

Bethesda Meeting House Newsletter

March 2024



Welcome to the second issue of the Bethesda Meeting House Newsletter. If you missed the first issue, you can find it on our [Bethesda Historical Society website](#). Buckle up. Here's what we've been up to during the past month.

No water!?!

Our most stunning discovery so far is that the Meeting House has no water supply. No toilets, no faucets! It's not surprising this was the case during the 19th century for a building that dates to 1850. But for all the 20th century? The lack of water (along with a declining membership and the cost of heating) was likely one of the reasons that the Baptist congregation moved religious services to the parsonage (which had bathrooms and a kitchen) shortly after 2010.

The state of the buildings

Our most pressing work has been preventing further deterioration of the two buildings from rain, snow, animals, and vandals!

The roof on the church is in pretty good shape, but its aging gutters have basically fallen off. Before we can install new ones, the decaying soffits need to be replaced. And *that* can't happen until the colony of squirrels living in the church attic, who use gaps in the soffits to come and go, relocate somewhere else. A humane trapper has started their move.

The church's window frames and sashes are rotten and barely holding up the beautiful Sandwich glass windows, so we're going to remove the glass and board up at least some of these windows before they collapse.

The parsonage's roof is old and badly damaged -- it's been letting rain and snow leak into the upper floors. The gaps in the roof were recently covered with a tarpaulin, which will stay in place until a new roof can be installed.

We've also cleaned up the three acres. If you drive by the site now on Rockville Pike, you'll see that trees have been trimmed, leaves and debris have been removed, and fallen dead trees no longer litter the property. Less obvious, but equally important, is that with the help of volunteers we cleared out piles of debris that had been abandoned in the parsonage.

We've also added security cameras on the property because, we're sorry to report, the parsonage was vandalized twice in the last five months. Recently, someone broke in and sprayed graffiti on bedroom walls. The Bethesda police are now helping us to keep an eye on the place.

Regrettably, the vandalism has forced us, on the advice of the police, to restrict access to the property. No Trespassing signs are now posted all over, and we're installing a chain across the driveway to prevent unauthorized access.

We also created a new sign at the foot of the hill so that passersby can see what we're up to and maybe help support our work.



Next up

The challenges now become exponentially more complicated and expensive as we try to bring this unique site and its two almost 175-year-old buildings into the 21st century after years of neglect.

We're arranging and paying for half a dozen engineering and other surveys of the land and the buildings which will help us size up the state of the property and what repairs are needed to restore the buildings. This is a necessary step before we can figure out the future of the site and before serious partners will want to get involved. We'll let you know what we learn.

Meanwhile, we're applying for grants from government agencies and foundations. Needless to say, we could also use your financial support. If you'd like to make a donation, go to <https://bethesdahistoricalsociety.org/donate-page/>

Volunteer Clean-up Sundays



Karen Philipps and her husband Mark removing litter and weeds from the back of the parsonage.

Every second Sunday of the month from 1:00 pm to 4:00 pm is now Bethesda Meeting House Clean Up Day! Bring a broom or rake to help us clean up the buildings and grounds. See the inside of the church up close and walk around this extraordinary Bethesda site you probably didn't know existed! Our next clean up date is March 10th.

Remember, access to the site at 9400 Rockville Pike is accessible only by driving south on the Pike toward downtown Bethesda. Driving towards Rockville, pass the Meeting House on the left and make the next U-turn.

Our volunteers

Throughout all the work so far, we continue to benefit immensely from the generous help of volunteers. In this and future issues of this newsletter, we're going to celebrate those who are contributing their expertise (and elbow grease) to save this historic site.

We have to begin with Bob Eisinger, a Principal and Managing Member of Promark Partners, who's been working with us since practically day one. He's a veteran real estate developer in Montgomery County whose firsthand knowledge of how to deal with complicated historic properties like the Meeting House extends from the smallest details to the biggest issues. And his boldness of vision matches up well with the challenges we face.



Bob, whose reputation in the local development community has given our project priceless credibility from the start, knows the people who can be the most helpful to us. His blunt advice (tough love is the best love) has kept our amateur mistakes to a minimum.

Bob is a hands-on guy who commutes from his home on the Eastern Shore to the Meeting House, rolls up his sleeves, and pitches in on whatever needs his help the most. He grew up in Bethesda, and saving the Bethesda Meeting House is a labor of love for him. We wouldn't be nearly as far along as we are if it wasn't for all his help. Thank you, Bob.

We'll be recognizing others in future newsletters, such as the young man who single-handedly saved the church bell from being stolen last fall. We'll talk more about that bell and whether we can link it to Paul Revere(!) in a future newsletter.

And if you have expertise or experience in something that would help us in our work and would like to volunteer, please email us.

Meeting House sign

By the way, if you're like many of us, you've witnessed the sad decline of the iconic sign that Bob Eisinger is standing next to in the above photo. You'll be pleased and relieved to learn that we carried the sign up the hill and into the church, where it now sits protected from the weather. And someone (another volunteer!) is working on the creation of a replica.

Remember to share this newsletter with others.

If you're not on our mailing list, send us a note. And share your questions or memories about the Meeting House with us!

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 Vice-President, David Schardt.

