

# *Telling Our Stories: Thomas Noble Wilson and the Origins of Grace Episcopal Church*

## Before Grace

Prior to European colonization, the land on which the Grace Church buildings now stand was the traditional territory of the **Nacotchtank and Piscataway nations**. In 1632, King Charles I of England “granted” the land that would eventually become Silver Spring to Lord Baltimore, then the “lord protector” of Maryland.<sup>1</sup> In 1732, Lord Baltimore parceled out this land to several families, including a 2,000+ acre section called the **Labyrinth grant**.<sup>2</sup> In or around 1759, Henry and Verlinda Wilson purchased more than 1,000 acres of the Labyrinth land, some of which they used for their tobacco plantation.<sup>3</sup>

The Wilsons and their descendants were enslavers through the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. In that, they were somewhat unusual: only about 40 percent of the area’s free residents owned any land at all, and only about one-third of landowners enslaved people.<sup>4</sup>

By the time Henry and Verlinda Wilson died around 1800, their land was depleted from years of tobacco farming. One of the Wilson’s grandsons, **Thomas Noble Wilson**, bought his siblings’ portions of the plantation and eventually purchased more land from other farmers who were leaving the area for better soil.<sup>5</sup> He became the wealthiest farmer in the area: he owned most of the current Silver Spring from near the Beltway through Takoma Park. Wilson restored the soil quality and built a thriving plantation—**almost certainly through the labor of the 10 to 17 men and women he enslaved** at various times from 1850 through the early 1860s.<sup>6</sup>

## Where Did Our Church Land Come From?

In 1864, our first rector, the Reverend George L. Mackenheimer petitioned the Episcopal Diocese of Maryland to organize a new parish under the name **Labyrinth Parish**, after the 1732 land grant. The petition was granted at the Diocesan Convention of Maryland in May 1864.

A parish committee approached Thomas Noble Wilson to request land for a church sanctuary building. He offered to donate 10 acres; the committee accepted **one acre of his plantation land**. This land

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.blairapartments.com/legacy.aspx>

<sup>2</sup> Maryland-National Capital Parks and Planning Commission. *North and West Silver Spring Master Plan*. Sept. 20, 2000. <http://montgomeryplanning.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/NorthWestSilverSpringMasterPlan2000ocr300.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> Oshel, Robert E. *Home Sites of Distinction: The History of Woodside Park*. (Woodside Park Civic Association, Silver Spring, MD, 1998). <http://users.starpower.net/oshel/H08.htm>

<sup>4</sup> Oshel, 1998.

<sup>5</sup> Oshel, 1998.

<sup>6</sup> Ancestry.com. 1850 U.S. Federal Census - Slave Schedules [database online]. Lehi, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations Inc, 2004; Ancestry.com. 1860 U.S. Federal Census - Slave Schedules [database online]. Lehi, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations Inc, 2010.

became the site of the original Grace Church building (where the school building is now located, north of the cemetery).

## Who Was Thomas Noble Wilson?

Thomas Noble Wilson benefited tremendously from privileges that many white people still benefit from today: He was born free, he inherited land from his family, and he did not face harassment within the community solely based upon his skin color.

We know from historical documents that **Wilson was an enslaver**; he may also have espoused white supremacist views. He favored secession from the Union,<sup>7</sup> likely because he was desperate to retain the unpaid labor his livelihood depended upon. Wilson even asked his neighbor, Francis Preston Blair, advisor to President Lincoln and father of Montgomery Blair, to send a letter to Lincoln in 1861, requesting help in the return of an enslaved young man who had run away to join Union troops. There is no record of Wilson receiving any reply.<sup>8</sup>

## Wilson's Death Witnessed by an Enslaved Person

Wilson was killed in late September 1862 when a group of Union soldiers from Massachusetts, who had deserted their regiment, attempted to steal some of his pigs. Wilson, who was 71, confronted the soldiers, and one of them stabbed him several times in the neck with a bayonet. Wilson died shortly thereafter from his wounds.

The transcript from the ensuing murder trial reports that **Hanson Smith, an 18-year-old enslaved by Wilson**, was called to testify in court. At that time, it was highly unusual for an enslaved person to participate as a witness; the rules of evidence in criminal trials stated that slaves could not testify against whites.

Smith testified that he saw the soldiers trying to steal the pig and rode to the house to alert the Wilsons. Thomas Wilson took the horse and rode back to confront the deserters, who then killed him. Smith was following Wilson on foot, saw the murder from a distance, and ran back to the house, saying, "The soldiers killed Massa!"

While Smith identified the accused, other witnesses from the Wilson household placed the accused at the house when the murder occurred. The accused was freed and Wilson's murderers were never brought to justice.

After his death, Wilson's executors placed advertisements promising a reward of \$150 (around \$3,500 in today's dollars) for the return of three fugitive enslaved people: **Jasper Detton, 21, Moses Whitecan, 23, and Lucy Clark, 40.**<sup>9</sup> There is no indication these individuals were found before they—and all enslaved Marylanders—were finally freed when a new state Constitution abolished slavery in Maryland on November 1, 1864.

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<sup>7</sup> Oshel, Robert E., *Silver Spring and the Civil War*, (The History Press, Charleston, S.C., 2014), 22

<sup>8</sup> Oshel, 2014, 24

<sup>9</sup> *Evening Star*, Nov. 15, 1862, Washington, D.C. <https://www.loc.gov/resource/sn83045462/1862-11-15/ed-1/>

*We as a church community are working to come to terms with the legacy of racism that is a part of our story. In our next installment, we'll explore some of Grace Church's earliest congregants and the contradictions they embodied.*