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**HISTORIC PRESERVATION REVIEW BOARD**  
**Historic Landmark Case No. 15-06**

**Emory United Methodist Church**  
6100 (and 6104 and 6120) Georgia Avenue NW  
Square 2940, Lot 17 (including Assessment and  
Taxation Lots 801,802, 808, 813)

Meeting Date: April 23, 2015  
Applicant: D.C. Preservation League  
Affected ANC: ANC 4A  
Staff Reviewer: Patsy Fletcher

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The Historic Preservation Office recommends that the Historic Preservation Review Board designate the Emory United Methodist Church building a historic landmark to be entered into the D.C. Inventory of Historic Sites. Staff further recommends that the Board forward the nomination to the National Park Service for listing in the National Register of Historic Places as of local significance, with a period of significance is 1856 to 1924, from the date of the first construction of a church on this site until the completion of the present building.



The property merits designation under District of Columbia Criterion A (*Events*) as it was the site of events significant to the heritage of the District and to the nation; Criterion B (*History*) for its “association with historical periods, social movements and patterns of growth that contributed to the heritage and development of the District;” Criterion D (*Architecture and Urbanism*) as it “embodies the distinguished characteristics of an architectural style”; and Criterion G

*(Archaeology)*. It meets National Register Criterion A for its association with a pattern of events that contributed to the history of Washington as the oldest church in Brightwood, both witnessing and participating in the neighborhood's spiritual, political and social life during its development from rural crossroads to urban neighborhood. It meets Criterion C for its distinctive architectural features which embody the Classical Revival style and is a very fine church edifice. Finally, the property merits designation under National Register Criterion D as its archaeological resources are likely to yield information important in history.

## **Background**

The Emory United Methodist Church site is bounded by the 6100 block of Georgia Avenue NW on the east, the 1300 block of Quackenbos Street NW to the south, and an alley, once part of the original Piney Branch Road, which separates the church property from Fort Stevens National Park to its west. On the north, it is bounded by an apartment building, which wraps the corner of Rittenhouse Street and Georgia Avenue.

Emory United Methodist Church has a history of over 180 years, dating to 1832 when it was established in the agricultural village of Brightwood. Brightwood served as a toll station on the Rockville Turnpike (later known as the Seventh Street Road and Georgia Avenue). The Emory congregation is the oldest in Brightwood, its first church built on a half-acre of land donated by A.G. Pierce for the purposes of a school and church to serve the then rural community. That building was a few yards from the current edifice. The two-story frame chapel provided a gallery for African-American worshippers who resided in the neighborhood. Most of the pioneers of Brightwood and the neighborhood's later civic activists belonged to Emory. In the 1850s, the congregation split from the Methodist Episcopal Church and joined the pro-slavery Virginia Conference. The congregation moved to the current site into a larger red-brick structure it built in 1856 ironically on land purchased from Elizabeth Butler, a free woman of color, and a resident of the bordering African American community of Vinegar Hill.

The advent of the Civil War led to the confiscation of the church property. Located on a high point, it commanded the approach down the Seventh Street Road, considered a vital artery between Maryland and Washington City. The Union Army proceeded to tear down the 1856 church building, its cellar—where the current building now stands—was repurposed as an ammunition magazine. A log house was converted to a guardhouse. And bricks went into fortifications and ovens. The site was circumscribed by the earthworks of the original fort. When Fort Massachusetts was deemed too small, it was expanded westward in 1863, taking the home and property of Butler's grandchildren, one of whom was Elizabeth, later famously known as "Aunt Betty" Thomas of Brightwood. The newly extended fortification was renamed Fort Stevens after a slain general.

Fort Stevens is significant for many reasons in addition to the fact that it was part of the Civil War defenses of Washington. It was the focal point of the 1864 Battle of Fort Stevens, the culmination of a Confederate invasion, and the spot where President Lincoln came under fire.

Fort Stevens attracted persons fleeing enslavement in the surrounding slave states. Referred to as "contrabands," they congregated on the periphery where they set up camps, helped to construct and maintain the fort, provided other paid services to the military and, toward the end of the war,

were provided a school. At the close of the conflict, many remained in the community and became residents of “Vinegar Hill.”



Estimated location of Fort Stevens projected onto current day aerial of the site. Fort Massachusetts is represented on the right portion of the image and includes the old brick structure superimposed on the current day church building.

After the war, a replacement church for the Emory congregation was constructed of stone on the site of the old chapel and completed by 1870. In 1907, a large frame structure, referred to as the Sunday School Annex, was attached to the rear of the stone chapel. A retaining wall was erected about the same time, incorporating an elaborate staircase built into the side of the knoll. It provided access to the chapel’s main entrance.

Serving a growing number of Brightwood residents and soldiers treated at the new Walter Reed Hospital, the church again had to expand. In 1922, the 1870 church was replaced with the grander stone edifice we see today.

### **Architectural Description**

Emory United Methodist Church is a granite Classical Revival style church with terra cotta trim, distinctive in its construction of dressed fieldstone blocks of varying shapes, sizes, and colors, its variegated tones giving its walls an almost mosaic-like appearance. Its pedimented portico is supported by four massive Doric columns. It is not just classical in its elements, but in its siting, the temple on a hill. On the crest of a knoll, it overlooks the area in all directions, a particularly

prominent visual presence on the Georgia Avenue corridor. Its cruciform plan is created by two short and narrow perpendicular wings at the rear projecting from its main block. The church was designed by the architecture firm of Milburn, Heister and Company, and Frank Ginechesi served as the builder for the construction that began in 1922 and completed in 1924.

The front bays and east, or front, façade of the church includes a classically-accented portico, and is wrapped by a heavier cornice and frieze than the remainder of the building. The cornice is composed of a wide lower band of three courses of terracotta block, with successively higher profiles and rabbets. The dentiled courses and backbands of the north and south facades are replicated above this band in terracotta, beneath an upper cornice band of scalloped terracotta blocks. The formality of the east façade is enhanced by a parapet which wraps the roofline of the front bays of the side facades. The parapet is constructed of multiple courses of terra cotta block with successively higher profiles, with its corners and ends delineated by pillar-like compositions.

The nominated property includes a large stuccoed frame structure attached to the rear of the main block of the church, referred to as the Sunday School Annex. This is the 1907 annex formerly attached to the rear of the 1868-1870 stone chapel and remodeled and enlarged in 1952 by architect R.O. Kluge. The original structure appears to survive as a gable-roofed section of the annex, but its east side was truncated when the present church was constructed.

### **The Architects**

The firm of Milburn Heister & Company, led by Frank Pierce Milburn (1868-1926) and Michael Heister (1870-1948), was a highly successful and prolific Washington practice that was skilled in designing large institutional buildings. In the early twentieth century, it was one of the most prominent firms in the District of Columbia and the southern U.S., designing over 250 major government and commercial structures in Washington and elsewhere.

Among Milburn Heister & Company's numerous major downtown commissions were the Powhatan Hotel (1911), the ten-story Interstate Commerce Commission building (1912), the eleven-story Department of Commerce building (1913), the Potomac Electric Power Company building (1912), and the Southern Railway Company building on Pennsylvania Avenue (1916). Their only extant downtown buildings are the Real Estate Trust Company (1913) at 1333 H Street NW; the American Federation of Labor headquarters (1916) at 901 Massachusetts Avenue NW; and Lansburgh's Department Store at 8<sup>th</sup> and E Streets (1916). The three are designated D.C. historic landmarks or contributing to a designated historic district.

### **Evaluation**

If the mission of the District's historic preservation laws and regulations are to protect and safeguard the city's historic, aesthetic and cultural heritage as reflected in certain buildings or sites, then the designation of could not be more appropriate. The aesthetics, the history, and the heritage embodied by Emory United Methodist Church make it fully worthy of protection.

Emory United Methodist Church, also known as Emory Beacon of Light, Inc., meets DC Criteria A (*Events*) and B (*History*), and National Register Criterion A, because it is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of history and the

development of the District of Columbia. The church has had a long history dating back to 1832 and is closely associated with the settlement and growth over one hundred eighty years of one of the District's largest neighborhoods, the Brightwood community. Additionally, it played a pivotal role in the Civil War, first because its site was the center of Fort Massachusetts, because it was the focal point of the only Civil War battle to take place in the District of Columbia, and as the location where President Lincoln famously came under fire as he viewed the progress of the battle.

Emory United Methodist Church also meets D.C. criterion D (*Architecture and Urbanism*) and National Register Criterion C as a preeminent example of early twentieth-century religious architecture in Washington, D.C. Uniquely situated on the crest of a hill at the top of a monumental winding stone staircase, the elegantly fashioned Classical Revival church's most striking features include its pedimented portico, dentiled cornice and frieze, massive Doric columns, granite walls, and terracotta trim. The architecture of the building in its setting evokes a grand and commanding presence. These features reflect the mature work of a highly successful and prolific local architecture firm, Milburn, Heister & Company, which designed many important institutional buildings in the city in the early decades of the twentieth century, of which few have survived.

Emory United Methodist Church also meets District of Columbia criterion G (*Archaeology*), as well as National Register Criterion D because it is likely to yield information important to our understanding of the Civil War, to the historic development of the church, and to the transformation of Brightwood from a rural landscape to an urban environment. As the site of the first-built section of Fort Stevens, a significant Civil War fortification where the Battle of Fort Stevens took place in July 1864, the church property may contain unique artifacts about this critical period in the history of the city and the country, including Civil War-era troop and contraband camps. Pre-Civil War era resources may also be present, related to the original church and/or to the preceding period when the property was owned by Elizabeth Butler, a free woman of color. There is also limited potential for early prehistoric resources deeply buried by wind-blown silty soils (loess) at the end of the Pleistocene epoch.

Based on surrounding topography, it appears that the project area has largely been built up, rather than graded. Such actions would result in burying of historic features, rather than the destruction of such features. So despite post-Civil War development and urbanization of the surrounding landscape, the church property retains archaeological potential as outlined in an archaeological assessment conducted in 2009 by consultants hired by Emory Church.<sup>1</sup> The limited investigations revealed buried features related to the post-Civil War church, and possibly intersected one of the ditches from the fort's earthworks. The consultants recommended that archaeological data recovery investigations be conducted prior to any construction activities on the church property, and the HPO concurred. In summary, the parcel contains archaeological resources potentially eligible for both the National Register of Historic Places and the District Inventory of Historic Sites.

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<sup>1</sup> Sperling, Christopher I. [DRAFT] 2009 Archaeological Assessment of 6100 Georgia Avenue NW; Lots 801, 802, 808, and 813; Square 2940 Washington, District of Columbia. Prepared by The Ottery Group, Olney, Maryland for Emory Beacon of Light, Inc., Washington, D.C. DC SHPO Archaeological Report # 401.