

# Defending Wilsonstown

Anne Arundel County residents work to preserve historic African American community in Odenton that's centered on church from centuries past



Bessie Rollins Queen, left, and Lillian Rollins, standing outside Wilsonstown's St. John AME Zion Church, say they are descendants of the town's founders. Isaiah, John and Dennis Wilson founded the town in the late 19th century. PAUL W. Gillespie/Capital Gazette



What is believed to be the foundation, walls and ruins of the Indian Spring Quaker Meeting House. JEFFREY F. Bill/Capital Gazette

By Dana Munro

Traveling down Conway Road in Odenton, one might not suspect they're entering a historic neighborhood until they reach a lonely church and its backyard cemetery. It's situated at a dead-end perpendicular to a set of train tracks.

While the public end of Conway Road looks more like a modern suburb, the other side, across the tracks, appears not too dissimilar to the way it did in the 1700s when it was a thriving Quaker settlement.

The area has hosted Quaker meetings, free Black Marylanders and military personnel preparing for combat in World War II. It's lost people to typhoid fever and dangerous working conditions along the railroad.

Since Isaiah, John, and Dennis Wilson were deeded 77 acres in the 1880s, the area's residents have been fighting back against government entities slowly closing in on the last remaining acres the town has. Residents of Wilsonstown, as it's called, say they can only attribute the town surviving this long to the faith they developed in that little church at the dead end as well as partnerships with similarly strong-willed neighbors.

The area's history starts with a Quaker property on the undeveloped side of the tracks. Indian Spring Meeting House was built around 1792, according to a Maryland Historical Society paper. Around the building a town started to develop. The Quakers were early

adopters of abolitionism, and many freed the people they enslaved in the latter half of the 1700s, long before the 1863 Emancipation Proclamation.

Once the Civil War concluded, the area's Black residents established Forks African Methodist Episcopal Church in 1869, named for its location near the "Great Fork" of the Patuxent River, according to a Maryland Historical Trust survey which also states the Quakers allowed the Black congregation to use their meeting house for worship. Forks bought the structure in 1891. Rachel Tyson, who was part of an early Howard County Quaker community, sold the Wilsons 77 acres in the 1880s for around \$500 in installments, according to a Maryland Historical Trust document. Wilsons town was born.

Several decades after the Wilson brothers purchased the land, the federal government took some of it, including the meeting house, to expand Fort George G. Meade in the early 1940s, according to the state assessment. Millions of troops funneled through the base to prepare for combat in World War II, said Fort Meade spokesperson Chad Jones. Once the war had ended, the church congregants and others sued the government to get the property back, according to land records. However, they lost the case in the late 1940s and the land was instead transferred to The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

A new legacy at the Wilsons town church begins

A new Forks AME Zion Church, since renamed St. John AME Zion Church, was constructed in 1942 on 6 acres of land the church members bought using money from the government's seizure of the property, according to the state survey.

"All of our parents and grandparents went to church," said Bessie Queen, 77, a lifelong Wilsons town resident who attended the church throughout her childhood along with her cousins Lillian Rollins, 73, and Everdean Holloway, 71. Rollins and Holloway, who are sisters, are Isaiah Wilson's great-granddaughters, they said.

The women were raised in a five-family Wilsons town household of more than 20 people in the 1950s and 1960s with no running water or indoor plumbing. Nearby white communities had these amenities by this time, Rollins said.

"You were poor and didn't know you were poor," Queen said. "My mother would feast on a \$60-a-week allowance from my father and we survived."

While Queen's father was a construction worker, Rollins and Holloway's father started out as a veterinarian's assistant at Fort Meade and their mother and grandmother worked doing laundry at the base.

They loved living in such tight quarters with family and got by on the little they had. Mr. Shepard, a white family friend of theirs who worked at Fort Meade, would sometimes bring over leftover canned rations of tuna, peanut butter and cocoa from the base for the kids.

Rollins and Holloway's grandfather worked on the railroad laying track along with many Wilsons town elders of that era. Their parents had to walk several miles to get to school in Bowie, as there were no nearby schools for Black students during segregation.

During their childhoods, the community of around 100 people was very close-knit. The town had one store: Ms. Odell's house.

"She sold candy and milk and soap," Queen said. "Those were good times."

The once predominantly Black neighborhood is now more diverse and residents are less entangled in each other's lives.

In the late 1970s and 1980s rumors spread about a haunted burial place of a worshipper of Satan at the cemetery behind the church. People from across the state came to see it.

Between 1987 and 1990 more than 100 arrests were made for acts involving the church, mostly for trespassing and many around Halloween, police representatives told The Capital in 1991. Vandalism was also a problem. In 1990, the shingles of the church were ripped off and an arson fire charred one of its walls.

#### Wilsontown fights rubble landfill proposal

The character of the town has transformed as well. There are only about five natives still living in the area as opposed to roughly 90 when Queen, Rollins and Holloway were children. Recent experiences have also shaped the town's attitude.

"We're more aggressive for speaking up for the things that we need with the county," Queen said.

The small community has found itself in a vulnerable position since the late 1980s when National Waste Managers Inc. filed an application with the state to build a landfill in Odenton along the northern edge of Wilsontown. The Chesapeake Terrace Rubble Landfill would store asbestos and other types of debris.

Residents fear the project could pollute their drinking water, which is already threatened by a plume of contaminants, including toxic PFAS, at a nearby landfill at Fort Meade.

Wilsontown is not the only neighborhood concerned about the project. A coalition of community groups has been fighting the landfill for years including Forks of the Patuxent Improvement Association, of which Queen and Holloway are members.

Last year, as the race for Anne Arundel County executive was heating up, Forks of the Patuxent Improvement Association and other groups penned a joint letter to Republican front-runner Jessica Haire requesting she return what they estimated to be around \$250,000 in campaign donations from representatives of Halle Companies, an entity affiliated with National Waste Managers. Haire ran against Democratic incumbent Stuart Pittman who has vocally opposed the landfill project for years. Haire lost to Pittman in the November general election.

The coalition has successfully fended off the developer for about 35 years now, but the project is still inching forward. National Waste Managers' latest hurdle is an endangered species of bat that the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service believes could be threatened by a landfill at that site. The developers are trying to prove the project wouldn't harm any endangered species.

One proposed entrance to the landfill would be right across from the church, Queen said.

#### Nearby retirees take an interest

While Wilsontown is covered in greenery, old screen porches and winding rural roads lined with trees, just 2 miles away lies a perfectly manicured senior living development: Two Rivers.

In late 2019, Jan Randall, who lives at Two Rivers, went out exploring in her new neighborhood after moving to the area from Albuquerque, New Mexico. She spotted a sign

that said “Wilsontown” and a church and cemetery and wondered what the story of this community was. There was no sign or plaque noting any of its history.

“I thought, ‘There’s more to this little community than what it appears,’ ” said Randall, 77.

She told her friend Jackie Jordan Irvine, 76, also a Two Rivers resident, a widow and an amateur genealogist, about it.

“I said, ‘Jackie what do you think if we figure out what happened in Wilsontown?’ ” Randall said.

Randall took Irvine to see it.

“It looked like I had walked back several decades in the past,” said Irvine, who had recently moved to the area from Atlanta.

Soon after they learned of the town the pandemic hit. While some spent their lockdowns making sourdough bread or crafting, Randall and Irvine spent nine or 10 months digging into documents stored at the Maryland State Archives.

“It was a mission,” Irvine said, conceding the research started out as simply “two old ladies with skills and nothing to do.”

Randall’s late husband’s family has Quaker roots, so she was familiar with some Quaker history. Meanwhile, Irvine, who is a descendant of enslaved people, had more Black history knowledge.

Part of what drew Irvine into the community was the AME Zion title of the church. She knew AME Zion churches had historical significance with deep roots in the abolitionist movement and that their congregants included Frederick Douglass, Harriet Tubman and Sojourner Truth.

Small discoveries started to make the story come together. The two women discovered documents suggesting that Johns Hopkins, the Baltimore philanthropist, university namesake and Quaker, was affiliated with the Indian Spring Meeting House. Hopkins’ childhood home is nearby in Gambrills. A cemetery near the meeting house is named Hopkins Cemetery. It is not known if there is a connection.

A historical marker is created

Irvine soon connected the pair with some Wilsontown natives and the two groups started putting together the research and oral history components of what they knew about the town.

“It was a hidden treasure of history,” Irvine said. “Everybody should know the story. It’s a story of resilience, survival. It’s just like the old African American saying, ‘Making a way out of no way.’ And, it’s still there.”

It was equally exciting for the Wilsontown residents, many of whom didn’t know much of the history Randall and Irvine uncovered.

“We were wondering, ‘Why is it called Wilsontown?’ all our lives,” Rollins said. “Now we know.”

She noted that in the 1950s and 1960s Black grandparents and parents often didn't teach their kids about their heritage, including hers. They were more focused on moving forward, she said.

After coming together, the groups felt the community needed a sign of some sort noting the town's significance. They tried to get the National Park Service to dedicate a marker but were told there weren't enough original structures to meet the service's threshold for a designation, Irvine said. Anne Arundel County's threshold, however, was lower.

Randall and Irvine handed over all the information they were able to collect to the county's Historic Preservation Program within the Office of Planning and Zoning, which installed a historical marker in 2021 that now sits beside the church. Queen said visitors often stop by and look at it.

What's to come

The Wilsontown natives said they worry about the area's future, aside from the threat posed by the landfill.

The church's former pastor, Wilmer T. Frazier Jr., who retired from St. John AME Zion Church in September, said most of its congregants are elderly. When he started there around 22 years ago the church had about 70 or 80 members. It now has around 40, the youngest of whom are in their 50s.

"I wouldn't be surprised after our generation is gone if the young people sell the land for all this money and move to the suburbs or the city and be fine and then somebody else will come here and enjoy this beautiful land," Rollins said. "It's happening already."

Holloway lives in a house right beside the church and Queen is nearby. Holloway can see the marker from her lawn. She likes to sit back there and relive her childhood – the big, crowded house she grew up in, the trees she climbed, even the outhouse they dashed in and out of in the winter and the bygone ancestors who helped lay the foundation for the community she's known all her life.

"Nothing stays the same," she said.