

## **Mt. Pleasant, Rockville, and Father Divine**

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Many Black leaders that fought slavery and provided spiritual and moral encouragement came from Maryland: Josiah Henson, Harriet Tubman, Frederick Douglas, and Thurgood Marshall, to name a few. Gaithersburg and Rockville can claim the charismatic founder of a spiritual and evangelical movement, The World Peace Mission, created and led by Father Major Jealous Devine. Father Divine was born to a former slave of Lemuel Clements and became an influential Black leader in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century.

Around 1843, a female slave was born at Mt. Pleasant, the present Casey Barns Community Center location, who was named Nancy. Her surname is unknown. She spent her early years at Mt. Pleasant and was probably baptized as a Catholic by the devout Clements family, which attended St. Mary's Church and is buried there. She probably was familiar with the catechism and rituals of the Catholic Church. Clements followed the Church's dictates on the spiritual life of his slaves, but followed southern ideas of the day on slavery. He sold or traded Nancy to another plantation owner north of Gaithersburg near Germantown, Henry Waring. Waring was also a Catholic and maintained a chapel for his family and slaves to attend. In 1860, Nancy gave birth to her first child, Annie, who was no longer living with her at the Warnings by 1864 when the last slave census was taken for possible compensation. When emancipation was decreed in Maryland in 1864, Waring had only nine slaves and Nancy was the only female slave. She probably had been a house servant and cook. She was listed in the 1867 slave statistics as Nancy Smith, age 21 and owned by Henry Waring of Germantown. Also listed was George, 11, Edward, 8, Bernard, 6, and Mary Smith, 3, but the family connection is not known.

As a free woman, Nancy resumed the surname "Smith", recovered her daughter, and moved to Rockville with Annie and her newborn daughter, Margaret. In July 1866, Nancy had another daughter, Delia, and supported her family by working as a domestic. She lived in the black section of Rockville with twenty-seven other people. Her daughters went into domestic service when of age. In the 1870's, Nancy Smith married George Baker, who was employed as a farm laborer. The family moved into a small house owned by Luther Snowden on Middle Lane in Rockville. There, in May of 1879, the Bakers probably had their first son, George Baker Jr. followed later by another son, Milford.

The Bakers eventually put together enough money to purchase a lot on Middle Lane and built a small home. So George Baker Jr.'s family, though limited to menial labor for small wages,

owned their own house and were active members of the black community. The family attended Jerusalem Methodist Church in Rockville and the children attended a primary school for Black students. George was known as an avid reader.

During his childhood, several lynchings and beatings of Black citizens took place in Rockville and Montgomery County with no legal repercussions administered to the lynch mob. Parts of the Middle Lane neighborhood became a slum, known as "Monkey Run." Life was difficult for the poorer residents.

George Jr. was small in stature, only 5 foot two inches high as an adult. He was not a good candidate for a laborer and obviously had higher aspirations. His mother died in May of 1897. Her passing was noted by the Montgomery County *Sentinel* because of her size. It stated, "She was, without a doubt, the largest woman in the county, if not the state." She was a curiosity to most, but left her children a religious fervor from her Catholic beginnings mixed with the acceptance of Methodism, and pride.

George Baker left Rockville and his family soon after his mother's death. He went to Baltimore in 1899 looking for opportunity and lived and worked as a gardener for a white suburban businessman and his neighbors and became familiar with the many new storefront religions and evangelists. He later lived with Harriette Snowden and became involved in storefront evangelism and "New Thought", a philosophy somewhat like the power of positive thinking. He joined an evangelist movement headed by Father Jehovia, a man called "The Bishop" who espoused Ethiopianism, and became "The Messenger." The group believed that if one thought and practiced pure religious beliefs, they could embody God. The Messenger was known for his powerful sermons and charismatic aura.

In 1912, he declared that he was the only true and pure expression of God's spirit and left Father Jehovia and the Bishop and became Father Major Jealous Divine. He spent five years as a circuit evangelist in Georgia and southern states calling himself the "Messenger of God." At one point he was judged insane and confined. He also suffered from mob violence and claimed to have narrowly escaped lynching.

Observers of his religious philosophy were held to strict behavioral standards including temperance, renunciation of family ties, and celibacy. Father Divine married, but characterized it as a spiritual union, rather than a physical union. He purchased a home in the all-white town of Sayville, Long Island and challenged racism and segregation by his presence.

Father Divine followed a positive approach, starting employment centers and offering other low-cost services. His efforts to pass a national anti-lynching law and eliminate racial consideration were precursors of the later civil rights movements. His philosophies and goals spread internationally, but were never part of the mainstream. On the other side, opposition continued. His religious philosophy and practices were rigid and controversial and he was called a charlatan who stripped his followers of family and profited from their efforts. Later in his life he moved his Peace Mission to Philadelphia. He died in 1965 but the movement was formally incorporated as a church and continues to this day, spiritually led in his name by his second wife, Mother Divine.