfully is picking up. Let's dive in.

Our biggest news!

We've received three more generous donations from members of the community that are helping us save and restore the Meeting House and the adjacent cemetery. Many thanks to our friend Bob Eisinger for helping us secure two of these donations.

If you've visited the Church recently, you probably saw that some of its beautiful stained-glass windows are in urgent need of attention, especially one on the south side that appeared on the verge of collapse.

That fragile window and two others have been rescued thanks to a generous donation from Knight Kiplinger, local resident and Editor Emeritus of Kiplinger, publisher of business forecasts and personal finance advice.

Washington Art Glass Studio of Dunkirk, Maryland, masterfully removed intact the three neediest windows and whisked them away for repair and restoration. Thank you, Knight, for helping us preserve these wonderful windows that likely date to the Church's construction in 1850.



We also received two generous donations to help us restore the cemetery. Although it's owned by the Bethesda Presbyterian Church and no longer used for burials, the cemetery is forever linked in history and shared space with the Meeting House.



Pat LaVay is Vice President and Senior Project Manager of Macris, Hendricks, and Glascock (MHG), a civil engineering, land planning, surveying and landscape architecture firm located in Montgomery Village.



Pat generously arranged for his workmen to conduct without charge a professional survey of the one-acre cemetery site, a gift that would have cost us thousands of dollars to commission if we had the funds (we didn't). Completing this survey was a necessary step before anything could be seriously planned or even proposed for the property. Many thanks, Patrick!

And a kindhearted Bethesda couple donated the money to hire a nationally renowned cemetery-design firm to prepare a conceptual plan for how the cemetery could be restored to a beautiful park-like setting. This might include a columbarium with niches for the interment of ashes, which Bethesda doesn't presently have. The generous couple who are helping us prefer anonymity for now, but someday we hope to thank them publicly.

Meanwhile...

The parsonage's two chimneys have been rebuilt and the County's Historic Preservation Office has given us clearance to replace the roof, a top priority. Before we do that, however, some repair and placement of fascia and soffits are necessary.



Our Volunteer of the month!

Everyone who volunteers for our Bethesda Historical Society and Bethesda Meeting House Foundation brings something special to the table, but few have the diverse skills and commitment of Dave Chase.



Dave chairs our Foundation's Building and Grounds Committee, but that doesn't begin to describe his contributions to our efforts to preserve the Bethesda Meeting House site and the cemetery.

Born and raised in Bethesda, "I come from a family of Do-It-Yourselfer's," he explains, "and spent my formative years watching Bob Vila and Norm rehab homes on *This Old House*." He was even general contractor for the construction of his own house.

However, it is his passion for saving old cemeteries that led him to us. "Although I love the work we are doing on the parsonage and church, my inner nerd is fascinated by the stories being told in the cemetery, many of which we still have to discover," he says.

When he's not fashioning and installing the replacement for our historic Bethesda Meeting House sign that you can now see as you drive by (wow!), he's leading and teaching the team that's repairing monuments in the cemetery. Or he's finding, hiring, and supervising contractors to repair the parsonage chimneys and the church windows. Or he's clearing debris and planting grass, or coming up with innovative ways (cadaver dogs, anyone?) to do more to preserve and restore the site for less. You see why he's been so valuable? Thank you, Dave!

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!

In September, Bethesda's Boy Scout Troop 204, led by Scoutmaster Christopher Lutgendorf, joined our conservation efforts and earned SSL credit.



Our thanks to Nicholas Chong, Mireya Graff, Fouad Kadry, Matthew Lutgendorf, Simon Lynn, Maxwell Spees-Miller, and Liam Walker III.

The next Volunteer Sunday is **October 13 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.

Uncovering the Meeting House's past

Part of the thrill of preserving an historic site like the Bethesda Meeting House is exploring its past. One of the most interesting periods (to say the least!) was from 1849 to 1857. The new minister of the Church, 30-year-old Randolph Smith, faced a crisis early in his tenure: the Church burned to the ground in November 1849.



Randolph and Abby Smith

Smith worked hard to rebuild the church in 1850, moving it to the top of the knoll where it sits now, and constructed a nearby parsonage to live in. But only months after also becoming the postmaster for the area, making it the Bethesda Post Office, Smith left for another position in Pennsylvania.

Some believe the cause of his departure was his anti-slavery views. Recall that Maryland was then a southern state, and that enslaved labor owned by some members of the Meeting House congregation was employed in the production of the leading crop in the area, tobacco.

We haven't been able to confirm that this was the reason for Smith's leaving so soon after rebuilding the church, but we do know that it was an issue for his successor, 26-year-old William Eva, known as the "boy preacher" because he started preaching at 15. Eva lasted until 1857 before he left to move back north in part because, we are told, his views on slavery were strongly opposed by members of the congregation.

The Bethesda Meeting House clearly did not escape dealing with the great issue of that day. We'll continue to research this history and will let you know what we learn.

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. For 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 (Dave Chase would love that!), for volunteers to read 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.

Donations are always welcome (and tax deductible!) at: bethesdahistory.org/donate-page/

Our email address is easy: 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>


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

Got questions?
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