

Visiting the “Very Quiet Baltimoreans”

(*The Baltimore Sun*, City Diary, October 9, 2002)

A friend who was in town for genealogical research needed to get to Mount Carmel Cemetery. I located it on the map—5712 O’Donnell Street, right across from the Baltimore Travel Plaza—and on impulse offered to drive her there.

We arrived late on a Saturday afternoon in a light rain. Unfortunately, my friend’s research on her lost relative had yielded nothing more than an obituary mentioning interment at Mount Carmel.

“So we’re just looking for her name on a stone?” I asked. The caretaker’s house was vacant, the front window broken.

“That’s right,” she replied cheerily. “We’d better spread out.” She popped her umbrella and headed off on her own.

I took the dirt road guarded by an angel who seemed to float on the underbrush. Everywhere the vines had grown up and over the gravestones. Weed trees had taken over, their roots raising whole families of grave markers, knocking them apart. There was also a surprising number of new graves, and signs that someone had visited: a browning Christmas wreath, a teddy bear, a vase of artificial daffodils.

Farther down the road, the low branches formed a tunnel, on either side of which I could peer into room after room of neglected markers. I found a secluded alcove where a descendant of Susannah and Henry Zell had apparently made an effort to clear away the brush. Farther still, I found the grave of Elizabeth, “beloved wife.” Someone had recently placed a plastic bouquet with a crisp pink ribbon in front of Elizabeth’s stone. The stone beside hers—her husband’s?—lay face down in the brush. In some places the markers had sunk into the path itself, and I had to scrape the mud away to read: “George W. Morrison, Eastern Shore Vol. Infantry.”

My friend did not find the grave she was looking for that day. She has since learned she had the wrong cemetery. As for me, I keep going back to Mount Carmel to visit. The place has enthralled me.

“Time has not been kind to the severely neglected Mount Carmel Cemetery,” writes Jane B. Wilson in her invaluable book, *The Very Quiet Baltimoreans: A Guide to the Historic Cemeteries and Burial Sites of Baltimore* (White Mane, 1991). The book entices the reader to “trespass the brambles” of Mount Carmel, and search out such curiosities as the large and impressive Father Time marker, and the boulder marking the graves of five Union veterans of the Civil War.

Ms. Wilson points out that early in the twentieth century, visitors to Mount Carmel Cemetery were issued a ticket with the lot number and name on one side, and the rules and regulations on the other.

There are actually five cemeteries in that stretch along O’Donnell Street. Deep in Mount Carmel, I once stepped through an Alice-in-Wonderland-like door in a hedge of mulberry and trumpet vine and found myself standing in an entirely different cemetery—the straight and narrow, comparatively tidy “St. Matthai Gottesacker” (St. Matthew’s God’s Acre).

From there I could also see the well-kept Oheb Shalom Congregation Cemetery beyond the opposite fence, and the First United Evangelical Cemetery (often referred to as “Schwartz”) rising on the hill across O’Donnell Street. The fifth cemetery on O’Donnell Street is the Evangelical Trinity Lutheran Congregational Cemetery, which was greatly diminished during the construction of Interstate 95. It is the little pie-shaped cemetery you see from an on-ramp.

Of the five cemeteries, only Mount Carmel is so sadly neglected.

The last time I visited, it was close to dusk and I was suddenly nervous, not about ghosts but about the pick-up truck I had seen pulling in ahead of me, and disappearing into the trees—lovers perhaps, or kids with a six-pack of beer. I was thinking of those precious old stones and statues under the vines, just barely hidden, and so vulnerable to vandals and thieves. What a pity, that no one stepped out of the shadows to require of me—and of the driver of that pick-up truck—some accounting for our business on the premises.

As time moves unkindly on, will anyone look out for the “very quiet Baltimoreans” in Mount Carmel Cemetery?