

March 23, 2023

The Commission would like to offer some historic context for the actions itemized in the Resolution and references with the goal of raising awareness of what was going on at the times the actions were taken. These comments are a work in progress, as more needs to be investigated. In general, the actions seem evident from the resource material, but they did not happen in isolation, nor with the spotlight structural racism can now shine on them. We understand that the journey from recognition to action is one that can be difficult and we need to take together in consensus for it to be effective. It is not something that can be imposed on a community.

Washington Grove has always been “A Place Apart” – by design. The utopian vision of the founders reflected Methodist efforts of the time to create locations for the conversion of souls, and these were located in rural areas outside of, but easily accessible from, urban areas. The Grove was one of several in Montgomery County, including our neighbor Emory Grove. Integral to the vision for the first congregants was escaping the urban stresses, heat and temptations to a peaceful, bucolic and untainted place apart. It was a gathering of city-dwellers in a landscape of farmers, but also a strict religious colony that condemned alcohol and any activities on Sundays, and devoted their time to sermons, enjoying nature, and saving souls in the ‘wilderness’. Thus, it was functionally separate from the surrounding countryside, connected primarily to Washington by the train. This countryside at the time was 40% black due to use of slaves on the tobacco farms, and who, as the soils failed and emancipation came, had to scramble for gainful work. Emory Grove was originally composed of these primarily rural black families, and was a strong element of the countryside context. Washington Grove viewed itself both as aligned with Emory Grove as a sister Methodist community and at the same time as apart from the rural culture.

The Grove was also “of its time”, which was one of a nation struggling with failed Reconstruction policies. Upon the ruling of Plessy v Ferguson, it also had to accommodate institutional segregation - the rise of Jim Crow policies and practices that built that segregation into many of our customs and world views even into the 1960s. We see this, of course, in the segregated school systems and the unequal employment and wealth statistics. But more subtle impacts permeate our attitudes and relationships and even our entertainment to this day.

Much of this we can now easily recognize as structural racism and feel we can divorce our own actions from those that came before. But just as many of the negative impacts of the decisions of that period remain, so too do the resulting overall life advantages enjoyed by most who live currently in the Grove. Though the intent of some of the decisions may be hard to ascribe to racism, the effect seem to be readily evident.

The Fence and Gates

The Camp Meeting grounds were arranged on either side of a county road called Broad Street that connected the train station and freight siding with the farms of the area as well as Emory Grove. The road

was where Grove Avenue is now, just 100' from the Tabernacle located in the Circle. It was commonly used by farmers hauling products to load onto the train and people going to and from the station. These people considered it a public path that would be available even though the Association actually owned it, and some apparently tried to formalize that access. The Camp Meeting Association succeeded in moving the public road over to where Washington Grove Lane is now (it became known as Laytonsville Pike). The farmers also used Ridge Road, Railroad Street and Grove Road for access to the siding. The Association wanted to secure the grounds from these public uses so erected a series of fences to inhibit wagon traffic, then added gates and at various times ordered them closed, then locked. The Camp Meeting was a summer event, so remained vacant most of the year. The gates were there in part to identify the grounds and to protect the tents, cottages and grounds off-season from vandalism. During the summer season they were to protect the somewhat carnival atmosphere of the camp from those that were attracted to it for other-than-religious reasons. In particular, they were concerned about the sin of alcohol.

The organizers of the two-week camp meetings here and in Emory Grove took pains to make sure they occurred at different times and the popularity of each rose and fell during their history. During the heydays of each, they could host up to several thousand people. Most coming here came on the train from Washington. Many, but not most, coming to Emory Grove also came on the train. They then had to walk to their camp, at first on Broad Street (now Grove Avenue) through our camp, which may have continued for a time after the fence was built. One instance is noted in the Association minutes that ordered the gates closed during Emory Grove's camp meeting, but no reason is identified, nor whether that was a common event. Of course, the only way around our camp was on Laytonsville Pike (now Washington Grove Lane). This reinforced our separateness in the minds of those inside the fence and those outside. That route was without a sidewalk until the 1970s for various reasons, apparently including opposition to providing a path to the stores at the commercial corner. This reinforced the separateness that remains to this day in the minds of those inside and those outside. And we are now working to overcome that long history.

Schooling and Employment

It's interesting that the first school at Emory Grove (now gone) was named after Washington Grove. The history of segregation in the county is well documented and now regretted. Residents of both Groves still remember those days, and the structures set up countrywide still resonate - so too with the patterns of employment. After the tobacco crops depleted the land, and farming turned to the less labor-intensive grain farming, there was not an abundance of work to be had for those that lived in the county. The Grove residents mostly worked in Washington and they gave maintenance work to many from Emory Grove. This pattern is common throughout the world where there is disparity of wealth and opportunity. Yes, we provided work; yes, the people that had the work were willing and grateful for it; and yes, many wonderful relationships were forged because of it. But it is one more structure of division as well, and reinforcement of both widespread privilege and repression.

Train Station and Auditorium Segregation

The B&O Railroad, like most railroads in the country, became segregated after the Plessy v Ferguson case in 1897. This included the cars and the stations, which nominally separated both the sexes and races to protect them from what was perceived as unpleasant customs practiced by each at the time (e.g. men routinely spitting on the floors). The Association did not object to, nor did they enforce these policies.

The issue of segregation at the Auditorium, however, was in the control of the Association and then the Town. It had become the national policy by the time the Auditorium was built in 1905 accommodating the many Chautauqua events that were customarily white. It became the center of activity and hosted home-grown theatrical and musical events as well as those of the regional Chautauquas. These events also followed the customs of entertainment of the day, a popular form of which was the minstrel show. Much has now been written about the inherent racism of these wildly popular shows and the Grove's residents were willing participants in both the parades and the shows in the Auditorium. This had waned by the time we became a Town, and other productions decreased along with the use of the building. An attempt to revive the theatrical use by a troupe composed of some current and former residents ran into conflict with the standards of segregation prevalent at the time and apparently common, though undefined, in the Grove. There was a much-disputed agreement which became contingent upon the troupe formally agreeing to enforce that segregation, and as they could not or would not assure their compliance, it fell apart. What would have revived the life of the Auditorium, in the end led to its gradual demise.

Racist Covenants

The founders of the camp meeting sought to create an ideal community based on strong community values that separated it from what it saw as a sinful society – good against evil. They were strict in their customs and policies in order to preserve the special community they had carved out. Like-mindedness was an assumption that was reinforced by their religion. As the community developed it gradually lost its religious underpinnings and mandates, but valued the community character it had created. As it moved to the more formal structure of a municipality through very turbulent times, it appears there were fears of losing that common bond. It is understandable there would be a desire for actions to assure the community would survive the changing times. It's unfortunate this action manifested itself as an exclusionary covenant. We now know that such exclusion was widespread in the country, and resulted in the segregated way we live even today. Whether these covenants were ever used or enforced in the Grove may not be knowable. What we do know is that our community stands out in the neighborhood as different in both good ways and bad.

The Commission supports the efforts to understand all actions in our history, how they have resulted in what we enjoy today, and how that understanding can improve our greater neighborhood. We recommend continuing to examine the past as important to determine our future.