WASHINGTON
NATIONAL
CATHEDRAL

Nearly every Sunday, when we gather as a community, we pray together:

Almighty God, to you all hearts are open, all desires known, and from you no secrets are hid: Cleanse the thoughts of our hearts, by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit, that we may perfectly love you, and worthily magnify your holy name; through Christ our Lord, Amen.

This simple prayer is a shared recognition of God's omniscience and our need to confront both what we have done and what we have left undone. In the end, no secret remains hidden, and no darkness escapes the light.

For the past several years, this Cathedral has worked to contend with this nation's original sins of racism and white supremacy. Now, we are called to do the same with our own history, to cleanse our hearts and trust in the Holy Spirit, because we believe we cannot be in right relationship with God until we are in right relationship with one another. This report is presented in that same spirit.

Within this report, you will find examples of the times when this Cathedral got it right, when we have taken tangible steps toward building beloved community. You will also find examples of when we got it terribly wrong, when we failed to see the face of God in our neighbor. This is our story. This is our history.

I encourage you to read this report. Pray on it. Think about it and talk about it. We can be proud of what we have done right, but we must confront what we have done wrong, trusting that the God who has walked alongside us throughout our history is the same God who walks alongside us into our future.

Thank you for being a part of this story. Thank you for being a part of this community. Thank you for sticking with us. Thank you for your witness.

Faithfully,



The Very Rev. Randolph Marshall Hollerith
Dean, Washington National Cathedral

WASHINGTON
NATIONAL
CATHEDRAL

‘TO YOU ALL HEARTS ARE OPEN’

A Racial History of Washington National Cathedral

January 2025

INTRODUCTION

Nearly 250 years ago, the founders of this nation launched a bold experiment to create a system of government that offered equality and the protection of the law to all citizens. In the two and a half centuries since, Americans have fought, argued, voted and died in the pursuit of making good on those promises for *all* people.

Across our national history, there have been times when Americans lived into the promise of our ideals, when we have taken steps to redeem the promissory note offered to all citizens. There have also been times when those promises were delayed or denied.

Around the mid-point of that national endeavor, this Cathedral was envisioned as a House of Prayer for All People, a sacred space near the center of civic power where all would be welcomed to experience an encounter with the divine.

At its best, this Cathedral offers itself as a place where every person is welcomed and embraced as a beloved child of God. Our Christian faith demands that every visitor, every worshipper, be able to find a home in this Cathedral, regardless of whatever labels the world might try to impose on them.

In this Cathedral, guests and worshippers are invited to experience the very presence of God, and to gain a glimpse of God’s kingdom on earth as it is in heaven. That is what Cathedrals were built to do: to provide a space apart, an encounter experienced through stories told in stone and glass, sacrament, word and song.

Like the nation we call home, the quest to live into the ideals of our founding has been marked by fits and starts, good intentions and sometimes broken promises. It has been led by pioneers and prophets, and also has been marked by the limitations of sin and human frailty.

Like any human endeavor, there are moments in Cathedral our story that inspire great pride, the times when we come closest to God's ideal. There are also moments when we have and continue to fall short, failing to live into God's vision of beloved community. Too often, those missteps are rooted in our nation's original sin of racism and the ugly stain of white supremacy.

Taking an honest look at who we have been is a crucial part of helping us understand who we are today, and to chart who we wish to be. Examining our past can help explain our motivations and actions, our fears and biases, our aspirations and ideals.

Exploring our institutional DNA isn't about setting ourselves up for praise, nor is it breathing life into troublesome skeletons. It's about leaning toward truth, integrity, honesty and justice. It's about finally giving voice to those who have been ignored or sidelined. It's about searching for the moments when God felt closest to us, as well as when we strayed furthest from God's desire for the flourishing of creation.

I. ORIGINS

Centuries before the land atop Mount St. Alban was acquired to build a new American Cathedral, this area was home to members of the Nacotchtank (Anacostan), Piscataway and Pamunkey nations.[1] For decades, the shared history of this land and the nations who lived here was largely ignored, forgotten, paternalized or sometimes disparaged.

Attitudes in early Cathedral history tended to reflect conventional notions of race and ethnicity that were prevalent in the early 20th century. In 1925, for example, a donor started a fund to erect a Cathedral memorial to Native Americans, saying "their belief in the goodness of the Great White Father in Washington to help them brings them very strong to our sympathetic consideration." [2]

Centuries after the Native American settlements – but also before the Cathedral was established – this land was home to several white farming families who used enslaved labor. By the time legalized slavery ended in the District of Columbia in 1862, hundreds of the enslaved had toiled in the farms that occupied much of Mount St. Alban and what we now call the Cathedral Heights neighborhood.[3]

A series of memorial stained-glass windows in the Cathedral pays tribute to the central slave-holding family, the descendants of Joseph Nourse, with a depiction of Black hands released from the chains of bondage. While the Nourse family did not directly sell their property to Cathedral founders, "the fact that the Nourse family had extensive land holdings on the hill overlooking Washinton, DC, prevented other development, and made it possible for a large tract to be available for purchase by the Chapter of the Cathedral Foundation."[4]

---

[1] Chris Myers Asch and George Derek Musgrove, *Chocolate City: A History of Race and Democracy in the Nation's Capital* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press), 5.
[2] "An Indian Memorial," Cathedral Age, Michaelmas 1925, 41.
[3] "Enslaved Persons on Mt. St. Albans and The Highlands, c. 1817-1862," Mark Auslander, Oct. 27, 2019. Available online at https://gloverparkhistory.com/population/slaves-population/mount-alban-highlands/
[4] Cathedral Art Database, item 1492.

The land we now know as the Cathedral Close passed hands over the next three decades; by the time it was purchased for the Cathedral in the 1890s, it was owned by a savvy real estate developer who, while not directly connected to slavery, had purchased it from the Nourse family.

This Cathedral was established as the bishop's seat for the Episcopal Diocese of Washington; for many people, it is the central symbol of the wider diocese. Several parishes within the diocese can draw a linear connection to the institution of slavery – accumulated wealth from enslaved labor that was given to erect a parish church, for example, including the Nourse-sponsored St. Alban's Episcopal Church on the edge of the Cathedral Close. Other parishes actively restricted the membership of free Black men and women; in some cases, predominantly Black parishes saw their very existence merely tolerated or even threatened by white church leaders.

The Cathedral's connection to the institution of slavery is less direct. However, there is considerable evidence and lived experience that demonstrates that institutional racism and a sense of white supremacy at times flourished at the Cathedral over the ensuing decades – even as Cathedral leaders publicly supported civil rights, fought against segregation or advocated for Black members of the Episcopal Church.

The real sin of the Cathedral, as one prominent Black priest put it, was in the sin of "white arrogance"[5] and a lack of grace-filled generous hospitality. "White supremacy may be a heresy," said the Rev. Dr. Kortright Davis, "but white arrogance is a lived-out theme."

In this House of Prayer for All People, "all" did not always mean "all."

II. FOUNDATIONS

When the U.S. Congress formally chartered the Protestant Episcopal Cathedral Foundation to sponsor this new Washington Cathedral in 1893, the effort largely had been the project of local businessmen working closely with leaders in The Episcopal Church. The 28 Cathedral founders listed on the Congressional Charter were all men, all white, and mostly wealthy.

A recent study into these 28 men found that at least seven came from families that were enslavers; there is no evidence that any of the Cathedral founders were themselves enslavers. One was Melville W. Fuller, the Chief Justice of the U.S. Supreme Court that had upheld legalized segregation in *Plessy v. Ferguson;* another was George Custis Lee, the eldest son of Confederate Gen. Robert E. Lee. However, in a reflection of the complexity of our shared humanity, others, such as Vermont Sen. George Edmunds, came from families that forcefully advocated for abolition. [6]

It is important to acknowledge the direct and indirect connections between leading Episcopalians of the late 19th and early 20th centuries and the vestiges of slavery and segregation. In 2024, the Church Pension Group — which currently manages $17.5 billion in assets — examined the top donors that launched the fund in 1917, just 10 years after construction began on the Cathedral. While the report

[5] The Rev. Dr. Kortright Davis, oral history, June 2023, Washington, D.C.

[6] Marc Fetterman, Emily Welsh and Linda Wirth, "Report on Founder's Involvement in Slavery," Sept. 26, 2023, Cathedral Archives.

found no direct ties to slavery, it nonetheless concluded that "wealth accumulation for much of the 19th century cannot be separated from the economics of enslavement."[7]

In other words, the wealth that fueled the growth of the Episcopal Church, and which funded the construction of its landmark churches in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, almost certainly benefitted from money gained from enslaved labor.

The Cathedral was born into a city undergoing immense racial and social change. "Compared to life in the city a generation before – and compared to black aspirations – the decades bracketing the turn of the 20th century witnessed a frustrating decline in political power, social standing, and economic opportunities for black residents. Jim Crow was settling in Washington, and a new generation of black Washingtonians struggled to stake their claim to the city."[8]

The first Episcopal bishop of Washington, the Right Rev. Henry Yates Satterlee, is widely credited with having the vision to build this new Cathedral. Satterlee was a member of the Colored Commission of the Episcopal Church, and in 1903 expressed growing concern about Black clergy engaged in "propagandism" and preaching for equal civil rights, a move that risked "fomenting race antagonism" within the Episcopal Church.[9]

Bishop Satterlee, a man of considerable personal wealth, at times embodied a sense of white paternalism toward Black citizens, reflecting an elite class of educated white Americans who saw African Americans not as equals but as a people deserving Christian charity. Just two months before he laid the Cathedral's Foundation Stone in 1907, Satterlee wrote that The Episcopal Church "must simply *give* to those colored people who desire to better their condition, full opportunities for improvement and education."[10]

His 1907 address to the Diocesan convention was even more pointed: "Though for more than a generation the Negroes have been made the political equals of the white by universal suffrage, the result has only brought out more plain than ever before, the fact that they are morally and intellectually a weaker race, and that, even if they should become great land owners, men of wealth and men and education, race antagonism would only become stronger and more sharply defined."[11]

In 1924, the Cathedral was asked to erect a memorial statue to the "Southern Mammy." The request was declined – not because images of Black slaves caring for white children were offensive and "Lost Cause" propaganda, but because the Cathedral did "not contemplate the erection of statues on the Cathedral grounds."[12]

---

[7] Church Pension Group releases report on the origins and sources of its assets," Episcopal News Service, May 8, 2024. https://www.cpg.org/globalassets/documents/publications/resolution_a129_report_from_cpg.pdf

[8] Asch and Musgrove, *Chocolate City,* 210.

[9] "Chronology of the Cathedral and the Issue of Race," by Diane Ney, Cathedral Archives, Dec. 14, 2015.

[10] Margaret Shannon, "Let Justice Run Down as Waters: Human Rights in the Cathedral's Fabric and Life." Cathedral Age, 2010. Emphasis added.

[11] The Right Rev. Henry Y. Satterlee, Speech to the Twelfth Annual Convention of the Protestant Episcopal Church of the Diocese of Washington, May 15 and 16, 1907, in *Journal of the Twelfth Annual Convention of the Protestant Episcopal Church of the Diocese of Washington.*

[12] Minutes of the 196th meeting of the Cathedral Chapter, April 29, 1924, Cathedral Archives.

It is important to note that the Cathedral was built, and funded, by the sacrificial gifts from generous donors from across the country. They came from different locations, with different motivations and means, but they all were taken with the vision of building a spiritual home in the nation's capital. Some were no doubt vocal advocates for social justice; some no doubt harbored racial animosity or a sense of white superiority. Some reflected the better angels of our nature, while others were lured by the demons of discrimination and white supremacy. Like the people who built this nation, the people who built this Cathedral are a kaleidoscope of different beliefs, backgrounds, ideologies and biases.

As this Cathedral leans into our second century, the most certain thing we can say about those who came before is that their actions, or inactions, continue to affect our lives today.

III. ICONS

In his 1951 seminal work "Christ and Culture," theologian H. Richard Niebuhr distilled five distinct ways the Christian church has operated in the world. The extremes are dominated by the Christ against culture at one end, and the Christ of culture at the other. In between, there is the Christ above culture, Christ and culture in paradox, and Christ the transformer of culture.[13]

Across the Cathedral's history, we can see evidence of each of these – times when the Cathedral largely reflected the dominant culture of its day; times when the Cathedral actively challenged prevailing cultural norms; and instances when Cathedral leaders publicly professed one thing while paradoxically seeming to act in contrary ways.

When confronting the sin of racism and false gospel of white supremacy that undergirds it, the Cathedral and all churches are called to transform the culture. That record, according to historical evidence and lived experience, has been uneven at best.

A New Cathedral for a Changing City

In many ways, the Cathedral reflected the dynamics and the demographics of the city it called home. Set high on a hill in a leafy neighborhood that came to be dominated by wealthy white families, the Cathedral was – and often remains – a socio-economic mirror of its closest neighbors. Geographically, it was cut off from much of the city by Rock Creek Park, which emerged in the early 20th century as a racial and class hedge that divided wealthy enclaves in upper Northwest from residents in neighborhoods around upper 16th Street, and middle-income and poorer areas to the south and east.

From its earliest days at the dawn of the 19th century, Washington had been home to a large Black population, some free, some enslaved. The decades after emancipation and the Civil War witnessed a dramatic growth in the city's Black population. By the end of the 1800s, just as plans for the Cathedral began to solidify, Washington was home to the nation's largest Black population, accounting for roughly one-third of Washingtonians.[14]

Black and white Washington, however, existed in separate spheres, segregated by race and socio-economic status. In fact, "As the city grew larger, more prosperous, and more modern, it also grew more segregated. ... The new neighborhoods were far more likely to be racially and economically

[13] H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1951).
[14] Asch and Musgrove, *Chocolate City,* 207.

homogenous, creating a segregated geography for the city that would last throughout the twentieth century."[15] Restricted covenants barred Black residents from certain neighborhoods, especially in affluent parts of Northwest Washington. The two Cathedral schools — St. Albans and National Cathedral School — were segregated initially, as was Beauvoir.

The declining social status of Black Washington became most acute just as the Cathedral's stone walls started to rise from the land atop Mount St. Alban. Still very much a city of the South, Washington proved to be fertile ground for Jim Crow segregation, and "the decades bracketing the turn of the 20th century witnessed a frustrating decline in political power, social standing, and economic opportunities for black residents."[16]

Several instances from the Cathedral's mid-life reflect its ambivalent treatment of race.

- Starting in the 1930s, city officials — spurred by wealthy white citizens and business leaders — began the systematic razing of Reno City, a middle-class Black neighborhood about one mile north of the Cathedral. Through coercion and deception, Black residents were forced to sell or abandon their homes and community institutions — including a Black Episcopal mission parish — in the name of urban renewal. There is no indication that Cathedral leaders spoke out against the redevelopment or the systematic removal of a Black neighborhood in their own backyard.

  Indeed, "what happened in Fort Reno was not an isolated experience. It was part of a larger pattern of displacement that took root in the 1920s and flourished as housing segregation solidified in the 1930s and 1940s."[17] The former neighborhood of Reno City was replaced by a sprawling park and a whites-only public school (currently Alice Deal Middle School) as Black communities were squeezed out of the western side of Rock Creek Park.

  "Cathedral leadership, like most white residents, was isolated and insulated from Black residents in the city," said the Rev. Canon Rosemarie Logan Duncan, the Cathedral's current Canon for Worship, who was raised at St. George's Episcopal Church, which grew out of the Reno City mission parish. "Whites lived a parallel existence that functionally resulted in Black life and experience being discounted or just invisible."

- In 1939, Cathedral leaders forcefully advocated for famed soloist Marian Anderson's right to perform in Washington after the Daughters of the American Revolution barred her from Constitution Hall due to her race. Nonetheless, they declined to make the Cathedral available for her concert, citing that musical performances were not allowed during the season of Lent. "This is out of consonance with the universal practice of our Church," a Cathedral representative noted.[18]

[15] Asch and Musgrove, *Chocolate City,* 189
[16] Asch and Musgrove, *Chocolate City,* 210.
[17] Asch and Musgrove, *Chocolate City,* 258.
[18] Author unknown, correspondence, Feb. 27, 1939. Cathedral Archives.

- Several years later, Cathedral leadership kept a conspicuous silence as two lives were cut short because of a racial slur uttered in the Cathedral. In 1944, a Black sexton and groundkeeper, Julius Fisher, was convicted in the murder of Catherine Cooper Reardon, a white assistant librarian, in the Cathedral Library.

  Fisher said Reardon had criticized his work sweeping under her desk and called him a "stupid N****r". He attacked her with a log from the fireplace, stabbed her and stuffed her body under steam pipes in the basement. [19]

  The case, which was layered in issues of race, class and social status, reached all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court, where Fisher's lawyers argued for his life because of his "diminished capacity." They also argued that Reardon's racial epithet had sent the man into a rage that was not pre-meditated.

  Fisher lost his appeal, and he was executed on Dec. 20, 1946. Even though the sensational story made national headlines, there is no public record of Cathedral leadership commenting on the racial dynamics at play, nor speaking out on behalf of either Fisher or Reardon. The main action taken in the case was an offer to pay $618 for Reardon's funeral, which her family declined to accept.[20]

Conflicting Messages

It is worth noting that during this period, Cathedral deans were largely occupied by the task of construction. To the extent that the Cathedral was vocal in the public square, that voice was often that of the Bishop of Washington. As a result, the Cathedral, the bishop and (by extension) the diocese were often seen as one and the same well through the end of the 20th century. As a result, the best way to examine the Cathedral's public role is to examine the legacies of its bishops.

In 1944, Bishop Angus Dun (1944-1962) ordered the integration of delegates at diocesan conventions during lunch; Black delegates previously brought their own food from home and ate outside. In 1949, he pointedly declined an offer to wash his hands after he confirmed Black children during a parish visit. [21]

"So long as there is a single congregation of Christ's flock in which a son of man is unaccepted because of his earthly difference of social status or race, there is an offense against sovereignty among the King's own people," Dun thundered to a meeting of the Diocese of Virginia in 1958.[22] "Offenses must come, but woe to him by whom the offense cometh."

Even so, Black parishioners were not fully counted in parish memberships, particularly in rural parishes where "the Negroes sit in the balcony and receive communion after white members."[23] At the time, the

[19] Margaret Shannon, "A little known WNC-related civil rights case," Aug. 27, 2024. Cathedral Archives.
[20] Minutes of the Cathedral Chapter meeting, March 17, 1944. Cathedral Archives.
[21] Margaret Shannon, "Let Justice Run Down as Waters: Human Rights in the Cathedral's Fabric and Life," Cathedral Age, 2010.
[22] "Dun Exhorts Episcopalians," *The Washington Post and Times Herald,* May 22, 1958, C7.
[23] Kenneth Dole, "Dun Asks Action on Integration," *The Washington Post and Times Herald*, May 5, 1958, B1.

96 parishes across the Diocese of Washington officially counted just 100 Negro members.[24] Dun asked whether predominantly white parishes would accept new Black members, and worried about white flight to the suburbs, but seemed to stop short of mandating full acceptance and integration.

"If transition from a predominantly white congregation to a predominantly Negro congregation is the only course, how shall we finance that transition?" he asked in a sermon at the Cathedral. "Are there enough white brethren so committed to their Lord and to the larger brotherhood that they will help make possible the transition? Who knows?"[25]

A 1971 Washington Post editorial after his death noted Dun's "force for tolerance, for interracial understanding and for freedom. Behind the austerity of his official mien, there lay a wealth of humor and kindness. He was concerned more to help than to punish, to heal than to condemn."[26]

Two events in the middle of the 20th century marked a decisive turning point in the Cathedral's treatment of race. First, nearly a century of racial tensions across the country finally erupted in the 1950s and 1960s, demanding attention from church and government leaders. And second, a dynamic and outspoken dean, the Very Rev. Francis B. Sayre, Jr. **(**1951-1978) shifted the Cathedral toward a more activist agenda.

Early in his tenure, Dean Sayre oversaw several decisions that, today, do not seem to square with his later outspoken embrace of civil rights activism.

In 1953, he blessed stained glass windows honoring Confederate Generals Robert E. Lee and Thomas "Stonewall" Jackson after a decades-long courtship of the United Daughters of the Confederacy, the leading evangelists for rehabilitating the "Lost Cause" mythology of a genteel slave-holding South. Nearby, a memorial was erected to Charles Warren, a legal scholar and founder of the Immigration Restriction League, which sought to limit immigration among "undesirable" and non-white populations.[27]

In 1956, Dean Sayre sanctified an elaborate tomb for his grandfather, President Woodrow Wilson, a noted racist who allowed segregation to flourish and turned a blind eye to racial violence. Wilson's legacy continues to loom large at the Cathedral, even as other institutions stripped his name from schools and buildings in recent years.[28]

It should be noted that there is a large difference between a physical memorial, such as a stained-glass window, and a tomb that contains earthly remains entrusted to God's care. As Dean Randy Hollerith has noted, "We are not in the business of disturbing gravesites. Every person in this Cathedral, living or dead, is a sinner is need of grace."[29]

The veneration of Wilson reflects how two different groups of people — one white, one Black — can see a historical figure from divergent perspectives. For many white Christians, including Sayre, Wilson was a

---

[24] Ibid.
[25] Ibid.
[26] "Angus Dun," *The Washington Post*, Aug. 15, 1971.
[27] "Constitution of the Immigration Restriction League, 1894." Immigration History, A Project of the Immigration and Ethnic History Society. Available online at https://immigrationhistory.org/item/immigration-restriction-league/
[28] For more, see "What About Wilson?" Cathedral Age, Spring/Summer 2024, pp. 12-17.
[29] ibid., p. 16

pious peacemaker who was an apostle of progressive reforms. For many Black Americans, however, he personified attempts to push Black America backwards. That was particularly true in Washington, where many Black residents relied on civil service jobs to lift them into the middle class.[30]

A Shift Toward Activism

Over time, Dean Sayre's activism reflected a shifting stance (and more vocal public profile) for the Cathedral. He spent much of his tenure alongside Bishop William Creighton (1962-1977), who publicly resigned three private clubs that refused to admit Black members.[31] He joined the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom and appointed Charles C. Johnson, Jr., as the first Black member of the Cathedral Chapter (or governing board) at a time when African Americans were given precious few opportunities for leadership.

Under Dean Sayre, the Cathedral made national headlines in 1966 for opening its doors for the wedding of a white woman, Jo Ann Kovacs, to a Samoan man, Meki Toalenai, after the couple had been denied a wedding license in Baltimore, Md., under the state's anti-miscegenation laws.[32]

Sayre was a forceful leader on racial equity, leading all the Cathedral clergy on the 1965 March from Selma to Montgomery, Ala., in shifts. "I was the first, and then they followed. I came home, they went. And as each came home, he preached in the Cathedral on the travesty of democracy and the racial sin that was going on in Selma and Montgomery ... All of us made public what we thought, which was quite a blow in Washington." [33]

When a church-affiliated school in Atlanta denied admission to the 5-year-old son of the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., in 1963, Sayre issued a public protest: "What our friends in Georgia forget is that in Christ we are members one of another ... When members of the church in Georgia privately act as if God is not the father of us all, then my own faith is wounded, the Church damaged, and the tradition of American Freedom deeply embarrassed."[34]

Against immense pressure and threatening letters, Dean Sayre welcomed King to preach at the Cathedral on March 31, 1968; days later, after King's assassination, he offered to have the slain civil rights leader interred at the Cathedral.

"We don't know what changed for Dean Sayre in those 15 years between accepting the Lee-Jackson windows and welcoming Dr. King," said the Rev. Canon Leonard L. Hamlin, Sr., the Cathedral's current Canon Missioner. "We are all complicated creatures, but each of us is capable of change, especially as we listen to where God is calling us to go."

In 1966, Dean Sayre recruited a dynamic young Black priest, the Rev. Canon John T. Walker, to serve as Canon Missioner, with a particular charge to work with the poor and dispossessed in Washington. Around the time Walker was recruited to join the Cathedral, the demographics of the nation's capital were undergoing dramatic change. In 1950, about two-thirds of Washingtonians were white; within a

[30] Asch and Musgrove, *Chocolate City*, 225.
[31] William R. MacKaye, "Clubs Get Bishop's Warning," The Washington Post, Dec. 6, 1968.
[32] Associated Press: "Md. Couple's Story of Love Changed History." Potomac News, June 3, 2007, 32.
[33] Francis B. Sayre, Jr., oral history, June 25, 1964. John F. Kennedy Presidential Library, Boston, Mass.
[34] Francis B. Sayre, Jr., "Statement Released to Press by FBS." March 17, 1963. Cathedral Archives.

decade, white residents fled to the suburbs and the city became majority-Black (54 percent) for the first time.[35]

Walker would go on to become the Cathedral's most outspoken voice on the issue of race, even getting arrested in opposition to the racist Apartheid regime in South Africa.[36] In 1971, he was elected the suffragan (assistant) bishop of Washington and was elevated to diocesan bishop in 1977. Soon after, he simultaneously served as Cathedral dean until his death in 1989.

When Walker proposed the unorthodox idea of serving as both dean and bishop, an elderly white member of the Cathedral Chapter scoffed at the notion. "If you want your own cathedral, we'll build you one on 14th Street," the man said, referring to the area left devastated by the racial riots of 1968.[37] Walker won the vote anyway.

Visiting Durham Parish Church in Southern Maryland in 1978, a white parishioner greeted Walker at the door after services and asked, "Why don't you preach to your own kind?" Without missing a beat, Walker replied, "Ma'am, I just did."[38]

Walker was one of several Black trailblazers, including (but not limited to):

- The Rev. Canon John Burgess, the first Black canon of the Cathedral, installed in 1951 (who would later become the first African American diocesan bishop in the U.S. church, in Massachusetts);
- The Very Rev. Nathan Baxter (1991-2003), the Cathedral's second Black dean and later, Bishop of Central Pennsylvania;
- The Rev. Dr. Pauli Murray, the first Black female Episcopal priest, ordained at the Cathedral in 1977;
- The Rev. Dr. Barbara T. Duncan, the first Black female canon of the Cathedral; [39]
- The Rev. Canon Rosemarie Logan Duncan (2016-present), the first Black Canon for Worship;
- The Rev. Canon Kelly Brown Douglas (2015-present), the Cathedral's first Canon Theologian;
- The Most Rev. Michael Curry, the first Black Presiding Bishop of The Episcopal Church, (2015-2024).

Unseen and Unwelcome

Yet, even as the Cathedral was outspoken on race and justice issues, the lived experience of Black visitors reflected something different. Time and again, visitors and members of predominantly Black parishes were met with suspicion, negative assumptions or racial hostility.

[35] Asch and Musgrove, *Chocolate City,* 2.
[36] "Bishop Walker among arrested," The Washington Post, March 14, 1985, 7B.
[37] Juan Williams, "Pioneer in the Cathedral," *The Washington Post Magazine,* Aug. 20, 1989, 23.
[38] As told publicly by the late Rev. Arnold G. Taylor, rector (1973-1993).
[39] Obituary: Barbara T. Duncan of Richmond, Va. 1942-2020, via McClenny Funeral Service, Inc. https://www.mcclennyfuneralservice.com/obituary/barbara-duncan

"There was no reason to come here to the Cathedral," said the Rev. Dr. Gayle Fisher-Stewart, past president of the local chapter of the Union of Black Episcopalians. "And if you did, you probably would not have been totally welcome to be here. You would have felt out of place."[40]

At St. Monica's Episcopal Church, a predominantly Black parish on the edge of Capitol Hill, parishioners referred to the Cathedral as "the plantation on the hill," recalled Paula B. Mays, a current member of the Cathedral Congregation. She remembers visiting the Cathedral as an all-Black wait staff served food and drink to white clergy and musicians. "All the Black churches viewed the Cathedral as remote and unwelcoming," she said.

The lack of hospitality reflected the second-class status of Black parishes throughout the Diocese. Canon Duncan recalled, for example, that a request to hold a Cathedral funeral for D.C. Superior Court Judge William "Turk" Thompson was initially denied in 1998, presumably because a Black judge did not rise to the level of deserving the honor. When permission was finally granted, the Cathedral questioned whether the choir soloists from Thompson's predominantly Black St. George's Episcopal Church had adequate formal training or vocal abilities to fill the soaring Cathedral.

Numerous other accounts have been told of Black clergy from the diocese — including at least two who would go on to become bishops — being questioned about their presence in the Cathedral as they arrived for official services. "It's just these barriers, even though you quote 'meet the standard' of whatever the category was," Duncan said. "You just knew that it was going to be difficult."[41]

As the Cathedral took shape atop Mount St. Alban, the stories told within its iconography were uneven at best, and troublesome at worst. Cathedrals "speak" through art and iconography, and the stories that were carved in stone or depicted in glass tended to reflect a white, Western and wealthy view of the world. Nearly all of the artisans who oversaw the Cathedral's design and artistry were white and male; the highly skilled artists and carvers were predominantly immigrants, and many of the laborers who set stone upon stone were African Americans whose identities have been lost to history.

Among the countless workers who labored to erect this building, we must acknowledge that there was little thought given to recording their names or their stories. However, we can name the men whom we can identify from limited archival records: men like Otto Epps, Richard H. Byrd and Walter Fleming, and a young Black female draftsman named Martha Cassell Thompson, who never received credit for the more than 300 architectural drawings she made at the Cathedral. [42]

Sacred Stories, Told and Untold

Across the Cathedral, sacred figures and historical heroes are primarily depicted as white; in this House of Prayer for All People, there were precious few opportunities for Black Americans to see themselves reflected in the visual imagery of the building, or to find their stories elevated as a key part of the American story.

[40] The Rev. Dr. Gayle Fisher-Stewart, oral history, May 19, 2023, Washington National Cathedral, Washington, D.C.
[41] The Rev. Canon Rosemarie Logan Duncan, oral history, July 3, 2024, Washington National Cathedral, Washington, D.C.
[42] Cathedral Archives

As Canon Theologian Kelly Brown Douglas pointed out, "The stories we tell in our religious iconography are not just about the building or American history. They also are symbols that point us to God, part of what makes the Cathedral sacred. To only have one story — a white story — suggests that this is the only story through which God can be revealed. If we want to suggest that we are all created in the image of God, then our religious iconography must always strive to reflect the 'all' as much as possible."[43]

The collection of 170+ needlepoint kneelers in St. John's Chapel is one key example. Begun in the 1960s at the height of the Civil Rights movement, this collection of "American history on canvas"[44] largely was closed in the 1970s. These red kneelers depict famous politicians, military heroes, scientists, authors and cultural figures. Within the collection, just five depict people of color (Frederick Douglass, Harriet Tubman and others), just 14 depict women (Louisa May Alcott, Susan B. Anthony and others), and some 45 depict people with direct or indirect connections to the institution of slavery (Jefferson Davis, Robert E. Lee and others).

Dean Sayre insisted that the Cathedral iconography must reflect something more than "a parade of old ghosts," but nonetheless the figures depicted in the Cathedral are mostly white and male. The dean serves as the Cathedral's chief iconographer, assisted by volunteer committees who offer suggestions and approve final designs.

In the 1970s, Dean Sayre added a collection of carvings outside the Cathedral Garth to represent five major groups of Native Americans (Southwest, Northeast, Northwest, Great Plains and the Artic). Other depictions of Native Americans within Cathedral iconography lean toward the traditional and paternalistic, with figures in feathered headdresses eager for conversion by white European settlers.

There are precious few depictions of African American heritage within Cathedral iconography, and much of it can be considered stereotypical or problematic. A stained-glass window honoring the slave-holding Nourse family depicts a pair of Black hands, liberated from the chains of slavery; installed in 1958, the window was meant to symbolize Joseph Nourse's "order to free his slaves at his death," with zero mention of the immorality of slavery itself.[45] A window honoring Musicians and Composers depicts the Black gospel tradition, with the enslaved working in a field of cotton. A depiction of President Abraham Lincoln as liberator shows him, arms open toward freedom, with two former slaves kneeling in submission.

The Cathedral's traditional, largely white view of American history began to change in the 1980s as the building neared completion, with the addition of a Martin Luther King, Jr., memorial (1985, by African American sculptor James Earl Reid), as well as Black theologian Howard Thurman (2004), civil rights matriarch Rosa Parks (2011), Bishop Walker (1998), and Jewish Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel (2021).

The Cathedral's programming and public voice similarly shifted. Since 1970, the Cathedral has held an annual tribute to Dr. King, and throughout the 1980s, led by Bishop Walker, the Cathedral was an outspoken crusader against South African Apartheid.[46] As early as 1992, the Cathedral mourned the

[43] The Rev. Canon Kelly Brown Douglas, interview, Oct. 27, 2024.
[44] "Guide to Needlepoint" guidebook. Washington National Cathedral, 1993.
[45] Cathedral Art Database, items 593, 594, 595, 928 and 1492.
[46] Marjorie Hyer, "Bishop One of 78 Arrested at Protest," *The Washington Post,* March 14, 1985.

impact of European conquest of Native populations, and by the early 2000s, the Cathedral was a leading voice for LGBTQ equality.

As the building leaned into its national identity – shifting from "Washington Cathedral" to "Washington National Cathedral" near the end of construction in 1990 – the stories told in this sacred space have been more intentional in trying to reflect the nation as a whole. As America attempted to reckon with her original sin of racism, the Cathedral has shifted in sync – an evolution that faced its greatest test starting in 2015.

IV. EVOLUTION

In 2015, the Cathedral was confronted with its most direct challenge to racial equality. After the murder of nine Black worshippers at Mother Emanuel AME Church in Charleston, S.C., the Cathedral faced questions about its windows honoring Confederate Generals Robert E. Lee and Thomas "Stonewall" Jackson – particularly the windows' inclusion of the Confederate battle flag, which was widely understood to be a symbol of white supremacy.

Dean Gary Hall (2012-2015) immediately called for the windows to be removed, which launched the Cathedral on a multi-year discussion of racial equality, racial representation and questions of inclusion. Under the new leadership of Dean Randy Hollerith (2016-present), the windows were removed in 2017 following the race-fueled riots in Charlottesville, Va. The question of new replacement windows heated up in 2020 as Black Lives Matter rallies spread across the nation following the murder of George Floyd in police custody.

Throughout the multi-year process, from 2015 to 2023, the frustration of Black members of the community was palpable. Early in the process, the late Rev. Robert Hunter, a Black Episcopal priest from the Church of the Atonement, picketed outside the Cathedral. "What's the problem? Just take the windows out. Get some chisels, we'll take them out for you. What's the hold-up?" Fisher-Stewart asked.[47] For Hunter, Fisher-Stewart and other Black clergy, the mere presence of the windows – and the Cathedral's methodical multi-year process to consider them – spoke volumes.

In 2023, the Cathedral installed new windows by acclaimed Black artist Kerry James Marshall, depicting the quiet dignity of African Americans demonstrating for fairness and equality. With Dean Hollerith's oversight, Marshall was given a mostly free hand with his contemporary design. An accompanying poem by scholar and activist Elizabeth Alexander chronicled the nation's ongoing march toward a more perfect union, defined more by who is included than who is excluded.

The windows project served as a capstone to various efforts to diversify Cathedral worship and programs, and to more intentionally integrate all aspects of American culture into Cathedral life. Some of this work pre-dated the windows project, and some of it arose from the COVID-19 pandemic, but taken together, this body of work represents the newest chapter in the Cathedral's journey.

Most recently, the Cathedral:

- Hosted more than 30 public programs on race, reconciliation, diversity and building God's beloved community that were spurred by the Lee-Jackson windows project.

[47] Fisher-Stewart oral history.

- Placed racial justice at the center of the Cathedral's programmatic life, outreach ministries, congregational life and invitations to guest preachers.

- Reoriented Sunday worship services to reflect a diversity of age, gender, race and sexual orientations in both worship leaders and musicians.

- Launched a contemporary music program that is fully integrated into Sunday worship services, with an aim to authentically reflect the diversity of the nation we are called to serve.

- Instituted a yearly service to celebrate and commemorate the contributions of Historically Black Colleges and Universities, as well as annual commemorations of the Juneteenth holiday.

- Revamped visitor experiences to include more opportunities for an intensive focus on race and diversity within the Cathedral.

- Commissioned an Iconography Review Task Force to catalogue the extent of diversity in all Cathedral art and iconography.

- Reoriented the Cathedral Human Resources department and a staff-led Racial Justice Core Group with an emphasis on Diversity, Equity and Inclusion in recruitment, hiring and staff training. The Canon Missioner also took on the title of Minster of Equity & Inclusion, with an institution-wide mandate to build and maintain an inclusive and equitable workplace.

- Welcomed Black Lives Matter demonstrators to the Cathedral, and hosted pilgrimages to key civil rights sites across the country.

- Consistently speaks in the public square on issues of racial diversity and justice, including racism in our political discourse, the racial impact of gun violence and against the demonization of racial minorities and immigrants.

- Invested in the Cathedral Scholars program, which matches mentorship and academic enrichment with promising students from disadvantaged corners of Washington, D.C. The program continues to boast a 100 percent acceptance rate to colleges and universities.

- Incorporated racial justice and racial reconciliation as key components of our Strategic Priorities of Welcoming, Deepening, Convening and Serving.

V. FORWARD

Our Anglican tradition cherishes the *via media*, or middle way. This tradition contains the ability to hold multiple contradictions in tension at the same time, and it is a useful lens through which to view our collective history on race.

Human beings are both created in the image of God and are inherently broken. Our biblical ancestors were messengers of God, and also flawed human beings. Each of us is never as good as the best thing we've ever done, nor as bad as the worst.

When examining the stories in our history – whether in our own lives or in the lives of our icons – we would be wise to start with some basic questions: Are the figures we lift up in our community primarily motivated by the core of our Baptismal Covenant, to "strive for justice and peace among all people, and to respect the dignity of every human being"? Were they committed to the foundational ideals of our national life, and did they actively work toward that more perfect Union? What did they get right? What did they get wrong? And, most important, what can we learn, in order to do better?

The Cathedral itself is a helpful metaphor for our individual lives. Even though construction officially ended in 1990, the Cathedral is never truly finished. There are empty places to fill with new figures who have new stories to tell. Like the building, we are all under construction or repair. None of us is ever truly finished, and there is always room for a new narrative, a new understanding, a new reconsideration of old assumptions.

It may be tempting, perhaps, to see this as one story about one institution, or one race, or one branch of the Christian tradition. We may also be tempted to dismiss it as dusty history with little relevance to our lives in the 21st century. Yet this is really the story of America, and of the wider human family: wrestling with our past, reckoning with the cry of justice, searching for a better way to be in relationship with our neighbor. We cannot know where we wish to go without first acknowledging where we have been, or where we are. We can never truly be the people God calls us to be without first recognizing the breaches in our lives, and taking the necessary steps to repair them.

In that light, we still have much work to do. The work that God sets before us will never be finished this side of Heaven. We can go confidently, however, knowing that we walk alongside a God who loves us and whose heart is overflowing with mercy and forgiveness.

Author
Kevin Eckstrom, Chief Public Affairs Officer

Dean
The Very Rev. Randolph Marshall Hollerith

Special thanks
Diane Ney, Mimi McNamara, Margaret Shannon, Emily Welsh

Review Committee
Simone Bramble

The Rev. Spencer W. Brown
Jodi Chambers
Andrew Nemo Chen
Tyler Cooper
The Rev. Canon Jan Naylor Cope
The Rev. Canon Dana Corsello
The Rev. Canon Kelly Brown Douglas
The Rev. Canon Rosemarie Logan Duncan
The Rev. Dr. Michelle Hagans
The Rev. Canon Leonard L. Hamlin, Sr.
The Rev. Preston Hannibal
The Rev. Vincent P. Harris
Dana Heiser
Ron Hopson
The Very Rev. Randolph Marshall Hollerith
Lauralyn Lee
Paula Mays
Jayne Osgood
Margaret Rawls
Agnes Solatan
Scott Sanders
Jeff Taylor
Faith Wang
Jackie Williams
Bob Wohlsen