

St. Columba's Church, Tenleytown and Race

A Racial History of St. Columba's Parish



Prepared for the Reparations Task Force of the Diocese of Washington

and St. Columba's Parish

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St. Columba's Today

St. Columba's Parish is today among the largest and wealthiest parishes in the Diocese of Washington. Located in the Tenleytown neighborhood of Northwest Washington, D.C., the church property includes the stone chapel and spacious gathering areas known as the Commons and the Great Hall. A large wing houses church offices, a music room, lounge, library, several meeting rooms, and a bustling nursery school. The grounds include a playground and outdoor gathering space, a Columbarium, various garden areas, and a parking lot. For 2021, the parish budget exceeded \$3 million. The church is currently completing a \$2.4 million renovation.

The Parish is served by three regular clergy, a priest assistant, and a deacon, two seminarians, a director of operations, three musicians on staff, and more than a dozen additional staff members. Like its surrounding neighborhood, St. Columba's parishioners, clergy, and staff, with notable exceptions, have been predominantly White.

But St. Columba's has not always been prosperous, and the surrounding Tenleytown community has not always been so predominantly White. St. Columba's has shaped, and been shaped by, the story of Tenleytown -- the neighborhood occupying the highest point overlooking Washington. Its long history includes the Native American tribes who thrived there for centuries, the English settlers who brought slavery and the Anglican church to the area, plantations worked by enslaved persons, Civil War forts, homes and churches built by the formerly enslaved, and Jim Crow segregation.

Understanding how St. Columba's grew from a small mission chapel established by St. Alban's parish in 1874 calls for an examination of the lasting effects of deliberate and systemic racist policies and practices in the United States since the 1700's, specifically including in Washington, D.C., Tenleytown, and the Episcopal church. This paper endeavors to gather facts that will help the parish and the Diocese of Washington understand how racism has shaped St. Columba's since its founding. In doing so, it examines the history of the land the parish occupies, the people who founded the church, and the church's relationship with the African American community that once thrived within the parish boundaries, including its own mission chapel, St. George's.

Finally, this paper is not the last word but a starting point: parishioners are invited to add their recollections of the church's racial past and their hopes for the future.

I. Before St. Columba's

The Early English Settlers

St. Columba's story can be traced back as early as the 1630's, when English explorers first arrived on the land on the east and north banks of the Potomac River. There, they encountered the Piscataway Native American tribe, which hunted, farmed, and fished in the Potomac Valley and quarried soapstone along the Rock Creek to make tools and vessels. At what is today the port of Georgetown was a tribal settlement known as Tohoga, where the native tribes traded goods. (Helm, Judith Beck, Tenleytown, D.C.: Country Village into City Neighborhood, Tennally Press, Washington, D.C. 1981, p. 1)

English settlements in what is now Washington, D.C. and the surrounding counties of Maryland began in the late 1600's, when Oxford-educated young Englishmen received patents from the British Crown for use of the land in the colony of Maryland. (Helm, 10-11). Over time, they drove out the Native American tribes and built a new society, relying heavily on the labor of indentured servants and enslaved Africans to create a prosperous British way of life. *Id.* The English settlers availed themselves of the extensive footpaths initially forged by Native Americans. Among the most important was one that headed north from the Tohoga settlement, the precursor of today's Wisconsin Avenue. (Helm, 2-5). Other footpaths later became River Road and Belt Road, leading out into today's Maryland suburbs. *Id.*

The English settlers also brought the Anglican Church to the Maryland colony. As research conducted by the Diocese of Maryland found, the process of establishing the Church of England began in 1692, purportedly to guard against papist plots and the threats of dissenters. By 1702, only Anglicans could hold public office. The church vestries served in effect as the local governments. All free men and all enslaved persons were taxed annually at a rate of forty pounds of tobacco – raised largely by slave labor - to build the churches and pay the parson. (Diocese of Maryland, "Racism in the Anglican and Episcopal Church in Maryland," by Mary Klein, diocesan archivist, and Kingsley Smith, historiographer).

The "Friendship" Tract

By 1713, two Englishmen had acquired patents for land they called "Friendship" in honor of their congenial relationship. Friendship consisted of more than 3,000 acres in what was then Frederick County, Maryland. James A. Stoddert owned the northern part of Friendship, above what is today Fessenden Street and extending north and west into Bethesda and Kenwood. Colonel Thomas Addison's tract included what is now Tenleytown, extending south to today's Van Ness Street and Sidwell Friends School, east to Reno Road, and west to the Dalecarlia Reservoir. (Helm, 12 - 14). Eventually, the land west of Rock Creek, including Addison's, was cleared and tobacco planted.

In fact, the area where St. Columba's parish is today consisted of plantations during the 18th century, worked by enslaved and indentured persons. Harvested tobacco was rolled behind wagons down the old Native American path to the port of Georgetown, thereby expanding the trail that became Wisconsin Avenue. (Helm, 20 – 23). In 1753, when Thomas Addison's son Anthony died, his property included twenty enslaved persons and various livestock used by the enslaved laborers for field work on the southern Friendship tract. (Helm, 16). Through a series of marriages, deaths, bequests, and acquisitions, the Addison portion of Friendship came to be owned by the Murdock family.

The Murdock Family

The Murdocks descended from a long line of prominent Episcopalians and played a significant role in establishing both St. Alban's and St. Columba's. W.D.C. Murdock contributed the initial parcel of land where the St. Alban's mission church that became St. Columba's was established. Forty-five years later, his daughter Marianne left a large bequest for the expansion of St. Columba's. The family had deep roots in Maryland's early colonial

plantation period, when they held numerous enslaved persons and handed them down as property to successive generations. Consequently, the family's history sheds light on the forces that led to the founding of St. Columba's and the sources of the wealth that made the parish possible.

The first of the Murdocks to arrive in Maryland appears to have been Rev. George Murdock, an Anglican priest, ordained in London's St. Paul's Cathedral in 1724. He became the first rector of what was then Rock Creek Parish, founded in 1726, now Christ Episcopal Church in Rockville, Maryland. *See* [History | Christ Church Rockville](#); [The Montgomery County Story, https://mchdr.montgomeryhistory.org/xmlui/bitstream/handle/20.500.12366/175/mcs_v037_n4_1994_howard.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y](#). Family genealogy materials indicate that Rev. Murdock acquired about 150 acres of land near the church in 1730. When he died about 1761, he left his son William Murdock his dwelling plantation house, land, and enslaved persons. (*see the Rev. GEORGE MURDOCK: Owings Stone Family Genealogy* [◆ 20,000+ ancestors and their relatives.](#))

It was William's son, John, who first acquired the large Friendship tract formerly owned by the Addisons. In 1760, John Murdock built a frame house for himself, which he called "Friendship," on land later acquired by American University and located where the current residence of the University's President now stands. (Helm, 18-19). John Murdock split his time between a home in Georgetown, where he served as a commissioner, and Friendship, where he was a gentleman farmer and later served as a colonel in the American Revolution. By 1780, he had acquired 1,562 acres of the Friendship tract as well as an additional 1,159 acres of land from two tracts to the south bordering the Potomac River, making him one of the largest landowners in what by then was Montgomery County, Maryland. (Helm, 20). When he died at the age of 58 in 1790, his extensive property inventory included forty-eight enslaved persons. (Helm, 51)

Following the successive deaths of John's son and grandson at young ages, a large portion of the land acquired by John Murdock passed to his great-grandson, William D.C. (generally known as W.D.C.) Murdock, who was born at "Friendship" and lived from 1806 – 1886. In the [1850 United Federal Census](#), he listed himself as a farmer. According to the 1855-1862 Tax Assessments of Washington County, W.D.C. Murdock of "Friendship" listed his assets as 1,000 acres of land, house and improvements totaling \$43,500; personal property such as furniture, carriages and farm animals totaling \$1,960; and ten enslaved persons with a total dollar value of \$3,850.

Murdock identified these enslaved individuals by name and assigned a dollar value to each of them. They were **William Hutchinson**, age 50, \$350; **John Lee**, age 23, \$600; **George Lee**, age 19, \$600; **Mary Lee**, age 20, \$500; **Martha Lee**, age 18, \$500; **Henry Lee**, age 13, \$500; **Frank Lee**, age 10, \$300; **Theodore Lee**, age 5, \$200; **Margaret Lee**, age 5, \$200; and **Ellen Lee**, age 3, \$100. He continued to hold most of these persons until they were emancipated in 1862. (*See* [A brief post-slavery history of African-Americans at American University - The Eagle \(theeagleonline.com\)](#), by Nickolaus Mack, April 19, 2018, citing [enslaved-persons-in-washington-county-tax-assessments-1855-1862.pdf \(freedmenscemetery.org\)](#)).

W.D.C. Murdock's 80-year life took some twists and turns. According to his obituary, his "tastes for study and literary pursuits led him to seek retirement on his extensive Friendship lands." Evening Star, July 24, 1886, p. 1. Upon his marriage, he moved to a larger estate, The Cedars, located on the land where the Duke Ellington High School for the Arts stands today. (see [The Cedars | Glover Park History](#)). Despite his inherited wealth, his obituary reported that he had lost all his property by the time of his death in 1886. His reversals resulted to a significant degree from the impact of the Civil War.

The Civil War Comes to "Tennallytown"

By the 1790's, the area where today's Wisconsin Ave. and River Road meet was known as "Tennallytown," named after John Tennally, who owned an inn there. Tennallytown Road was a muddy, unpaved trade route leading down to the port of Georgetown. During the Civil War, Tennallytown was transformed when thousands of soldiers and laborers flooded into the area to support the Union war effort.

In 1861, the Union Army established a ring of forts on the high land around Tennallytown. These included Fort Reno (located on the land where the national park and Alice Deal Junior High were built) and Fort Gaines (located at the intersection of today's Massachusetts and Nebraska Aves., where American University's Katzen Art Center now stands). Fort Gaines in fact stood directly across from Murdock's "Friendship" estate, along today's Massachusetts Ave.

During the war, the population of Washington, D.C. nearly doubled. Washington County, which included Tennallytown, experienced the greatest growth yet remained rural and sparsely populated. The 1870 census of Washington County for the "Tennallytown post office" listed many families as headed by farmers and laborers, with about one-third of them "Negro."

Much of the growth in Tennallytown in the decade following the war occurred on the land formerly occupied by Fort Reno. Many formerly enslaved persons who came there during the war simply remained on the land, having nowhere else to go. The first houses built at Fort Reno were shanties built by the freed enslaved persons out of leftover wood. (Helm, 170).

Murdock and the Emancipation of Enslaved Persons in 1862

To maintain the loyalty of wealthy slave-owning families in Washington during the Civil War, Congress passed the Compensated Emancipation Act of the District of Columbia of 1862. The Act freed enslaved persons in the District of Columbia and provided compensation to those who held them for their supposed "property losses." No compensation was given to those who had been enslaved.

W.D.C. Murdock sought a total of \$9,100 in compensation for eight enslaved persons by submitting a detailed petition that provided their names, ages, skin color, and skills. He even had them officially appraised. Based on Murdock's descriptions of them, these individuals included the Hutchinsons and Lees he had identified in the 1855-62 tax records. They were: **Wm. Hutchinson**, 56, valued at \$900; **Wm H. Lee**, 20, valued at \$1,100; **F. H. Lee**, 20, valued at \$1,200; **Theodore Lee**, 16, valued at \$1,100; **Mary C. Lee**, 26, valued at \$1400; **Martha A.**

Lee, 24, valued at \$1,400; **Margaret A. Lee**, 16, valued at \$1,100; and **Ellen Lee**, 14, valued at \$900. Murdock also listed **Sophia Hutchison**, who was then eighty-nine, but did not seek compensation for her, describing her as “old & infirm, valueless, though your petitioner feels in duty bound to support her.” (Murdock’s petition, along with others submitted pursuant to the Compensated Emancipation Act, is available at [Civil War Washington \(civilwardc.org\)](http://CivilWarWashington.org), published by the [Center for Digital Research in the Humanities](http://CenterforDigitalResearchintheHumanities.org) at the [University of Nebraska-Lincoln](http://UniversityofNebraska-Lincoln.edu))

Following their emancipation in 1862, at least some of these formerly enslaved persons remained associated with the Murdock family. According to W.D.C. Murdock’s obituary, “Frank and Henry Lee, two servants of the Murdock family in the days of slavery, helped to bear the coffin of their former master to the grave.” (*Evening Star*, July 24, 1886, p. 1). Assuming that these men were the 20-year-olds identified in Murdock’s 1862 compensation application as Wm. H. Lee and F.H. Lee, they would have been 44 years old by Murdock’s death in 1886. Both men appear in later census records as residing in the Reno community and Georgetown.

The Demise of the Friendship Estate

During the Civil War, Union troops stationed on or near the Friendship estate cut the timber on Murdock’s land, took down all the fencing, and used it for fuel and fortifications. Murdock failed to recover after the war and was forced to sell off his holdings.

After his death in 1886, Murdock’s estate filed a claim for his losses. In 1904, the Court awarded the estate \$47,424.60, the value of the timber taken by the troops and not paid for by the United States – an amount equal to about \$1.48 million today. *See* United States House of Representatives, 58 Cong., 2nd Session, Document No. 501, Letter from the Assistant Clerk of the Court of Claims, transmitting a copy of the findings by the Court in the case of William A. Gordon, Administrator of William D.C. Murdock, Deceased v. The United States, Congressional Case No. 10111 and 10378). Consequently, when his sole surviving heir, Marianne Murdock, died in 1920, she was able to leave \$10,000 of this money to St. Columba’s (about \$150,000 today), by far the largest gift the church had received.

II. The Founding of St. Columba’s

In 1874, St. Alban’s Parish founded the mission chapel that came to be known as St. Columba’s in Tennallytown. St. Alban’s parish itself had only been established 20 years earlier, in 1854, encompassing much of today’s Northwest Washington. Murdock and other founders of St. Alban’s were among the wealthy landowners in Washington County. When the war ended in 1865, St. Alban’s found Tennallytown transformed from a rural outpost of large plantations and estates. Drunkenness and brawling were common in post-war Tennallytown. People were not coming down the muddy, rut-filled road to St. Alban’s, so the church came to them.

A small wooden chapel was built on what was then Murdock Mill Road in 1875 on the land donated by St. Alban’s vestry member W.D.C. Murdock. Constructed of unhewn log and slab boards, the chapel was about 20 feet square and heated by a wood burning pot-bellied iron stove. (History of St. Columba’s, 1973; interview of Frances O. Belt)

Little information exists about the people who attended the St. Alban's mission during its early years. The post-war arrivals to Tennallytown were not as prosperous as the first settlers had been hundreds of years earlier. Most were lower middle class or working-class people; some would have been classified as poor, and very few would have been called well off. (Helm, 196). Given that the area was about one-third African American, it is possible that some who came to the mission were formerly enslaved persons who were settling in the Reno community.

The first services were conducted by the then Rector of St. Alban's Rev. John Chew, a grandson of Bishop Thomas Claggett, the first bishop of the Diocese of Maryland (Cline, Ruth Harwood, Church at the Crossroads: A History of St. Alban's Parish, 1854 – 2004, Posterity Press, (2009), p. 51). Bishop Claggett had himself held enslaved persons. (See Kline and Smith, [Racism-in-the-Anglican-and-Episcopal-Church-of-Maryland.pdf \(episcopalmaryland.org\)](http://episcopalmaryland.org)). Rev. Chew was performing baptisms and marriages of "colored" couples who were coming to St. Alban's during the early years of Reconstruction after the war (Cline, 55). Consequently, it seems unlikely that he would have turned any African Americans away from the mission chapel. Regardless of the races of those who attended the services Rev. Chew held every Sunday, they were undoubtedly very simple.

Over the next 25 years, the mission grew in fits and starts, served by the clergy and parishioners of St. Alban's, who had many other responsibilities. The African American population, and some White families, settled in at what came to be known as Reno City on the land formerly occupied by the Union forces. Through 1900, the census for the Tenleytown area continued to show that about one-third of the population was African American. By the end of the 19th century, three events spurred the growth of the mission.

First, the arrival of the first electric streetcars on today's Wisconsin Avenue in 1890 made the area more accessible and attractive to settlers, so the population grew. Second, the Episcopal Diocese of Washington separated from the Diocese of Maryland in 1895. The new Bishop Henry Yates Satterlee sought to invigorate the new Diocese and promoted the mission activities of St. Alban's. Third, Bishop Satterlee brought Rev. Bratenahl as the new rector at St. Alban's. Rev. Bratenahl and his wife Louisa lavished attention on the mission. In 1900, a parish hall was added onto the chapel. In 1904, the mission was finally given its name – St. Columba's. An auxiliary vestry was formed to give St. Columba's more autonomy and control over its affairs, and a full-time vicar was finally assigned to St. Columba's.

By 1911, the rustic wooden chapel building had been replaced with a more substantial, though still modest, chapel of pebble-dash construction. Following rapid turnover in the vicars serving the chapel, Rev. W.W. Shearer became vicar of St. Columba's in 1915 and stayed until 1930, finally bringing stability to the mission. He oversaw St. Columba's transition to a separate parish in 1924 and became its first rector. (Cline, *passim*).

III. The Founding of St. George's Mission in Reno City

Following the Civil War, segregation remained pervasive, including within the Episcopal church. Bishop Satterlee was a New Yorker who questioned some aspects of the Jim Crow culture of the South, including in Washington, D.C. Satterlee's views on race and the practices

of the Episcopal church at large are far beyond the scope of this paper. Suffice it to say that he sought to reach out to African Americans, teaching at King Hall, a cooperative Divinity School located adjacent to the Howard University campus that was established by the Episcopal Church in 1889 for the training of its “colored” clergy. He opposed the church’s closing of King Hall in 1906 and continued to lecture there every week until it closed. (Cline, 96; *see also An Illustrated Handbook of Howard University, Washington, DC*, Washington, DC: Howard University, 1902, pp. 44-46)) and website of [Department of History, 1913-1973 - Howard University](#).

With Satterlee’s support, St. Alban’s founded a second mission in Tennallytown in 1899 – this one specifically to serve the thriving African American community in the Reno City. There is no indication that consideration was given to simply inviting African Americans in the Reno community to attend services at the already existing mission of St. Columba’s, located within walking distance. Services were initially held by clergy and a deacon from St. Alban’s in a simple row house at Reno. In 1903, St. Alban’s purchased a lot next to the brand-new Jesse Reno School for African American students and by 1913 had built a chapel there. St. Alban’s records indicate that funds donated for the initial founding of the St. George’s mission were held in a separate trust, which St. Alban’s vestry drew from to pay some but not all of the expenses.

While lecturing at King Hall, Bishop Satterlee met Rev. Edward Douse, a Black Jamaican priest, born and educated in the British West Indies. In 1906, Rev. Douse became a member of the clergy at St. Alban’s and served as the vicar of St. George’s. His duties extended beyond St. Alban’s and the mission at St. George’s. He simultaneously served as vicar of St. John’s Chapel, a segregated mission of St. John’s Church in Georgetown, beginning in 1907.

Rev. Douse was very successful in building the congregation of St. George’s, performing many baptisms and confirmations there and earning much praise from the Diocese of Washington for his work. St. George’s held social events, such as lawn parties and rummage sales, and offered adult education at an “Industrial School” and a day nursery for working mothers. St. George’s also fulfilled its financial obligations to the Diocese of Washington. Diocesan convention reports for 1918 showed the largest financial receipts in the history of St. George’s chapel, which were sufficient to pay all current expenses and give surplus of \$100 to apply to the debt on the land. (St. Alban’s Chronicle, March 19, 1919).

There is considerable evidence of positive collaboration between St. Alban’s, St. Columba’s, and St. George’s during the early decades of the 20th century. The clergy of each church participated in the services of the others on special occasions. Lacking its own parish hall, St. George’s used the hall at St. Columba’s for some social events. Rev. Shearer held meetings at St. George’s to plan the formation of several organizations at the chapel, including an Altar Guild and Ladies’ Aid. During the First World War, St. Alban’s and St. Columba’s clergy participated in services at St. George’s honoring those who had served in the war effort.

IV. Racial Segregation in the Church and Washington, D.C.

Despite the beneficial exchanges between St. George’s, St. Alban’s, and St. Columba’s, the three churches were clearly distinct congregations. They held separate services and social activities. The annual children’s picnics were segregated events. (Cline, 138).

Segregation within the church was hardly unique. The period beginning in 1913 with the advent of the administration of President Woodrow Wilson was marked by increased racial segregation and the rollback of gains made by African Americans during reconstruction in Washington, D.C. and throughout the United States. The deepening of racial segregation and the imposition of repressive Jim Crow laws and policies in the District of Columbia are well beyond the scope of this narrative. Suffice it to say that President Wilson, himself a Southerner, showed no opposition when his cabinet segregated much of the federal workforce. [Woodrow Wilson: Federal Segregation | National Postal Museum \(si.edu\)](#). Racial tensions grew in Washington and throughout the United States.

Although there is no suggestion that St. Columba's excluded participation by African Americans, very few attended the services during this period. A long-time member of St. Columba's, Mary Cronin, interviewed around 1973 in connection with St. Columba's centennial celebration, remembered that just one African American attended St. Columba's. She recalled the period around Rev. Garner's tenure as vicar (1912–1914) and the First World War:

One [memory] that stands out in my mind is the heavy-set colored woman who always sat in the last pew in church (the only colored person who attended St. Columba's Church). When it was Communion Sunday, she waited until everyone was served, then she would walk up alone and take communion. Her shoes always squeaked and as the church was so quiet, the squeaking sounded louder. Everyone loved her, and I don't recall her name

Mary's brother, William Tyler Page, Jr., son of William Tyler Page, who served as the vestry's senior warden for many terms, added to his sister's "recollection of our dear old colored woman, Eleanor (Fox)," remembering her as "Aunt Hattie."

The racial stereotypes and caricatures permeating American culture were thus evident within the church. When St. Columba's put on an "Old Time Minstrel Show" in its newly remodeled parish hall in 1911 to raise funds to defray construction debt, the performers appeared in black face and sang Swanee River, Old Kentucky Home, and Kiss Your Minstrel Boy Good Bye. Reporting on a similar Minstrel show held in St. Columba's parish hall in 1903, St. Alban's newsletter noted the "full houses greeting our men friends, who had suddenly become dark complexioned." St. Alban's Chronicle, St. James Day, 1903.

V. Growing Disparities Between St. George's and St. Columba's

Disparities in the financial resources between the two mission chapels became more pronounced as the White population grew in Tenleytown and St. Columba's continued to flourish under Rev. Shearer's leadership. St. George's relative lack of resources were evident in Rev. Douse's undated, handwritten letter to Bishop Harding, likely prepared in the early 1920's. After giving his account of the work at St. George's and St. John's, Douse appealed to the Bishop for additional support for both chapels, requesting a vicarage and parish hall for St. George's and a new chapel, clerical help, and a deacon for St. John's.

The Diocese of Washington acknowledged both the needs and contributions of St. George's. A report prepared for the 1920 Diocesan Convention of Washington noted the need to meet the "growing colored population" of more than 100,000 in the District of Columbia. The report stated that St. George's chapel was the only "colored" church within the confines of the then six square miles of St. Alban's parish and noted that the chapel is "strategically located on the ground adjoining the Reno Public School." Cognizant of the request Douse had made in his letter to Bishop Harding, the report stated that its Vicar, Edward Douse, "reports the need of a new vicarage and parish hall" and that his "Nationwide Campaign quota has been paid in full." (quoting report by D. Wellington Curran, Stephen E. Kramer and E.L. Stock, *Journal of the Diocesan Convention of Washington, 1920*, Appendix at 100 - 101).

A 1921 Diocesan Convention of Washington report spoke favorably of Douse's work, stating that, "The Chapels at Ft. Reno and Georgetown, in charge of the Rev. Edward Douse, are located in a populous field where fruitful work can be accomplished." The report praised Rev. Douse, noting that, "The Vicar is a kind Pastor to the congregations whom he serves." (quoting report by D. Wellington Curran and others, *Journal of the Diocesan Convention of Washington, 1921*, Appendix at 117).

Nevertheless, there is no evidence that St. George's ever acquired a parish hall, deacon, or clerical help. Rev. Douse's many responsibilities affected his health. He may also have contracted influenza during the pandemic of 1918, as did Rev. Shearer. (Cline, 136-37; St. Alban's Chronicle, Feb. 23, 1919). At the insistence of the parish and some outside friends, including Bishop Harding of the Diocese of Washington, Rev. Douse took a vacation in June of 1919, having taken only one holiday since 1906, when he first took charge of the chapel. While his health problems surfaced over time, he continued to carry on his responsibilities at both St. George's and St. John's.

During the 1920's, the disparities between the two mission chapels accelerated and grew deeper. While St. Columba's achieved greater prominence and stability, St. George's remained very active, but its future began to dim. St. Columba's did offer some financial support for St. George's. At a meeting of the Auxiliary Vestry on May 24, 1922, Vicar Shearer read a letter of thanks from the vicar of St. George's chapel for financial assistance given by St. Columba's. The following year, as St. Columba's was planning to become a separate parish that would include St. George's within its boundary, the Auxiliary Vestry referred the subject of "conditions at St. George's chapel . . . to the Committee on the New Parish for investigation" and also received a report from the Young People's Social Club that "they would assist in meeting the indebtedness of St. George's chapel..." (St. Columba's Auxiliary Vestry minutes, 9-26-1923)

At the diocesan level, support for St. George's at Reno appeared to wane. In contrast to earlier reports to the diocesan conventions, a 1924 report questioned the continued location of St. George's at Reno. The report discussed the locations of the various "white" and "colored" Episcopal churches in the District of Columbia, including St. George's. Reflecting the growing racial segregation in Washington, the report opined:

At present, the colored churches are far more strategically placed than are the white churches. One exception should be noted in the case of St. George's Chapel Fort Reno. It is the opinion of your committee that this work should either be moved to a better location or abandoned.

(report submitted by C.M. Young, C.S. Abbott, Wm. H. Nes, Chas. P. Bennis, and William Stanley, *Journal of the Diocesan Convention of Washington, 1924*, Appendix at 74). The Committee offered a resolution to this effect, but records identified to date do not reflect that it was acted upon or adopted. In the years that followed, St. George's and the Reno community it served would begin to confront the political forces that led to their demise.

VI. St. Columba's Becomes a Separate Parish

St. Columba's received a major boost in 1920, when the daughter of W.D.C. Murdock, Marianne, died and left \$10,000 to benefit St. Columba's – an amount equal to about \$150,000 today, the largest gift received by that time. Under the terms of her will, she left the bequest as an “endowment fund or for building purposes for St. Columba's Chapel.”

By 1921, St. Columba's congregation had grown to a point where it was able to raise sufficient funds to support its own operations and become a separate parish. Initially, the congregation voted to remain a mission of St. Alban's but later came around. At the diocesan convention in June of 1924, St. Columba's was separated from St. Alban's and became a separate parish. Rev. Shearer became the first rector of the new parish.

As the parish boundaries were redrawn, the portion of St. Alban's parish transferred to St. Columba's parish encompassed the Reno community. Consequently, the diocese also separated St. George's chapel from St. Alban's and made it a mission of St. Columba's. (Cline, 146).

St. Columba's Builds a New Sanctuary and Parish Hall

Shortly after becoming an independent parish, St. Columba's started plans for a new building to house the sanctuary and parish hall. To acquire the additional land needed for the new building, St. Columba's drew from the Murdock trust and purchased 70,000 square feet of land adjoining the existing chapel. (*See flyer for Proposed New Church and Parish Hall; Title search conducted by the law firm of Morris, Pearce, Gardner & Beitel, May 21, 1974.*)

- Donations from parishioners, coupled with the Murdock funds and large bank loans, allowed the construction to begin at a projected total cost of \$100,000, an amount equal to nearly \$1.7 million today. The minutes of St. Columba's new vestry reflect that the parish borrowed heavily to finance the construction of the church buildings. An initial loan of \$50,000 in 1926 swelled to nearly \$80,000 by 1928 – an amount equal to nearly \$1.3 million today. (Vestry minutes, 5-26-1926; 2-20-1927; 11-23-1927; 4-9-1928). St. Columba's was plainly overextended. The debt continued to grow and became an increasing burden on the parish.

On St. Columba's Day, June 9, 1926, the cornerstone was laid, an event covered by local newspapers. A photograph appearing in the Washington Post showed that, in fact, the cornerstone itself was laid by two African American men, who are not named. (An enlargement of this photograph is set forth on the cover page to this paper.) The vestry had voted to continue Rev. Douse as the vicar of St. George's chapel, and he participated in "The Office for the Laying of the Foundation Stone of St. Columba's Church," along with the Rectors of St. Alban's and St. Columba's. Rev. Douse offered the supplications, including a poignant petition:

Grant, we beseech thee, blessed Lord, that thy holy Catholic church may be filled with the spirit of truth, unity, and concord, and may seek diligently to minister, to all sorts and conditions of men, thy precious gifts of Holy Scripture and Apostolic Creed, Holy Sacrament and Apostolic Order.

Relationship between St. George's and St. Columba's

St. Columba's apparently paid little attention to St. George's after it became a mission of St. Columba's. A handful of references are found in the following records:

Vestry minutes: The vestry directed during a meeting on October 28, 1925 that a commendation letter be sent to St. George's because it was the only church in the Diocese to complete payments to the Nationwide Campaign. At its June 23, 1926, meeting, the vestry appropriated \$25 (about \$380 today) to send to Rev. Douse, enclosing a letter expressing appreciation for his work and giving the funds for use on his vacation. And during a meeting the following year on June 22, 1927, the vestry directed that a letter be sent "to Rev. Edward Douse for his 22 years of faithful work at St. George's Chapel and enclose a check from the Treasurer for \$25.00." (again, about \$380 today).

Minutes of St. Columba's Men's Volunteers: Records indicate that Rev. Edward Douse was a member of the men's group and that he resided at 4819 Vincent Street, a street in the Reno community near St. George's. Members of Men's Volunteers, January 1, 1928. At meeting on April 12, 1926, he made a "very interesting and instructive talk on his native land Jamaica."

Budget Committee reports: A report for St. Columba's proposed budget for 1926 included expenditure of \$1,680 for "missions, including nation wide campaign fund and support of St. George's chapel." An additional \$300 was projected for the "convention fund, St. George's included." St. Columba's vestry designated convention representatives for both St. Columba's and St. George's, but all delegates were members of St. Columba's, not St. George's.

St. Columba's Newsletter: The cover of each issue of St. Columba's Messenger identified Rev. Shearer as the Rector and Rev. Edward Douse as Vicar, St. George's Chapel, and named other staff of St. Georges, including the church school superintendent, Treasurer, the Choir Mother, and the officers of St. George's Guild. However, the only story that mentioned St. George's was a report on November 22, 1925, that Rev. Edward Douse, vicar of St. George's, said the blessing at the annual dinner for the men of St. Columba's held in preparation for the Every Member Canvas for contributions. Other newsletters showed that St. Columba's was preoccupied with raising money during this period and in the years that followed.

VII. The Demise of the Reno Community

The story of the destruction of the Reno community and the racism that fueled it is told in detail by Neil Flanagan in his 2017 article, [The Battle of Fort Reno - Washington City Paper](#). As Flanagan recounts, as early as 1899, a group of White property owners, District of Columbia Commissioners, and real estate developers were advocating for clearing the Reno community, falsely claiming that it was “blighted.” In fact, they wanted the land to build a junior high for White students at Reno and a so-called “high class” all-White neighborhood nearby – a goal they eventually achieved by using restrictions on land use, such as racially restrictive covenants that prohibited people of color from buying homes in the area.

A series of interrelated decisions by various governmental bodies over the course of the 1920’s led to a complete change in Fort Reno and the surrounding area, where St. Columba’s parish sits. These included (1) the Water Department’s decision to build a new larger reservoir and water tower; (2) the Board of Education’s plan to build a junior high and high school; (3) Congressional approval to allow the National Capital Parks to acquire the entire Fort Reno area and develop a landscaped public park; and (4) the National Capital Park and Planning Commission’s design for a scenic Fort Drive to connect the city’s Civil War forts. (Helm, 470)

The debate over the fate of the Reno community lasted several years. In June of 1926, the Senate Committee on the District of Columbia held hearings on a proposed bill to confiscate the Reno land through eminent domain. Most of the testimony was in favor of building an all-White junior high there. The Reno residents themselves were not told about the hearing, but an African American lawyer named James Neill read about it in the newspaper and brought people with him to testify. A few Senators expressed concern about the residents of the Reno. Here’s some of what they heard:

James Warren testified that he would not sell his home. It took him his whole life to get it, and that he just bought a new home last year. (1926 Senate Hearing, 13)

Thomas Walker testified that the Black residents built little huts there 70 years ago to get out of the way of people who wanted to be rid of them, and then walked down to the heart of the city to work. Now those people have followed them out to Reno and want to drive them out. He said that “you love your home,” and that there was no place for them to go. (1926 Senate Hearing, 16)

S.W. Hebron testified on behalf of the Methodist Episcopal church at Reno. He stated that it is a large congregation that is planning to increase its property and build a new building. He stated that he is getting on in years and does not want to sell the home he built. He added that he cannot buy another house in other parts of the city where it is desirable to live. (1926 Senate Hearing, 17)

Thornton Lewis, Vice President of the Reno Citizens Association, testified that they were working men trying to be law abiding citizens. They are working men and could not buy a chicken coop with the little money they would get. (1926 Senate Hearing, 18)

Lucinda Harper testified that her husband was there, and that he is crippled. She asked “Where will I go? If you take my home and all the improvements that I have made there on Davenport Street and turn me out of doors, would it be fair in the sight of God?” She also stated that anytime the white people call upon us, we are at their service, and asked what they would do if they did not have us to call upon? She said that there would not be enough money to buy any place else. (1926 Senate Hearing, 18)

Dr. T. Edward Jones, a physician who had previously lived there for 15 years and who subsequently occasionally went to the residents’ homes as a physician, testified that the homes are well kept, orderly, and neat – not a blight. He agreed with a comment made by Senator Copeland that the condemnation proceedings would not adequately compensate them for their homes. (1926 Senate Hearing, 19)

The 1926 bill died but a new one was introduced. At Senate hearings in January 1929, the testimony broadly favored building the junior high and, in addition, proposed parks at Reno. Neval Thomas, President of the NAACP chapter in D.C., testified on behalf of Reno residents, imploring the Senators “to defend the interests of the Negro population of Reno” and prevent D.C. Commissioners from driving people from their homes.

Some Senators and one Commissioner remained concerned about African Americans at Reno, so a compromise decision was reached to acquire land first for the junior high, then more in stages. But the fate of the Reno community was sealed. Many homeowners accepted offers at low prices for their homes under threats of condemnation and moved away. The neighborhood slowly declined. By the 1940’s, all of the homes were gone.

VIII. The Closing of St. George’s

No one spoke on behalf of St. George’s, St. Columba’s, or the Diocese of Washington at the either the 1926 or 1929 hearings. Their silence is striking given that St. George’s fell squarely within the area designated for the all-White school that became Alice Deal Junior High. However, Rev. Douse must have been following the January 28, 1929, Senate hearings closely. Three days later, he met with Rev. Curran, the Executive Director of the Diocese of Washington, and told him that St. George’s would have to be sold soon. As outlined below, St. Columba’s largely ignored diocesan efforts to help St. George’s and treated the sale of its mission chapel as a financial opportunity to defray some of St. Columba’s growing debt.

Correspondence About St. George’s Between the Diocese and St. Columba’s

Diocesan records show that after meeting with Rev. Douse, Rev. Curran immediately wrote to Rev. Shearer. Curran’s letters reflect his recognition of the urgent need to plan for the sale of St. George’s and its relocation elsewhere. In fact, Rev. Shearer was already well aware of the government’s plans to acquire the St. George’s property.

February 1, 1929: Rev. Curran advised Rev. Shearer that St. George’s would be sold soon and added, “I feel that the Department of Missions, in cooperation with the vestry of St. Columba’s, should have an understanding as to the future of St. George’s church.” He suggested that they discuss a plan for relocating St. George’s, using proceeds of the sale as well as a \$4,000

legacy that would come to St. George's, but only if it continued to exist. Rev. Curran also expressed his concern for "our good friend Douse," who was by then 60 years old, writing that, "He really is a sick man and needs every care and help." There is no record that St. Columba's responded to Rev. Curran's letter.

March 15, 1929: Rev. Curran wrote again to Rev. Shearer, advising him that the Department of Missions, with the Bishop presiding, had adopted a suggestion that the proceeds of the sale of St. George's chapel be held in trust by St. Columba's vestry. He explained that a legacy of \$4,000 may come at any time, which would revert to the heirs if the chapel no longer existed, and hoped that this proposal would win favorable consideration by St. Columba's.

April 5, 1929: The Register of St. Columba's vestry wrote back to Rev. Curran to advise him that the vestry was grateful for the Department of Missions' concern about the disposition of St. George's. The letter stated that the vestry had adopted the recommendation "in spirit" and would take appropriate action to set aside a fund to perpetuate the work at St. George's chapel.

November 4, 1929: Rev. Curran wrote again to Rev. Shearer and told him that he was organizing a new church near Howard University. Curran asked Shearer what had become of the organ at St. George's chapel and said that he would be very glad for any church furnishings St. Columba's may have. He also asked Rev. Shearer what he thought of calling the new church St. George's, which would strengthen St. Columba's claim on the legacy when due, adding that it was "my understanding that and that the Rector and Vestry had set aside a certain amount to keep in existence in order that the legacy might be lost if by reason of the fact that no St. George's church is in existence." (In fact, there is no evidence that a legacy was ever received.)

The correspondence ends with this letter from Rev. Curran. However, St. Columba's vestry minutes show that the vestry had already made plans for the proceeds of the sale of St. George's and had no intention of assisting in its relocation.

The Sale of St. George's and St. Columba's Response

By 1928, St. Columba's was frankly cash-strapped and in debt. The vestry minutes and weekly newsletters are replete with the parish's efforts to raise money from the congregation and other sources. During September of 1928, the vestry offered to sell 4040 Davenport, which included the rectory and 5,500 square feet of land, to federal agencies for \$20,000, subject to a first trust of \$4,000 (the vestry had pledged the rectory to secure a bank loan). The government was interested in the property as it was located immediately adjacent to the Reno community along Belt Road but declined to purchase it at \$20,000. (Vestry minutes, 9-26 & 10-21-1928)

St. Columba's did, however, receive an offer of \$5,975 for the lots in the Reno community where St. George's chapel stood in from the D.C. government in November of 1928. After investigating land prices, the vestry decided that the offer was too low and was advised to await condemnation proceedings. (Vestry minutes, 11-18 & 11-28-1928)

St. Columba's was nevertheless anxious to get money from the sale of St. George's. In January 1929, the vestry "referred the method of raising additional needed funds to the Finance Committee with instructions to find out how soon condemnation proceedings would be instituted

by the District of Columbia to acquire the property upon which St. George's Chapel stands with a view to using that money if available at the time needed." (Vestry minutes, 1-23-1929)

In fact, by the following April 1929, the treasurer had already arranged a loan of up to \$5,000 from Riggs Bank based on St. Columba's ability to repay it some time that year from the sale of St. George's. (Report of Vestry Finance Committee, 4-24-1929). This commitment was evidently not disclosed to the Diocese, notwithstanding St. Columba's letter that same month informing Rev. Curran that the vestry "agreed in principle" that the proceeds of the sale of St. George's chapel be held in trust by St. Columba's vestry.

Inasmuch as St. George's was closing, Rev. Douse submitted his resignation, effective July 1929. The vestry responded by sending him a letter enclosing a check for \$50 (about \$670 today). In July, they asked him to transfer the chairs, altar, and church appurtenances to the Parish Hall when St. George's closed. By September, Rev. Shearer had loaned furniture and other articles used at St. George's to St. David's Chapel, another mission of St. Alban's. (Vestry minutes, 7-24 & 9-25-1929) St. Columba's apparently did not inform Rev. Curran that the parish had already loaned St. George's furnishings when he asked about them that November.

The decision to await the condemnation proceedings proved to have been a shrewd one. On January 9, 1930, the vestry was informed that a jury had awarded \$9,382 for the St. George's property, well over the \$5,975 previously offered. The vestry tentatively allocated \$1,000 to benefit St. George's and \$8,000 to pay two loans. When the award turned out to be somewhat less, the vestry reduced the contribution for St. George's to just \$500. Altogether, St. Columba's netted \$8,529.70 from the sale of St. George's - an amount equal to about \$138,000 today. (Vestry minutes, 1-9, 5-28, & 7-1-1930).

St. Columba's offered no explanation for appropriating to itself nearly all the proceeds of the condemnation of St. George's. While the parish had unquestionably made some financial and pastoral contributions to St. George's, St. Columba's did not build the chapel or buy the land. Rather, these were paid for by St. Alban's, a wealthy benefactor, and St. George's congregation itself. From a purely legal perspective, St. Columba's was entitled to dispose of the proceeds of the condemnation proceeding as it saw fit: St. Alban's had deeded the title to St. George's over to St. Columba's when it became a separate parish. Nevertheless, St. Columba's acted only in its own self-interest, exhibiting little concern for the future of St. George's, and responding disingenuously to Rev. Curran's letters about relocating St. George's.

No records show how St. Columba's congregation responded to the closing of St. George's. St. Columba's weekly Messenger was not published between June 30 and October 6, 1929. A comparison of these two issues shows that St. George's had been removed from the cover page in October, but there was no story about its closing. Nor is there any indication that St. George's chapel was deconsecrated, even though Bishop Harding had consecrated in 1913 amid press coverage praising Rev. Douse's work. (Evening Star, 8-2-1913).

Life-long St. Columban George Fletcher, then in his nineties, remembered St. George's mission church well during an interview with the Tenley Historical Society in 2004. He described it as a "faithful congregation, "very active," and "not a go-to-sleep church." Although

the Fletcher family had been deeply involved at St. Columba's since the early years of the twentieth century and actually lived close to the Reno community, he was not able to recall anything about the eventual fate of St. George's. (THS, Tenleytown Heritage Trail, Telephone interview of George Fletcher by Walter Schumann, July 18, 2004).

St. Columba's response to the closing and sale of St. George's reflected in part the parish's preoccupation with its financial survival. Money troubles only grew in the following years. Rev. Shearer resigned in the Fall of 1930 and was replaced by Rev. E.A. LeMoine, who proved less popular and effective than his predecessor. As the Depression deepened, banks began calling in the loans. Vestry members were making no-interest loans and outright gifts to the parish and personally guaranteeing the parish's bank loans. Rev. LeMoine took pay cuts.

Even Bishop Freeman was concerned about the financial condition of the parish. In January of 1934, the Bishop met directly with the vestry about the parish's failure to pay interest due on the mortgage; and in 1936, he wrote to express his concern about the parish's "present unfortunate position." He asked the parish to contribute to diocesan missions, but the vestry replied that it did not have the funds to do so. (Vestry minutes, 1-5-1934; 1-7-1936).

Ultimately, the vestry concluded, fairly or not, that the financial problems were the result of LeMoine's inability to attract and retain parishioners. He finally submitted an acrimonious resignation letter the following year. (Vestry resolution, 1-11-1940; LeMoine letter, 7-21-1941)

But it would be wrong to say that financial pressures alone dictated St. Columba's treatment of St. George's. Unlike St. Alban's, which had participated in and regularly reported on the activities of Rev. Douse and the St. George's mission, St. Columba's expressed little interest in St. George's. Rev. Douse participated in major events at St. Columba's, and St. Columba's in turn apparently did what was it was required to do for St. George's. Racist attitudes were not a guarded secret at St. Columba's. During the Annual Congregational Meeting on April 13, 1936, the congregation discussed filling the position of St. Columba's caretaker, who resided on the church property. The vestry's summary of the meeting bluntly reported that, "It was a consensus of opinion to have a white family as caretakers of the church."

Some St. Columba's parishioners participated in an organization that actively opposed efforts to build housing even for affluent African Americans in Chevy Chase. Several members of the vestry during the 1920's and 1930's, including its widely-respected senior warden William Tyler Page (see [William Tyler Page - Wikipedia](#)), were officers of the Friendship Citizens' Association, where Friendship Heights is located today. The association vehemently opposed the establishment of an African American community nearby, vowing that the land would "not be a negro colony." [The Washington times. \[volume\] \(Washington \[D.C.\] 1902-1939, July 05, 1906, Last Edition, Image 1 « Chronicling America « Library of Congress \(loc.gov\)](#); Flanagan, Neil, [The Battle of Fort Reno - Washington City Paper](#) and [Four Black men developed a Montgomery County suburb to provide a better life for some in their community. They received something very different in return. – Greater Greater Washington \(ggwash.org\)](#); see also [Village History - Village of Friendship Heights \(friendshipheightsmd.gov\)](#).

The White population continued to grow in Tenleytown and throughout northwest Washington and Montgomery County as the New Deal and World War II brought more people to Washington. Restrictive covenants on housing openly excluded people of color; African Americans were unable to obtain home loans. By the 1940's, the die was cast. The forces that made St. Columba's parish so predominantly White were firmly in place.

IX. St. Columba's Since the 1940's

In 1942, Rev. Randy Mengers replaced LeMoine as St. Columba's rector and stayed until 1969. Under his leadership, the parish was able to rebuild its membership, address its financial woes, and add a new wing and nursery school. Desegregation of D.C. public schools began after the Supreme Court's ruling in Brown v. Board of Education, ushering in the civil rights movement, but St. Columba's neighborhood and congregation remained largely White.

During the 1970's through the 1990's, St. Columba's initiated a number of outreach efforts, including programs to assist refugees from Southeast Asia and to support an orphanage and school in Honduras. In 1994, St. Columba's began a major program to address racial segregation in Washington, D.C. At the urging of then rector Rev. William Tully, the parish launched the St. Columba's/Truesdale Educational Program, or "STEP," and began working with the kindergarten class at Truesdale Elementary School, located in the predominantly African American Petworth neighborhood. The STEP program evolved into a decades-long relationship with the students and the Petworth community. Run by two staff members and dozens of volunteers, the program provided supplemental educational support and recreational activities, too numerous to describe here, and guaranteed the students' post-secondary education through the I Have a Dream Foundation. Relationships with the "Dreamers," now in their thirties, continue to this day. A recent posting by one of them on Facebook called for a STEP reunion.

During the 2000's, St. Columba's also had the great fortune to welcome two African American priests to the clergy: the Rt. Rev. Eugene Sutton, today the Bishop of Maryland; and Rev. Canon Rosemarie Duncan, who grew up attending St. George's in the Bloomingdale neighborhood and is now the Canon for Worship at the Washington National Cathedral.

Today, the parish offers outreach services that include grate patrol and a Water Ministry for those without housing, a family homelessness initiative, programs to assist refugees, a racial justice ministry known as Stirring the Waters, Sacred Ground courses, and an Anti-Racism Task Force. The vestry has committed the parish to becoming an anti-racist church, affirming that this is a core priority of St. Columba's mission. Currently, the parish is developing programs to engage in public advocacy to address such problems as affordable housing. Progress toward becoming a Beloved Community may be slow, but it is moving forward.

**In memory of
St. George's Chapel Congregation and Rev. Edward Douse, Vicar, circa 1908**



St. George's Chapel, circa 1917

