

Oak Grove

Oak Grove, Virginia is a small community located in eastern Loudoun County just west of its boundary with Fairfax County and the Town of Herndon. Its origins dates to shortly after the American Civil War (1861-1865) when in 1868, with the help of local resident Ellen Thompson, the Reverend Robert Woodson, pastor of Zion Baptist Church in Alexandria, Virginia founded the congregation who would form what is now known as the Oak Grove Baptist Church. During that same period, Canadians Cynthia and George W. Bell began to purchase land on and around the border of Loudoun and Fairfax Counties. In 1871, the Bells subdivided the former Payne Farm into one-acre lots to form the Oak Grove community. In 1874, William Sheldon purchased a lot in Oak Grove and was soon joined by other African American citizens including members of the Berkley, Hannah, and Wormley families.

Circa 1875, the first Oak Grove church building was constructed of logs; it served both as the church and as a schoolhouse for African American children. The school drew students from Oak Grove and the small hamlet of Cooktown that was located near the western edge of the newly incorporated Town of Herndon (1879), as well as some children from the nearby area of what is now Sterling.¹ In 1893, several men established the Odd Fellows “Autumnal” Lodge that drew membership from both Loudoun and Fairfax [Counties].”²

In the late 1890s, a frame, board-and-batten church replaced the original log church.³ (The original church cemetery, with approximately 150 marked burials, still stands to the northeast of the

¹ Between 1869 when Virginia began a statewide public education system and the late 1960s when both Loudoun County and Fairfax County fully integrated their public schools, white children and black children were required to attend separate school facilities. Barbara Glakas, [“Remembering Herndon’s History: Oak Grove Elementary School: An All-Black Elementary School in Pre-Integration Herndon.”](#) *Patch*, May 13, 2015.

² Debra Lee, *Loudoun County’s African American Communities: A Tour Guide and Map*, Published by Friends of Thomas Balch Library, Inc., Leesburg, VA, 2004, pg. 18.

³ Before building their first structure, the congregation was first organized as the “Colored [Baptist] Church”, then renamed the “Woodson Mission Church” and then, sometime in the early 1870s, was took on its permanent name of “Oak Grove Baptist Church.” The third church, built in 1944 by church trustees Frank Baylor and Oliver Branham, Sr., was destroyed by fire on January 17, 1957. The fourth church was completed in 1958. Expansion of the church membership precipitated the replacement of the fourth church structure with a new, larger church building in 2000. In addition to the church cemetery and the 2000 church structure, six historic residences that date from the turn of the 20th century through the mid-20th century are still standing in 2004. “History of Oak Grove Baptist Church” Retrieved May 17, 2021. <https://ogbc-sterling.org/our-history/>; Kathryn Gettings Smith, Edna Johnston, and Megan Glynn, *Loudoun County African-American Historic Architectural Resources Survey*, Washington, DC: History Matters, LLC, pgs. 121-122.

current church building.) It is uncertain whether this new building or the former log church building housed the school.

In September 1930, a new, two-classroom Oak Grove School opened to serve local African American students. It stood approximately 150 yards southeast from where the current Oak Grove Baptist Church is located on the Fairfax County side of the county line. The school's construction was due to the efforts of local African American citizens. In 1929, they formed the Citizens Association of Oak Grove Colored School and offered to give title to two acres of land to the Fairfax County School Board if the Board would agree to build a new school.⁴ Fairfax County accepted the land. Once the school was built, Loudoun began making payments to Fairfax County for African American students who lived on the Loudoun County-side of the Loudoun County boundary with Fairfax County to attend the new school which provided classes for both Loudoun and Fairfax County students through the 7th grade.

In 1953, a new, six-room, brick Oak Grove Elementary School was constructed at the intersection of Rock Hill and Sterling Roads near the Loudoun and Herndon borders and served. As historian Debra Lee has noted:

“When the county boundary was surveyed in 1958, it determined that some of the village, including the school, was in Fairfax rather than Loudoun. This created disruption for the children because Loudoun decided to bus its pupils to Leesburg to the newly constructed Frederick Douglas Elementary School rather than pay tuition for them to remain at Oak Grove.”⁵

Not only did the school lose one source of its funding, but Loudoun residents were faced with their children having to travel 20 miles west to Leesburg. Despite this, Oak Grove, under the direction of principal Earl Pulley continued to serve Fairfax elementary students until 1964, when the school closed, and its students began to attend Herndon Elementary School.⁶

In 2004, when History Matters, LLC conducted a survey of the architecture of Oak Grove, local informants described it as “a self-contained community that at one time had a segregated

⁴ Glakas, “Remembering Herndon’s History” *Patch*, May 13, 2015. In addition, Fairfax County received some funding for the 1930 building from the Rosenwald School Fund. [Fisk University Rosenwald Fund Card File Database](#), Accessed May 17, 2021. Started in 1917 by the philanthropist Julius Rosenwald who was one of the owners of the Sears, Roebuck and Company, the Rosenwald Foundation distributed funds to build more than 5,000 schools for African American students in the American South between 1917 and 1948.

⁵ Lee, *Loudoun County’s African American Communities*, pg. 18.

⁶ Glakas, “Remembering Herndon’s History” *Patch*, May 13, 2015; [Town of Herndon, VA Historic Marker Program](#), “Oak Grove School.”

public school, church, a small general store, and its own baseball league”⁷ as well as a being a “flag stop” on the now defunct Washington & Old Dominion Railroad. The hamlet still remains, and its school, built in 1953, now serves to house Herndon’s Community Development Department.

⁷ History Matters, LLC, *Loudoun County African-American Historic Architectural Resources Survey*, pg. 121.

William Obediah Robey

William Obediah Robey (c. 1820-1888) was a 19th century leader in Leesburg and Loudoun County, Virginia. He first appeared in Loudoun records in 1834 when he was arrested because he was suspected of being a runaway slave.”¹ After proving that he was free, he apprenticed to Loudoun resident Edward Hammat, until 1841.² Between 1841 and 1847, he lived in Washington, DC where he sought an education. In 1847, he returned to Loudoun County, settled in Leesburg, and became the first African American member of Leesburg’s Presbyterian Church then located on West Market Street.

In 1851, Robey was 34 years old and working as a blacksmith.³ That year, he married Rachel Ann Watson who lived in Leesburg with her parents and worked as a seamstress. Like Robey, Rachel Watson and her parents were free.⁴ In 1853, the Robey’s purchased a corner lot at Church and North Streets in Leesburg and made their home there. By 1857, they had three children, all of whom were baptized at the Presbyterian Church on West Market Street where William Robey was a member of the congregation.

In February 1857, the Robey’s lost their 10-month infant son Charles. In late August 1857, Rachel Watson Robey died of tuberculosis at the age of 26, leaving William with two children under the age of 10 to raise.⁵

It is unknown how the Robey family experienced the years between 1861 and 1865 when the American Civil War waged all around them, however, soon after the war end, William Robey opened

¹ Betty L. Morefield, “William Robey, 1820?-1888” in *The Essence of a People II, African Americans Who Made Their World Anew in Loudoun County, Virginia, and Beyond*. [Leesburg, VA: The Black History Committee, Friends of Thomas Balch Library, 2002], pg. 26.

² Not known is in what trade Robey was apprenticed.

³ *List of Free Negroes over the age of 12 years, specifying their names, trades, or occupations within the District of Geo. K. Fox Commissioner of the Revenue [Loudoun County, VA] for the year 1851*, page 4.

⁴ According to Morefield, William Watson was a blacksmith but, unlike William Robey, he is listed as working as a laborer in both the 1850 *U.S. Census* and in local registers that listed free blacks living in Loudoun in the 1850s.. His wife Emily Watson was a laundress.

⁵ The 1860 *U.S. Census* lists William as age 41, working as a blacksmith, and owning real estate valued at \$600 and personal property of \$100. His two children, Mary A Robey, age 9 and William F. Robey, age 6 live with him. Though still a relatively young man when his wife died, Robey never remarried.

a U.S. Freedom Bureau School at his home at Church and North Street in Leesburg. In doing so, he became the first black teacher identified to have taught school in Loudoun County.⁶ During this same period, Robey became a licensed Presbyterian minister, preaching in black Methodist and Baptist churches throughout the area. In 1867, he became the leader of Leesburg's newly formed Mt. Zion Methodist Church in Leesburg, serving as its minister until 1879.⁷

Sometime after the Freedom Bureau School closed in December 1869, Robey began teaching in the lower grades of the Loudoun County Public Schools that opened for black children in Leesburg on West North Street. He would teach there until 1888, the year of his death. He was buried next to his wife Rachel in Leesburg's Presbyterian cemetery.

⁶ In June 1866, a local newspaper reported that "William Robey has for more than a year past been teaching a large number of freed boys and girls." Eugene Schell, [Timeline of Important Events in African American History in Loudoun County, Virginia](#), Accessed May 18, 2021.

⁷ Morefield, pgs. 28-29.