



A HISTORY OF  
PRATHERTOWN



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*To earn a great name*

*And at the end of  
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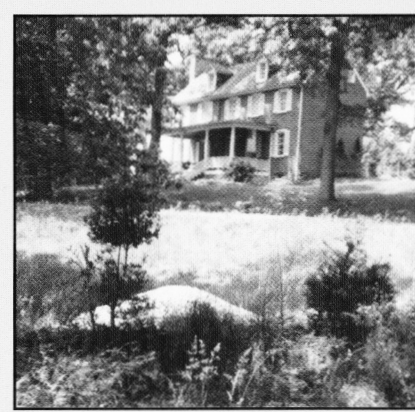
*— The Reverend  
James Edwin Prather*

When the Prathers purchased Dorsey Meadows, they did not intend to farm the land as their sole means of support. They planned to build their homes there and have small gardens or truck gardens. Marshall, Rezin, and Moses worked on the farms throughout the County. Some of the women would take in washing. They would go out on Monday and pick up the clothes from other families and then deliver them on Fridays. Some of the families had horses and would hire their labor and services out to other farms, mainly the Clifton Wightman farm on Wightman Road. Many of the family members eventually started their own busi-



*Prathertown homestead was a two story log cabin built from the wood from the surrounding areas. The Prather families lived in the cabin until each family could build his own home.*

nesses in the building industry and others entered various professions. By the



*The Woodbourne Estate or the Blunt-Dorsey House, This house was home to five generations of the Blunt family. A brick clad manor home built in the 1800s. The Prather family were slaves on this plantation which was a self-contained manor home. Reverend James Edwin Prather describes the old slave quarters which still had iron bars at the windows.*

second and third generation, most of the descendants had earned college degrees.

Most of the people living in Prathertown today are the direct descendants of the founders. They built the original house, the Prather homestead, out of logs cut from the nearby woods. The original house was a two-story, four room, log cabin where family members tried to survive in the early days after emancipation. Marshal had two rooms upstairs and Moses two rooms downstairs. The house provided cramped quarters and the children had to sleep on the bed "crossways." Eventually, Marshall and Moses were able to build separate homes. The original homestead was torn down in the 1930s but some of the logs still remain on the lot where the homestead stood. All of the members of the Prather family built their own houses in those days.

According to the Reverend James Edwin Prather, Moses Prather was a slave at the Woodbourne Manor House or the Blunt-Dorsey

House. Reverend Prather in an interview conducted in 1978 described the old slave quarter on the Woodbourne estate as having iron bars at the windows. In his youth, the Reverend Prather and other family members worked on the Blunt-Dorsey farm where he saw the former slave quarter.

Prathertown is unique in that it has managed to survive and maintain its identity even though many African-American historic communities have disappeared into suburban tracts. The Reverend Prather, grandson of Marshall Prather, witnessed the disappearance of other African-American communities in Montgomery County. He realized the importance of preserving Prathertown's heritage so he requested that his interviews be placed on file in the oral tradition section of the Montgomery County Historic Library. Sharon Prather, the Reverend's daughter, has an unpublished manuscript detailing the history of Prathertown from its beginning to the present.

A brief biographical sketch of the Reverend Prather is given here. He was minister of his church, the Poplar Grove Baptist Church in Darnestown, Maryland. The church is now nearly 120 years old. The Reverend Prather started his own ministry there after serving as an assistant pastor at the Brooke Grove United Methodist Church in Laytonsville for 26 years. Most of his congregation were from Prathertown and Gaithersburg. Originally the church services were held at the Hall in Stewartown. He had his own religious radio program in 1943 located in Frederick, Maryland. Later, he had a radio program in Gaithersburg, Forward with God, on WHMC. His wife and daughters, nieces and nephews were on the radio with him every Sunday morning. The Poplar Grove Gospel Choir, would come and sing every Sunday morning. He is also a member of the National Association of the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). He is member of the Montgomery County Medical Foundation and served on the Board of Directors of Suburban Hospital. He served on the Montgomery County School Board and the Committee for integration of schools in 1954. He served as a chaplain for the State of Maryland, working with prisoners at Jessups Prison, and with the elderly at the Asbury Methodist Center located in Gaithersburg, Maryland. He has devoted his life to working with the underprivileged and trying to bring people closer together in Montgomery County. He focused on confidence building among people in various communities because in his words, "so many people feel left out of society." He never lost sight of the fact that his ancestors struggled to build a viable community that would instill pride in the descendants.

There are many Prathers living throughout the State of Maryland. Many live in Montgomery County, both European descent Prathers and African descent Prathers. There is a local cemetery where one person traced a Prather family back to 1698. There are also family branches in Frederick and Prince George Counties.

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*The Posey House was built in 1910. Sarah was a midwife and John operated a small sawmill which he processed the logs brought there in horse and wagons by local residents. The residents also worked on the Wightman Farm. The Posey House is one of the last examples of late 19<sup>th</sup> or early 20<sup>th</sup> century German country style architecture. The Carpenter family has resided in this house for the last 10 years and have impeccably maintained the house.*

*Goshen Store (not shown) is one of the earliest structure in the area. In 1792, a mill was built there known as the Goshen Mills. By 1853, a post office was opened in the same complex. In the 1920s and 1930s, Annie Prather, a midwife, operated the store and boarding house in the building. In the 1950s, the building served as the Republican Headquarters in the county for the Eisenhower-Nixon campaign.*

There were very few schools in the area. There was the one-room school house on Blunt Road and the Goshen School on Goshen Road. The children were sent to school at Stewartown before 1954. During that time, there was opposition to integration. Reverend Prather received threatening telephone calls and on one occasion, someone threw a molotov cocktail through the door of the Poplar Grove Baptist Church. This was done to force him to withdraw from the school integration movement. No one was hurt but it was a frightening experience.

For recreation, the people of Prathertown used the campgrounds at Emory Grove which were converted to a night baseball park. Even the famous baseball player Satchel Page played there. There would be horse shows and people would come from Sandy Spring to hold a fair. They did not have swimming pools but some of the children would swim in Seneca Creek. In more recent years, they went to Glen Echo. There were other activities such as Field Days that would allow children from the different schools to get together for competitive sports.

The old log homes are gone and now many residents of Prathertown live in brick homes along Wightman Road. Developers have tried to buy land in Prathertown but the community leaders worked to discourage people from selling their homes and property. The residents were offered \$15,000 to \$20,000 in cash and this was an offer that some found hard to resist. Once the money was spent, many ended up in apartments not knowing how they were going to meet the next month's expenses. People were urged to try to hold on to what they have. According to Reverend Prather, there is an old proverbial saying that "a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush." Many of the older people sold their property and suffered as a result of it.

All of the residents were nearly squeezed out of Prathertown. One of the local developers wanted to build a dam on Seneca Creek for flood control and management in Montgomery Village.

There were no movements to make Prathertown a town or incorporate it. It has always been a settlement. To quote from Reverend Prather, "We are setting on this little island, I call it an island because we are being surrounded by Goshen Estates and Montgomery Village. This is our heritage and it was handed down to us, our landmark, and so we're going to try to just hold on and keep it up and let it be presentable and do the best we can."



*The Black and White Inn formerly owned by Charlie Harris who was the local blacksmith. People came from Washington, D.C. as well as from local areas to have their horses shod at Charlie's shop. The Harris family also had a store at that location where they sold home made candy. On the weekends, Mrs. Harris cooked meals for people who came from the city to enjoy the countryside. The house later served as an inn for traveling African-Americans during the era of racial segregation.*

The Reverend Prather was a Methodist minister for 26 years. He then obtained the ministry at the Poplar Grove Baptist Church in Darnestown. Only eight members of his family belonged to the Baptist Church, the rest were Methodist. They attended the Goshen Methodist Church on Goshen Road. At the Poplar Grove Church, there was a large metal tub outside the church that served as the first baptismal pool. On one occasion a request was made by a member of the church to be baptized in the river just like Jesus. The Reverend Prather contacted Clifford Wightman who owned the property along Seneca Creek and permission was granted. The baptism was held in Wightman's meadow on a fall evening.

Before becoming the pastor of the Baptist Church, the Reverend Prather and his family would take evangelizing trips to Pennsylvania, West Virginia and southern Maryland. In those days he referred to himself as a supply minister, that is, he did not have his own church.

Many of the people of Prathertown have their own businesses. The Reverend Prather also had a cement business. He laid the foundations for many of the homes and buildings on Randolph Road. However, he was the only African-American businessman with his office in the old town Gaithersburg. Eventually, the office space was taken away from him and he worked from his home.

He remembers when the county was 50 percent African American in the 1900s. The average family in Prathertown had nine children. Many of the younger people moved away.



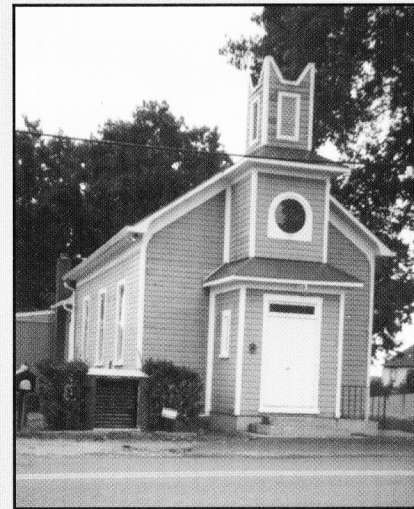
*The Boyd House is a manor home built by the original owner Wesley Boyd. Reverend Prather describes the house as "being the big white house on the hill." This house was a cultural center for Prathertown. On Sunday afternoons, there would be teas and concerts and people would come from all over Montgomery County and Washington, D.C. The Boyds were related to the Prathers by marriage. The ladies would wear long white dresses and formal white gloves.*

His only son, James Prather, age 20 years old, died of wounds while on a combat operation in Vietnam. He was only in Vietnam for 30 days before he died. He wanted to be a minister and was called by the other members of his company "Reverend" because he would lead the company in prayer every morning.

At the Suburban Hospital, they are paging, "Dr. Prather, Dr Prather." According to Reverend Prather, he still wears the same size hat, six and three eighths.

The senior assisted living complex, that is now being built will bring the sewer lines into Prathertown, allowing the property owners to sell their vacant lots. Hopefully single family homes which blend into the historic community will be built.

The widening of Wightman Road will take away the front yards of the residents of Prathertown, creating traffic and safety issues, pollution, and noise. Some of the houses such as the historic Posey House may be demolished as a result of future road construction.



The Poplar Grove Baptist Church in Darnestown. This was the Reverend Prather's Church.



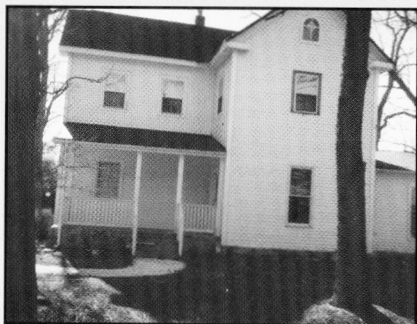
Many members of the Prather family are making history today. The Reverend Sandra Prather and her husband the Reverend Carl Prather were instrumental in getting a legislative bill through Congress and the Senate that provides universal health care for children. They also played a significant role in the Welfare to Work Program, providing par-

ticipants with the necessary job and education skills to find employment.

All of the members of this magnificent community have a wealth of information on the history of Prathertown, Goshen, and Gaithersburg.



The Thomas-Wightman House, on Wightman Road, was built in the late 1800s. It is said that the house has a ghost, the elder Mr. Wightman has been seen walking around the house. The house is indexed as a historical site by the Historical Preservation Committee.



The Benson House is a frame house built in the 1800s. The Benson family sold a tract of land that was part of Dorsey Meadows to the Prather family in 1883, after members of the Prather family received their independence. It is believed that the early homeowners received a pair of Kentucky Coffee Bean Trees as a wedding gift. Although these trees are not prevalent in Montgomery County they are thriving for being in this northern cline. The trees at and near the Benson home are 180 years old and, unfortunately, one has been chopped down by the developer who is building the senior assisted living complex. The seniors there would most likely have enjoyed this lovely tree as part of their environment. The Kentucky Coffee Bean Tree in Darnestown had a much better fate. There the developer protected the tree and created a park so that all of the residents could enjoy its rare beauty.



Great Seneca Creek enabled three to four mills to be constructed in Goshen. The Goshen mills and the Davis Mill helped to create industries as well as towns and roads which provided connecting links between the towns and cities in Maryland and in Washington, D.C. The mills became the backbone of the early farming community of Goshen, an area with gentle rolling hills and fertile valleys described as the land of milk and honey. During the Civil War, Great Seneca Creek Bridge was guarded by 5,000 Union troops to protect a Confederate invasion of Washington, D.C.



Butler's Orchard, which is famous for its strawberries, is near Prathertown.



ANNIVERSARY — The Rev. and Mrs. James E. Prather we're honored by approximately 200 friends, relatives and members of Poplar Grove Baptist Church in Darnestown on the anniversary of 25 years of ministry at the church. The celebration was highlighted with a banquet at the Peter Pan Inn, Urbana. The Reverend Prather has served 25 at the church, 35 years in the ministry.

Photograph of the Reverend and Mrs. Prather.



Major General Thomas L. Prather, Jr. was one of the first black students to attend Gaithersburg High School. Today he and his wife, Beulah, reside near the area where they grew up.

The photograph of the two Prathers, General and his wife Beulah

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Pfc. JAMES W. PRATHER

### James Prather, 20, Gaithersburg GI Killed in Action

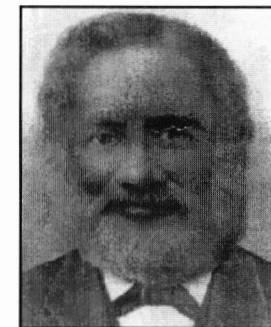
Army Pfc. James W. Prather, 20, of Gaithersburg died of wounds Monday in South Vietnam while on combat operations. He originally had been reported missing by the 14th Infantry of the 25th Division.

Pfc. Prather was a graduate of Gaithersburg High School, and was a sophomore at Montgomery Junior College before joining the Army. He played football for both Gaithersburg High School and Montgomery Junior College.

He was a member of the Poplar Grove Baptist Church, where he was president of the junior choir and a member of the junior usher board.

He leaves his parents, the Rev. and Mrs. James E. Prather of Route 1, Gaithersburg; and five sisters, Mrs. Lawrence Copeland of 1682 Irving St. NW, Mrs. Clifford Claggett of Dimes Road, Rockville, Mrs. Denver Saunders of Route 1, Gaithersburg, Miss Sharon of the home, and Miss Joyce of 5902 Knollbrook Drive NW.

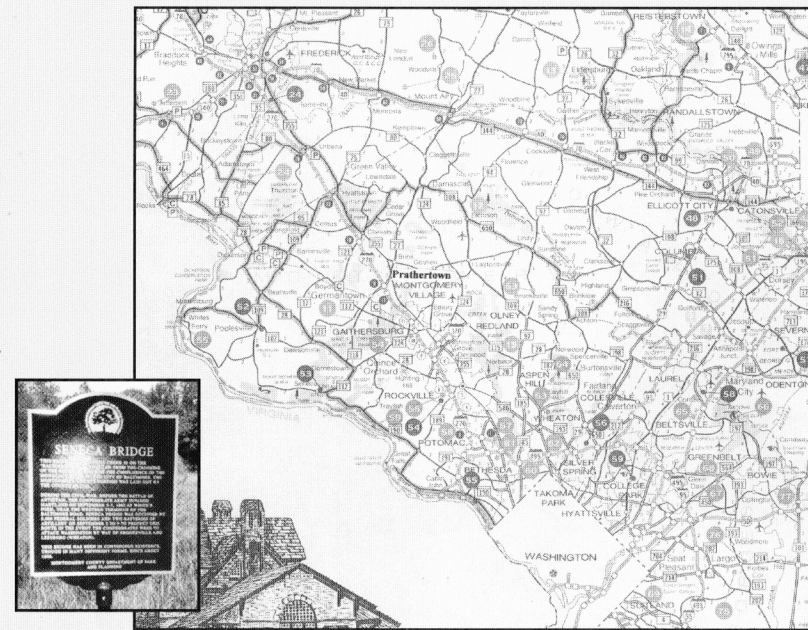
Photograph of James Prather, Reverend and Mrs. Prathers son who died in Vietnam



Wesley Prather

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The Prather, Saunders, Boyd, Claggett, Dove, Wilson, Frazier, and other families