



MEMORANDUM

To: Historic Preservation Commission

From: John Liebertz, Cultural Resource Planner III, Countywide Planning and Policy Division, Montgomery Planning

Date: January 8, 2025

Re: An Amendment to the *Master Plan for Historic Preservation: Clarksburg Heights (12700-12712 Running Brook Drive) and Community of Faith United Methodist Church & Cemetery (22420 Frederick Road), Clarksburg, MD*

Staff Recommendation:

That the HPC recommends that the Planning Board list the Clarksburg Heights District and Community of Faith United Methodist Church & Cemetery in the *Locational Atlas & Index of Historic Sites* and recommends that the County Council designate the properties in the *Master Plan for Historic Preservation*.

Background:

The Historic Preservation Office evaluated potential historic resources as part of the Planning Department's ongoing *Clarksburg Gateway Sector Plan* that will guide the area's future growth. The *Clarksburg Gateway Sector Plan* will focus on a portion of the 1994 Plan's Transit Corridor District and a few surrounding areas. This area is part of the I-270 corridor—a significant employment resource for the county and the region. Planners will evaluate land use, zoning, transportation, and environmental and historic resources to determine if a new mix of land uses and zoning are more appropriate for this area. The Sector Plan will make recommendations for how best to update the 1994 Plan and its 2011 and 2014 amendments, including but limited to housing needs, interchange design, staging of retail development, transportation corridors, environmental considerations, and historic preservation recommendations. Staff recommends the designation of one district and one site to the *Master Plan for Historic Preservation*.

Designation Criteria for the Clarksburg Heights District:

Staff finds that the Clarksburg Heights District satisfies three designation criteria (1.A, 1.C, and 1.D) as listed in §24A-3 of the Montgomery County Code.

1.A Historical and cultural significance. The historic resource has character, interest or value as part of the development, heritage or cultural characteristics of the county, state or nation.

Clarksburg Heights is a unique example of a mid-twentieth century subdivision in Clarksburg, planned, built, and owned by African Americans. In Montgomery County, African Americans faced widespread and pervasive discrimination by land developers, property owners, and the government who used or supported de jure or de facto segregation to limit housing opportunities. Between 1890 and 1960, the Black population in Montgomery County stagnated and occasionally declined, while the white population experienced exponential growth. In particular, African American educators struggled to acquire housing in the county. The NAACP estimated that ninety percent of African American teachers commuted to

Montgomery County from Washington, D.C. because of discriminatory housing practices. In 1963, F. Wilson Wims, an African American builder, and Sarah L. Wims, sought to address the housing crisis with the construction of Clarksburg Heights, a small subdivision of modern, middle-class housing in the Rocky Hill community of Clarksburg. African American purchasers included at least three Montgomery County Public School teachers including Mary E. Johnson, Katie R. Harper, and Edith J. Gregg. Clarksburg Heights represents the efforts of the African American community to expand housing options prior to the passage of Montgomery County's Fair Housing Ordinance (1967) and Fair Housing Law (1968) and the Federal government's Fair Housing Provisions of the United States Civil Right Act (1968).

1.C Historic and cultural significance. Is identified with a person or group of persons who influenced society.

Clarksburg Heights is significant for its strong association with F. Wilson and Sarah L. Wims, leaders of the Clarksburg community, who subdivided, planned, and built this middle-class subdivision. The Wims supported African Americans who wanted to move to the suburbs, but faced intense discrimination. Montgomery County has recognized Wilson Wims for his dedication to the advancement of the African American community, his actions to create an inclusive community through youth athletics, and his participation in civic organizations. In 2006, the Montgomery County Office of Human Rights inducted Wims into the Human Rights Hall of Fame. The following year, Clarksburg High School named their new baseball field "Wims Field" in his honor. In 2014, Montgomery County Public Schools named the new elementary school in Clarksburg "Wilson Wims Elementary" at the behest of the greater community.

The significance of Clarksburg Heights is enhanced by its association with its first and long-standing owners who influenced local affairs. This report highlights the contributions of Mary E. Johnson, Katie R. Harper, and Edith J. Gregg, three African American women who taught at both segregated and integrated Montgomery County public schools, and James R. Gregg who challenged discriminatory practices at country clubs and worked to improve conditions for African American residents.

There are no historic sites or districts listed in the Master Plan for Historic Preservation that reflects the contributions of these individuals to Clarksburg or Montgomery County.

1.D Historic and cultural significance. Exemplifies the cultural, economic, social, political or historical heritage of the county and its communities.

Clarksburg Heights serves as a poignant reminder of segregated life and the resilience, achievements, and contributions of African Americans residents in mid-twentieth century Montgomery County. F. Wilson and Sarah L. Wims had the knowledge, skills, and determination to counter rampant discriminatory housing practices and provide much-needed middle-class housing for African Americans. Clarksburg Heights represents the productive life of the African American community in Clarksburg. The Wims, Johnson, Harper, and Gregg families all tirelessly worked to improve conditions for African Americans who lived in Montgomery County.

Designation Criteria for the Community of Faith United Methodist Church & Cemetery:

Staff finds that the Community of Faith United Methodist Church & Cemetery satisfies three designation criteria (1.A, 1.D, and 2.E) as listed in §24A-3 of the Montgomery County Code.

1.A Historical and cultural significance. The historic resource has character, interest or value as part of the development, heritage or cultural characteristics of the county, state or nation.

The Community of Faith United Methodist Church and Cemetery represents an early twentieth century, gothic revival church attended by the residents of Rocky Hill—the earliest African American community in Clarksburg—and the surrounding region. The church reflects the development pattern associated with the formation of the Rocky Hill community and the lives of African Americans during an era of segregation in Montgomery County. Churches and schools provided parishioners the opportunity for education, social engagement, and leadership opportunities. Influential members of the Rocky Hill and Clarksburg community including the Davis, Foreman, Mason, Snowden, and Wims families are all buried at the church cemetery.

1.D Historic and cultural significance. Exemplifies the cultural, economic, social, political or historical heritage of the county and its communities.

The Community of Faith United Methodist Church serves as a visible reminder of segregated life and the resilience, achievements, and contributions of African Americans residents in the early twentieth century. After the original wood-frame church burned in 1924, the congregation pressed forward with the construction of an imposing Gothic Revival-styled brick church. The church trustees hired Charles W. Spurgeon Graves and Charles Green, highly skilled African American builders from Washington, D.C., to construct the building for \$7,500 in 1925. These actions by the congregants—who worshiped more than 30 miles away from the nation’s capital in a rural section of the county—reflect the prosperity of the church and its function as a religious, educational, and social center for the African American community. As noted in *Black Historical Resources in Upper Western Montgomery County, Maryland* (1979), Community of Faith United Methodist Church was one of the largest and most architecturally notable African American churches.

2.E Represents an established and familiar visual feature of the neighborhood, community or county due to its singular characteristic or landscape.

The Community of Faith United Methodist Church and Cemetery is the last public site associated with the Rocky Hill community in Clarksburg. The church and cemetery serve as a tangible link to the African American community’s past, providing a sense of continuity, orientation, and place as a former center of religious, social, and educational activities. The imposing front-gable brick church with an integrated tower has stood in its original location along Frederick Road for nearly a century.

The Rocky Hill community, however, lost its other community landmark along with other significant resources. In the 1960s, Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning demolished the Rocky Hill Elementary School, a two-room segregated Black elementary school. Additionally, many homes of early Rocky Hill and Clarksburg community members identified in previous architectural surveys, such as the Lloyd and Sarah Gibbs House, Arthur and Ella Mae Gibson House, William and Mary Hackey House, Clifton and Rachel Snowden House, Benjamin F. and Elizabeth Wims House, and John Henry and Emma M. Wims House, have been demolished. Most of these individuals were buried in the church cemetery, and there are no limited sites that that reflect their contributions to the development of Rocky Hill or Clarksburg in the *Master Plan for Historic Preservation*. Therefore, the church remains as an essential feature of the built environment and its preservation would retain the legacy of the community.

Conclusion:

The subject properties satisfy the designation criteria listed in §24A-3 of the County Code and the HPC should recommend that the Planning Board list the Clarksburg Heights District and Community of Faith United Methodist Church & Cemetery in the *Locational Atlas & Index of Historic Sites* and recommends that the County Council designate the properties in the *Master Plan for Historic Preservation*.