

On Sacred Ground: The Potomac (Maryland) United Methodist Church Cemetery  
A Digital Record and History

Jim Mayer  
Cemetery Manager  
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The following is a digital record of the memorials at Potomac United Methodist Cemetery as of July, 2008. This record is part of project sponsored by the Boy Scouts of America to archive much of American history in the US Genweb Tombstone project. For those who rest in our cemetery, this means that their memory is recorded in our National and Maryland state archives.

It should be noted that this is not the official record of burials in the cemetery, but only a record of gravesites with monuments and memorials. Inquiries about burial records should be addressed to the Church office.

For more than 2000 years, the grounds now occupied by the Potomac United Methodist Church, located only 16 miles west of the Nation's capitol, have been a place of faith and worship. The area was first inhabited by the Canaya Indian tribe (part of the Susquehannock Nation) who found their deity in the enormous chestnut trees, flowing streams, and lavish abundance of turkeys, buffalo, and deer that lived in the surrounding woods. Like other members of their tribe, they were traders who used the islands in the Potomac River as trading centers. They were also town planners and created a path that connected them with fellow tribe members to what would one day become Washington, DC. This rugged thoroughfare first appeared on maps in 1716 and today is known as River Road, a major link between Washington, DC and western Maryland.

In 1608, Captain John Smith and his small army were the first Europeans to discover what one English pioneer described sixteen years later as "the most pleasant place in all the country." Over time the Captain's name evolved into Cabin John. The area, however, remained sparsely settled for the next century. In 1714, Lord Baltimore granted 300 acres of land to Edward Offutt at the junction of what is now Falls and River Roads. This parcel of land, known as Offutt's Crossing, began to attract a number of Presbyterians in Virginia who were being persecuted for their refusal to attend services of the Episcopalian Church, part of the Church of England.

Reverend Hugh Conn is the first recorded preacher in the Potomac area. In 1716, he helped construct the Cabin John Meeting House/Church, "a thirty foot building, constructed roughly of timber, not even a plank floor, and a gallery for servants." Conn shared his ministry with a church in distant Bladensburg. As a circuit rider, he was advised to travel the wilderness "heavily armed and carry a flask of whiskey."

The church began to really grow under the leadership of Reverend James Hunt who assumed the calling in 1769. Reverend Hunt also used the Cabin John Church as a rallying point for local patriots who joined in the American Revolution, and he was one

of the first Marylanders to take the Loyalty Oath, disavowing fidelity to Britain and loyalty to Maryland. In 1779, he founded the Tusculum Academy, the first secondary school in Montgomery County.

The gravesites of Reverend Hunt and his wife, Ruth, are the two oldest in our cemetery. The inscriptions on their monuments are moving. Reverend Hunt is described as a person “laboring for the good of souls, and the glory of his Heavenly Master.” His wife is noted as “a woman of sorrows and acquainted with grief Being the greater part of her days.” In death, however, “she shall rise above the skies when the last trump shall sound.”

Cabin John Church played an important role in the War of 1812. The Church’s Pastor, John Brackenridge, was appointed Chaplain of the Senate. When the British invaded the Capitol, the Pastor “afforded comfort to the wounded and afflicted’ and offered the Church and its cemetery as a source of refuge.

Around 1830, the Presbyterian congregation began to dwindle. The soil had been overplanted with wheat and tobacco. Many residents left Offutt’s Crossing to move to the young towns of Bethesda and Rockville. The church was abandoned and the land was sold to a neighboring farmer, Oratio Clagett.

The abandoned farmlands were increasingly being claimed by a growing of number of settlers who followed the Methodist faith. The religion had expanded rapidly after the American Revolution; and by the early nineteenth century it was the largest religion in Montgomery County. Believers were attracted to its informal theology which was based on the values of the common person, hard work, and economic and social equality. In particular, the majority of Methodists opposed slavery and the church actively sought to convert slaves and free blacks.

In 1853, Oratio Clagett donated the grounds of the former Presbyterian Church to a small group of Methodist farmers. The next year, they built the Potomac Chapel on the grounds of the Cabin John Church. Earliest church enrollment records number the congregation are just 48; but the gravestones in the cemetery’s Old Section serve as a memorial to these early pioneer families of the Potomac Church: Offutt, Collins, Creamer, Pennefield, Clagett, Bull, Ingalls, and Kilgore.

These farmers brought improved agricultural and fertilization methods that helped restore the soil, and the discovery of gold in Potomac brought in a new industry to the area. Their lives, however, were torn apart by the Civil War. The congregation was divided by abolitionists and supporters of slavery. The church was still served by circuit ministers which meant one week a pastor who supported slavery and the next week a pastor who opposed it.

The Potomac area was a crossroads for Union and Confederate troops. Some church members recorded that J.E.B. Stuart’s cavalry passed through the grounds in 1863 on their way to Gettysburg. Historians believe there was a minor skirmish between North and South troops near the Church in 1864. The victims are possibly buried somewhere in

the cemetery with the Union soldiers who died from typhoid while stationed at the hospital in nearby Great Falls. We cannot be certain, but these graves were probably located in the empty lots on the south end of the Old Section.

We have very little information about the church from 1865-1914. One of the first Montgomery County public schools was erected on the church grounds in 1865. The congregation was still made up mainly of farming families and it was a special occasion when a doctor and a storekeeper joined the church. Church members would walk as far as 15 miles away to attend services and some arrived in reconverted Civil War ambulances that were now horse drawn carriages. A tree stump was prominent in front of the Church entry to help female equestrians who rode side saddle.

The church was remodeled and enlarged several times. In 1908, the Potomac Church became a single church (or a station as it is described by the Methodist conference). The same year, the church built a house for its new parson.

Potomac, the former Offutts Crossing renamed in 1880, still remained a mainly quiet, remote agrarian based community. This all changed in 1924 with the introduction of electricity and by 1930 the paving of River Road to the east and west and Falls Road to the north and south. Today, Potomac is a thriving suburban community of nearly 45,000 residents.

The Potomac United Methodist Church has kept pace with these changes. It has served as a virtual Town Hall to the community as young families moved to the area with new needs for schools, shopping facilities, and social services. The ravages of time and termites have taken their toll on the old church. A new Georgian colonial church was constructed in 1969. The cemetery was also expanded into what is now the one acre A and B sections that border the Old Section. In 2000, the church opened a new Parish Hall to serve as a meeting hall for the congregation and the community to meet the religious and social challenges and opportunities of a new century.

Our cemetery serves as a bridge to our church's heritage. It was designated as a registered historic site by the Montgomery County Historic Committee in 1976. Unfortunately, we have lost much of the history. Like many frontier cemeteries, memorials were made of wood that eroded overtime. Official records and logs have been lost or destroyed. The Church is grateful to Ann Patterson Harris who in 1989 collected many of these records to write an early history of the church and cemetery.

We are most thankful to a group of church leaders (Bill Doggett, Ed Long, Bruce Hartshorn, and Paul Guild) who in 1991 resurveyed the entire cemetery and restored and updated documentation. But as a member of that group pointed out, "We did our best to restore some order, but still much of the history is a guessing game. Sometimes you just have to stand in the middle of these blessed grounds and feel how sacred this spot is."

The Potomac United Methodist Church is proud to be a part of this project. Our heartfelt thanks go to William Hess and his Boy Scout colleagues who have made such a significant contribution to recording our cemetery's history. We hope this digital record will bring you closer to the peace and blessings which people have found here for centuries. That spirit is recorded on one of our early memorials, "Lovely thoughts forever linger O'er the grave where Willie lies."