



ADVISORY NEIGHBORHOOD COMMISSION 6E
PO Box 93020 Brentwood Station, Washington, DC 20090

March 1, 2022

Muriel Bowser
Mayor
Council of the District of Columbia
1350 Pennsylvania Avenue NW
Washington, DC 20004

RE: Resolution Recognizing the Harmoneon cemetery in Square 475 and Supporting a Commemorative Work at this Site

Dear Mayor Bowser:

On March 1, 2022, at a duly noticed and regularly scheduled meeting of the Advisory Neighborhood Commission 6E (“ANC 6E” or “Commission”) conducted virtually via videoconference and with a quorum of 6 out of 7 Commissioners and the public present, ANC 6E approved the following resolution by a vote of 6 for, 0 against, and 0 abstentions:

WHEREAS, the Columbian Harmony Society (“the Society”) was a mutual aid organization founded in 1825 by a group of free Black men of the District of Columbia for the purpose of aiding its members “in infirmity, sickness, disease or accident, and to provide burials for them after death”;¹

WHEREAS, as one of its first actions, the Society allocated \$100 for the purchase of suitable land for a cemetery to serve the free Black community, and in 1829 purchased the southern half of Square 475 in Washington City (bordered by Florida Avenue NW, 5th Street NW, S Street NW, and 6th Street NW) to create the Harmoneon cemetery;²

WHEREAS, all free Black males, age 21 years or older, were eligible for election to membership in the Society and pay an initiation fee of fifteen dollars and monthly dues of twenty-five cents. In exchange, the Society pledged to provide twenty-five dollars toward a member’s burial expenses, fifteen dollars toward burial expenses for the member’s wife, and seven dollars and

¹ Revised Constitution of the Columbian Harmony Society, 1846. Reprinted in the Sluby *History of the Columbian Harmony Society and the Harmony Cemetery*.

² Sluby, Paul E. *History of the Columbian Harmony Society and the Harmony Cemetery, Washington, D.C.*. Rev. 2001. p.10.



fifty cents toward the burial expenses of a member's child. In addition the Society pledged to provide financial assistance to the widow and orphaned children of a deceased member;³

WHEREAS, the Columbian Harmony Society and the Harmoneon cemetery provided a degree of financial stability for its Black members who were excluded from burial at white cemeteries and often struggled to afford the costs of funeral arrangements and a burial plot;

WHEREAS, leaders in the free Black community were interred at the Harmoneon cemetery include, including:

- George Bell (1761-1843), a former slave, education activist, and co-founder of the Bell School, the first school open to Black children, free or enslaved, in the District of Columbia;⁴
- Rev. John F. Cook, Sr. (1810-1855), former slave, a pioneer in the fields of education, religions, and civic affairs, the first Black Presbyterian Minister in the District of Columbia, and founder of the 15th Street Presbyterian Church;⁵ and
- William Costin (c. 1780-1842), a Black activist and civic leader who challenged the DC Black Codes in the Circuit Court of the District of Columbia (*Costin v. Washington*, 1821).⁶

WHEREAS, the Harmoneon cemetery also served the the poor community, with one quarter of Square 425 being set aside for free Black residents without means;⁷

WHEREAS, an 1856 ordinance prohibited cemeteries in Washington City, which forced the Society to relocate the Harmoneon cemetery to a 17-acre parcel at the intersection of Rhode Island Avenue NE and Brentwood Road NE, the present site of the Rhode Island-Brentwood Metrorail station, Rhode Island Row, and Rhode Island Avenue Shopping Center;⁸

WHEREAS, by 1859, all human remains were supposed to have been transferred from Square 475;⁹

³ Revised Constitution of the Columbian Harmony Society, 1846. Reprinted in the Sluby *History of the Columbian Harmony Society and the Harmony Cemetery*.

⁴ Maryland Historical Trust Maryland (MHTM) Inventory of Historic Properties Form, Inventory No. PG: 72-045, available:

https://www.mncppcapps.org/planning/HistoricCommunitiesSurvey/Documentations/72-045/72-045_Harmony%20Memorial%20Park_MIHP%20Form.pdf. Asch, Chris Myers and George Derek Musgrove. *Chocolate City: A History of Race and Democracy in the Nation's Capital*, 2017, pp.43-44.

⁵ Sluby, Paul E. 2019. *Bury Me Deep: Burial Places Past and Present in and Nearby Washington, D.C.*, p.35.

⁶ Costin's grave marker was transcribed in Records of the Columbian Harmony Society, Vol. 1. Asch and Musgrove, pp.63-64.

⁷ MHTM

⁸ Sluby 2001, p.12-13.

⁹ *Ibid.*



WHEREAS, in 1959, the Harmoneon cemetery was again relocated from Rhode Island Avenue NE and Brentwood Road NE to the National Harmony Memorial Park in Landover, Maryland, in a land deal that would ultimately lead to the construction of the Rhode Island Avenue-Brentwood Metrorail station on that site;

WHEREAS, in 1981, Metro installed a commemorative bronze plaque at the Rhode Island Avenue-Brentwood Metrorail station to memorialize the former site of the Harmoneon cemetery;

WHEREAS, no memorial currently exists to commemorate the original location of the Harmoneon cemetery at Square 475 in the present day Shaw neighborhood;

WHEREAS, in October 2020, headstones removed from the Harmoneon cemetery at Rhode Island Avenue NE were discovered dumped into the Potomac River and being used as erosion control rip-rap at a farm in King George County, Virginia. Some of those headstones may date back to the original location of the Harmoneon cemetery in Shaw. An effort is underway to recover the headstones, identify the decedent for whom the headstones belong, and transfer the headstones to National Harmony Memorial Park in Landover, Maryland;¹⁰

WHEREAS, the discovery of headstones from a historic Black cemetery being used as rip-rap in the Potomac River underscores the need to preserve and recognize the District's historic Black cemeteries, to honor and remember free and formerly enslaved Black residents that were buried in these cemeteries, and to reckon with the legacies of slavery, racial segregation, and the enduring effects of racism on our community;

WHEREAS, the original site of the Harmoneon cemetery in Square 475 is located in the present day Shaw neighborhood, within the jurisdictional boundaries of ANC 6E in Single Member District 6E02;

THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED that ANC 6E formally recognizes the Columbian Harmony Society and the Harmoneon cemetery, a historic and pioneering cemetery for free Black residents in the District of Columbia that was located at Square 475 between Florida Avenue NW, 5th Street NW, S Street NW, and 6th Street NW, between 1829 and 1859;

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that ANC 6E requests that the Mayor sponsor a commemorative work to be installed at the original site of the former Harmoneon cemetery and that this commemorative work recognize the significance of this historic Black cemetery and the role that the Columbian Harmony Society played in creating a dignified and affordable cemetery for the interment of free Blacks in the District of Columbia;

¹⁰ https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/virginia-politics/headstones-black-cemetery-potomac-river/2020/10/25/3586f0d4-0d7a-11eb-8074-0e943a91bf08_story.html



BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that ANC 6E advises that the design and installation of the commemorative work memorializing the Harmoneon cemetery at Square 475 be integrated into the District Department of Transportation (“DDOT”) design for the S Street NW Revitalization Project,¹¹ a planned streetscape project that includes the 500 Block of S Street NW; and

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that ANC 6E designates Commissioner Alex Lopez, ANC 6E02, to represent the ANC 6E in all matters relating to this resolution. In the event that the designated representative Commissioner cannot carry out their representative duties for any reason, the Commission authorizes the Chair to designate another Commissioner to represent the Commission in all matters relating to this Resolution.

ON BEHALF OF THE COMMISSION,

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'M. Eichler', written over a large, light gray watermark that says 'DRAFT'.

Michael Eichler,
Chair

CC: Anita Cozart, Interim Director, DC Office of Planning
Brooke Pinto, Ward 2 Councilmember
Phil Mendelson, Council Chair
Elissa Silverman, At-Large Councilmember
Anita Bonds, At-Large Councilmember
Christina Henderson, At-Large Councilmember

¹¹ <https://www.sstreetnw-revitalization.com/>