



*“From Where I Sit ...”*

## **Zion Community Project, Inc. An Historic Cemetery – *Safeguarded by the CME Church!***

Zion Christian Cemetery is a cemetery owned by the CME Church and yes the question is often asked, “Why do we have a cemetery?” I can’t provide an informed answer to this question since I was not involved at the time of its acquisition but let me tell you what I have come to know about this project during my tenure as General Secretary.

First a bit of history. The cemetery was founded in 1876 by Reverend Morris Henderson (who also founded Beale Street Baptist Church in 1875, a congregation with over 2,400 at the time of his death just two years later). The cemetery had been established to provide a decent burial place for the many people of color in the city of Memphis who did not belong to a church with an adjoining cemetery. It was the first and, although inactive, remains the oldest African-American cemetery in the Memphis, Tennessee area. After Henderson’s death in 1877, members of the Zion Association formed the Zion Cemetery Company and purchased the cemetery. Shares were passed to descendants of the owners through the years.

For approximately 50 of its 135 year history, Zion Cemetery was a well-kept, keenly manicured site in this growing southern community. Resting beneath the soil of this 15.3 acre parcel of ground on the north side of the 1400 block of South Parkway East, over 35,000 persons have been interred. Persons of stature and wide acclaim along side persons of low estate, in a place where death, life’s common denominator, makes all people equal.

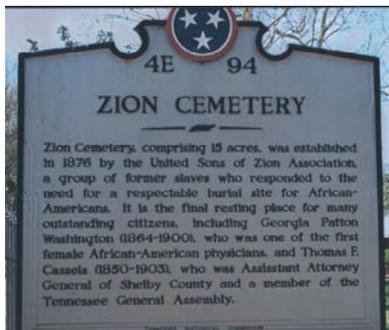


Listed on the National Register of Historic Places, the cemetery became the final resting place for thousands of persons including Dr. Georgia Patton Washington, Tennessee’s first African American medical doctor; Thomas Frank Cassels, Tennessee’s first African American lawyer who was later appointed Assistant Attorney-General in 1878; and most notably Thomas Moss, a letter carrier, who along with Calvin McDowell and William Stewart, both store owners, were lynched in 1892. Their deaths inspired Ida B. Wells, editor and owner of the Memphis newspaper “Freedom of Speech”, to begin her international anti-lynching crusade.

Also interred are Philip M. Nicholson, a wealthy landowner and planter; Nicholson’s son, Walter, a dentist; and Charles and Julia Hooks, who were educators, musicians, and the grandparents of the late Dr. Benjamin Hooks. Many others include Civil War Union soldiers, religious and other civic leaders, and victims of the 1878 yellow fever epidemic.

The original organizers operated this thriving cemetery until the 1920's by which time most of them had died. Some of their heirs tried to continue maintaining the cemetery, but by the mid-1930's, Memphis newspapers were reporting that African-American ministers were asking their congregations, as well as relatives of those buried at Zion, to help pay for the maintenance of the neglected cemetery. By the 1960's, the property was largely abandoned and overgrown and by 1972 the number of owners had dwindled with the last known shares in the hands of George Christian (a CME layman). The overgrown area created conditions for various illegal activities including an automobile chop shop and a dumping ground. For many years, people driving down South Parkway had no idea that this was an historic area. Christian died in 1985 and his wife, Mrs. Eva Alcorn Christian (a member of Mt. Pisgah CME Church), deeded the cemetery to the General Board of Personnel Services of the Christian Methodist Episcopal Church (see The Christian Index, May 15, 1986).

During the administration of (now retired) General Secretary, Dr. N. Charles Thomas and under the project direction of former Assistant to the General Secretary, Reverend William



Smith, the cemetery was leased to an independent board incorporated as Zion Community Project and whose directors included Dr. Thomas, Reverend Smith and Mrs. Claudette Branch, President CME Historical Society. During this period a \$50,000 grant was received from the State of Tennessee which funded the wrought-iron fencing of the cemetery, the building of

the entry arch and columns, and the erection of wrought-iron gates (which have since been stolen twice). But no funds were available to assist in clearing the overgrown areas.

My tenure with this project began in October 2002 when I became part of an ad hoc committee of the Board with an emphasis on renewed reclamation. Without a program for perpetual care, the Board of Directors has had to rely on volunteers to clear and maintain overgrowth which covers most of the cemetery. Approximately 4 of the 15 acres have been transformed through the efforts of nearly 1,000 volunteers (college students, high-school students, church groups, community service and fraternal groups) who yearly contribute 2-3 hours on a given Saturday or 2-3 days during a month to reclaim this historic landmark from continued overgrowth.

To cover the cost of existing cleared areas while volunteers continue to hack away at other overgrown sections, the Board of Directors has initiated annual fundraising dinners held in November to help offset this expense. These efforts were successful in netting over \$5,000 in

2009 and over \$10,000 in 2010. The success of the 2010 dinner was the direct result of the support of the CME Church (both local and Connectional) who contributed more than 75% of the gross receipts. The fundraising dinner for 2011 is set for November 10<sup>th</sup> with a goal of \$25,000.

Additionally, the Board of Directors has partnered with Rhodes College (Memphis) to begin a major capital campaign to obtain the necessary funding to complete the clearing of the overgrowth, restore the roadway throughout the cemetery, install remote access gates, put in safety lights in selected areas, erect a monument memorializing the interred whose tombstones have been inadvertently destroyed, and arrange for the inclusion of Zion Cemetery as an historic tourist stop with a local tour agency. The potential of such an opportunity moves this project to a new paradigm of possibilities.

Persons interested in genealogical research in Zion Cemetery may do so on-line at [www.zioncemeteryproject.org](http://www.zioncemeteryproject.org), a website which has been provided through a grant from the Tennessee Civil War National Heritage Area and is maintained by Rhodes College. Persons interested in history will also find Zion Cemetery on the website of Crossroads to Freedom ([www.crossroadstofreedom.org](http://www.crossroadstofreedom.org)).

At the beginning of this article I acknowledged the frequent asking of the question, “Why do we have a Cemetery?” I believe the best answer is because it was believed that the CME Church could be trusted to safeguard this precious site until it could be restored and in the meantime the CME Church would protect it from potential developers who might disregard the sacredness of this delicate resting place. Its history is our history, its struggle is our struggle and its potential for the future is our potential or at least that is the way it looks to me ...

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