

Bethesda Meeting House Newsletter

January 2024



Photo: Donovan Marks

Welcome to the first issue of the Bethesda Meeting House newsletter. We hope this will be the first of many as we work to keep the community up to date on our efforts to preserve what is arguably the most significant historic building in Bethesda. You can also read this newsletter [online here](#).

Who are we?

We are the Bethesda Historical Society (BHS), founded in 2019 by Wendy Kaufman and other Bethesda residents and history lovers. We've been sponsoring public talks about Bethesda history and walking history tours of downtown Bethesda by Board member Hank Levine. We've mounted exhibits of artifacts from Bethesda's past in local libraries and in a gallery. We recently opened an office in downtown Bethesda where we are cataloging Bethesda memorabilia. You can find out more about us at our website bethesdahistoricalsociety.org

How did we get involved with the Bethesda Meeting House?

Back in 2019, after noticing the deterioration of the Bethesda Meeting House, BHS President Wendy Kaufman attended a religious service at the site and met with the pastor and the congregation. By that time, the church had only a handful of members and had moved its services to the adjacent parsonage where all of them could fit around the dining room table.

Wendy offered to help with needed repairs to halt the property's deterioration, but the congregation was noncommittal. When the pastor died two years ago, the property was essentially abandoned and continued to deteriorate.

We offered to buy the Bethesda Meeting House from its new church corporation board, based in Baltimore. Two years of frustrating negotiations followed. The Board initially believed the property was worth millions of dollars, but eventually realized it wasn't. The buildings are protected by the Montgomery County's Master Plan for Historic Preservation, in addition to being in the National Register of Historic Places, and can't be torn down or significantly modified. Zoning prevents most development and the property's challenging topography isn't conducive to substantial new development.

When Montgomery County last year started fining the board thousands of dollars for not properly maintaining the two historic buildings, the owners reached a deal with us to take the three acres and two buildings off their hands for an amount much lower than they had initially sought. We formed the nonprofit Bethesda Meeting House Foundation to purchase the property.

If you haven't read our official announcement of the sale, which includes a brief history of the Meeting House, you can find it at bethesdahistoricalsociety.org

We're grateful for all the help we've received so far

In the negotiations over the purchase and in all our subsequent work on the site, we've benefitted tremendously from the involvement of some of the leaders of the legal, historic preservation, property development, and real estate communities in Montgomery County. They've generously donated their time and expertise in the shared belief that the Bethesda Meeting House, which embodies the history of the town, is an historic treasure that should be preserved for generations to come.

We are especially grateful to a Bethesda couple who provided a substantial donation to buy the property. They prefer anonymity for now -- maybe someday we will be able to publicly thank them!

That's enough for this first issue

In the future, we'll discuss how we're going about the extensive (and expensive) work of stabilizing, preserving, and restoring the property and how we anticipate paying for it. There'll be ideas about what the future may hold for the site and lots of history, including about the "slave gallery" in the back of the church.

Share this newsletter with others. If you're not on our mailing list, send us a note. And do you have questions or memories about the Meeting House? Share them with us!

Our email address: BethesdaHistory@gmail.com

Meanwhile, enjoy these beautiful photos below of the site, taken by professional photographer Donovan Marks. His website is [here](#).

This newsletter and the BHS website are edited by BHS Vice President David Schardt.



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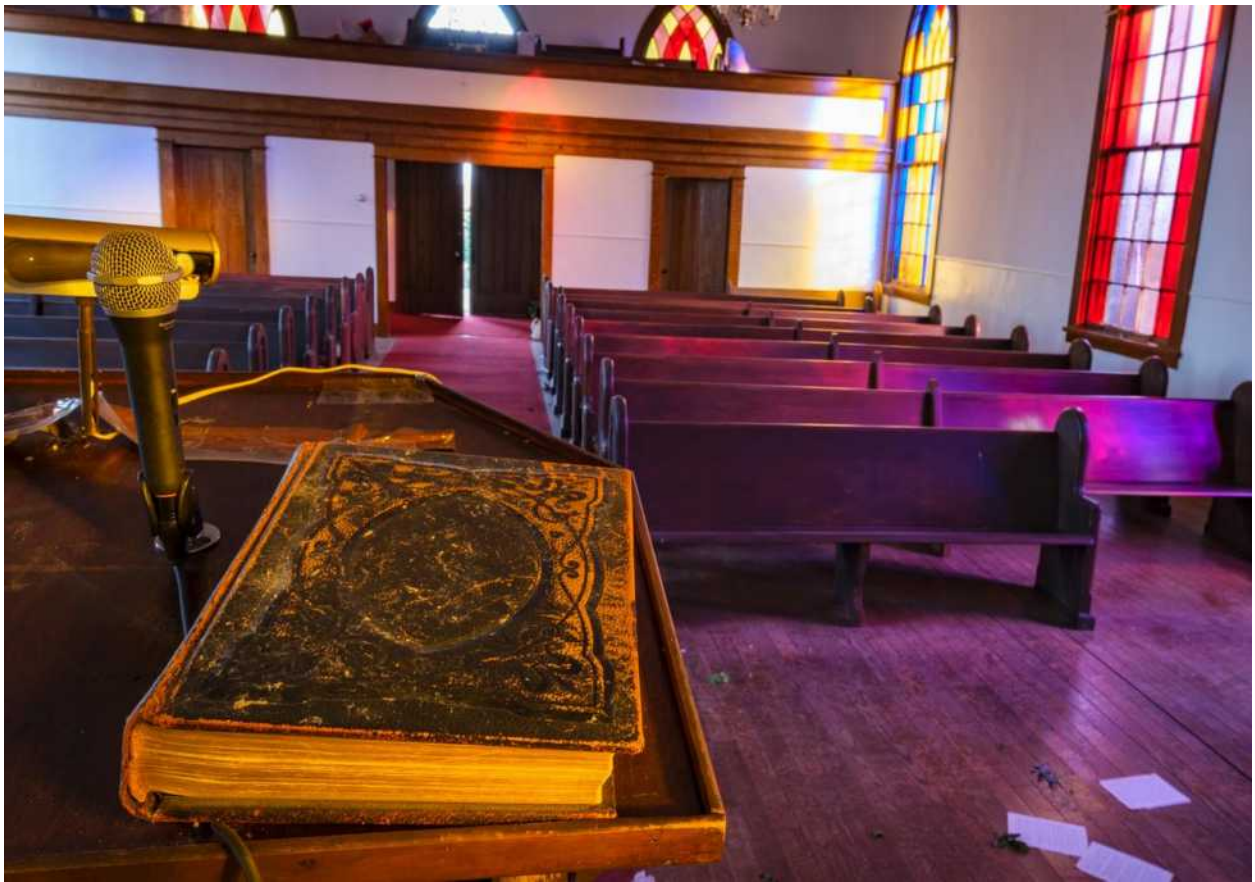


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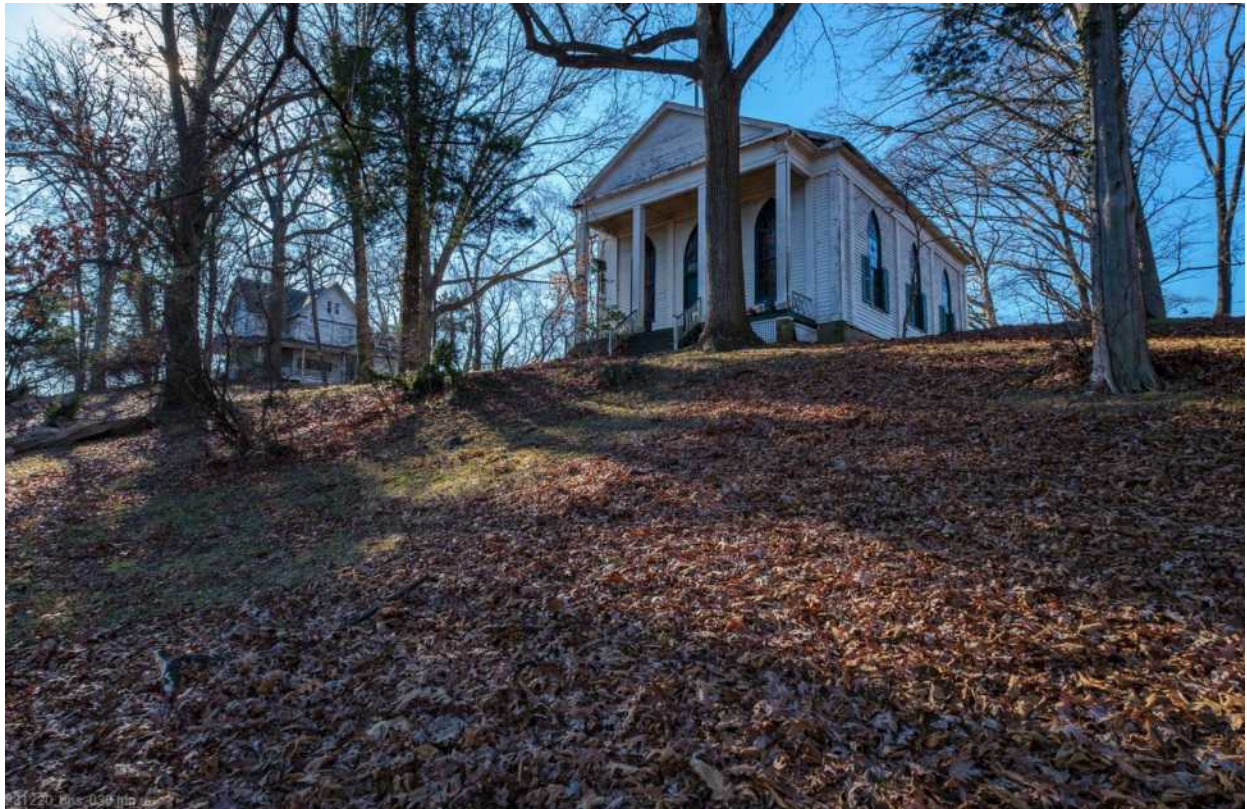


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