**WHY DOES HISTORY MATTER TO US?**  Each of the community meetings that the St. Thomas Church or the developer has held to date has started with a history. So, we’d like to start our meeting that way also. We’d like to focus on the history of the relationship between St. Thomas church and the community – a distinguished history that the neighborhood and the community, as well as the church members, are proud of and want to preserve.

The first services in the original stone sanctuary were held in 1899 after church construction was complete; the building that still stands, St. Thomas Parish Hall, was completed in 1923. St. Thomas was known through the early 20th century as a “Presidents’ Church,” due to its famous political parishioners. Franklin Roosevelt was the most notable. He was a senior warden of the church prior to becoming President, and chose St. Thomas as his place of worship the day after his inauguration. Harry Truman was another President worshiper; Mrs. Edith White Bolling Galt Wilson, otherwise known as Mrs. Woodrow Wilson was another famous parishioner. Eleanor Roosevelt has the distinction of being the first person to deliver a lay sermon during a church service, and I like to think that homily was foretelling of the church’s willingness to push norms by allowing a woman to “preach”. In the early 90s, Anne Richards, the famous Texas governor, attended St. Thomas frequently when she was in town.

All that’s left of that original historic sanctuary are the alter ruins and the gable visible in the current park, along with the Parish Hall. Part of what we neighbors are advocating for is the preservation of these historic structures, as they represent part of this important history. The great impact of this church, however, is not limited to the church buildings and the many dignitaries who worshiped there. To many, the park is also significant because it serves as a landmark of how a church responded to the tragedy of the fire.

An awful thing occurred in 1970 that shook the entire neighborhood – an arsonist’s fire destroyed the historic gothic sanctuary. Henry Breul was the rector at the time of the fire, and he was a dynamic and visionary leader. Years prior to the fire he began a ministry to the “hippies” in Dupont Circle. A few upscale parishioners were skeptical about this ministry expansion – that it didn’t fit the dignity of the church – but Henry believed that the church should respond to the community needs and the reality of the current time. I attended St. Thomas in the late 1980s, and he continued this same ethic with an outspoken commitment to civil rights for lesbian and gay parishioners (and clergy), at a time when such positions weren’t popular.

So, it was not out of character for Henry and for St. Thomas Church that when the church building burned to the ground, they sought to create a church that in his words was, “pruned of great property and wealth.” When rebuilding was considered, the church decided D.C. didn’t need another big gothic structure, and, according to Henry, “no one could afford to maintain it anyway.” So, they INTENTIONALLY created the current all-purpose worship hall, seeking to set an example for other churches and the future. The park became a model of urban ministry, providing the gift of green space, and a place to make the “church” an accessible part of the community.

Over the years, Henry’s vision of how a church can evolve within a community has come alive. The park has been the venue for Easter vigils, weddings, picnics, and even pet blessings – all officially sanctioned by the church. Yet think of all the countless unofficial happenings – a chance first meeting, and hand-in-hand walk, a wedding proposal, a quiet reflection, an afternoon with a beloved pet – all part what it means to be “church” to a surrounding neighborhood. The St. Thomas visionaries of that time would be thrilled to see their dream so fully realized. What a wonderful “landmark” to a time and place, and what a wonderful living symbol of turning tragedy into something beautiful

Jim Holmes, the St. Thomas rector who succeeded Henry and officiated at his funeral, spoke of Henry as a vigilante because he liked to “stir the pot.” Henry stirred the pot by ministering to hippies, by advocating for women priests, by washing the tear gassed eyes of Vietnam War protesters, by welcoming gay and lesbian parishioners, and, not insignificantly, by planting a park rather than rebuilding a church structure to show us what it means to be a truly modern church. As Jim said in his eulogy, “It is often said the defining moment of St. Thomas was the fire. In truth it was not the fire but the rising from the fire. The parish was redefined by its people, and the garden which was put in over the piled up ruins was and remains a gift of new life to the neighborhood.”

Our neighborhood group is a bit like Henry -- “vigilantes” who are stirring the pot still. We have been labeled as being nostalgic, and misguided about the significance of these historic buildings and the park. We’re not driven by nostalgia, but instead we are honoring the historic intention of this community gift. We are promoting preservation of this church because we want to sustain the history of the relationship between this church and the community; to save the parish hall, the sanctuary ruins, and for many of us the Park, that fully embodies the vision of that 1970s parish that made “church” available to so many. We don’t want to let that vision die and we hope you don’t either and that’s why you’re here tonight.