

Ruth Ann Overbeck

(Excerpt from “Old Naval Lodge,” an Overbeck History Lecture, on April 20, 2010)

By Gary Scott

For a long time you have met here for the Overbeck Lecture. You have heard fascinating lectures on the history of Washington and the history of Capitol Hill. Ruth Ann Overbeck, through her friends, her work, and her wide influence, gave Capitol Hill its modern historical consciousness as a working local neighborhood, apart and separate from the mighty deeds of Congress. She discovered builders, architects, tradesmen, merchants, shopkeepers, and a host of local people who populated the largely middle class Capitol Hill neighborhood during most of its history. Through her house histories, her tours and her publicity, she gave the gentrified Capitol Hill a special sense of its identity after realtors like Dale Denton, John Janke and others sold it to a new generation of Washingtonians returning from the suburbs to the city. She advanced the view that Capitol Hill had always been a bi-racial neighborhood, though red lining of real estate had excluded African Americans from major streets to interesting side streets and mews-like dwellings. She was just as interested in the working neighborhoods on the side streets and the alleys as in the grand architecture of East Capitol Street. She knew that “Capitol Hill” originally had meant only the immediate streets surrounding the Capitol, but that it was pushed farther and farther back by realtors who could always find you a slightly less expensive house just a few blocks back, until Capitol Hill reached to Kennedy Stadium.

As a historian for the National Park Service I had met Ruth Ann while arranging for her to give a Capitol Hill tour for park rangers back in the 1980s. I worked with her when she was a contractor for the Anacostia Seawall study and the Anacostia Study cut short by her death. I introduced Ruth Ann to an Architectural Conservation Course at West Dean, Sussex, England, and accompanied her and Robert Hughes, her husband, on a trip to West Dean and the south of England. I have memories of Ruth Ann with dowsers at the Chalice Well and the Tor at Glastonbury. We were both from Texas and both had come out of the Methodist Church. She had retained a connection with the Capitol Hill United Methodist Church. We had a professional friendship which lasted for many years.

In the early 1980s I did a Masonic Temples tour for the Smithsonian Resident Associates, met Harry Hodges the Secretary of Naval Lodge, and fell in love with the polychromatic lodge hall, at that time a hidden jewel. I transferred my Masonic membership to Naval Lodge and Robert Hughes became a member and moved up the chairs as Master of the Lodge. I followed him up and was Master in 1996. As Harry Hodges, lodge secretary for 25 years became increasingly ill, Robert filled in as Lodge Secretary and became lodge secretary. Ruth Ann became fascinated with the older members of Naval Lodge, all local Washingtonians, many who were born and raised up on Capitol Hill and then moved out to the Maryland suburbs during the White Flight of the 1950s, when Capitol Hill streets were block-busted and African Americans began moving on to the major streets of the neighborhood. The older lodge members continued to come in from the Maryland suburbs to lodge meetings to keep the lodge going.

Ruth Ann started an oral history project of older lodge members, such as Past Master Walter Graham, whose father had been a member of Naval Lodge, and whose two sons had served as Master. We recruited new lodge members and kept it going in the 1990s. Ruth Ann's father in Texas had been a Mason. Her mother had been a member of the Eastern Star, so Masonry was in her roots and a part of her blood.

Ruth Ann faced her bout with pancreatic cancer bravely and stoically. She knew she had only six months, with so much work yet to be done. Her brave, unflappable facing of her cancer was and continues to be an inspiration to her friends and those who knew her. Of note was that Ruth Ann was the last to play the organ at Naval Lodge. She had played the harp at my installation as Worshipful Master. Though sick and riddled with cancer, she gave a beautiful performance to the lodge. When the Master at that time rose to close the lodge, it was noted that Ruth Ann was still in the choir loft. She wanted to see the awful Masonic secrets and the closing of the lodge. Tenderly she was asked to come down, and Ruth Ann regally descended those stairs and stood outside the door while the lodge was closed. She died shortly thereafter. I went to Sibley to see her the night before she died. "Ruth Ann," I said, "the eyes of Texas are upon you." She had been an honors student at the University of Texas.

Ruth Ann moved to Capitol Hill on 12th Street, SE in the 1960s. Between her first marriage and her marriage to Robert, she lived there alone. We were barely holding on in the city, living behind bars with open drug markets and homicides a few blocks away. But Ruth Ann had a strong sense of Capitol Hill as a neighborhood, she stressed Capitol Hill. She always talked about Capitol Hill. For some of us, she was Capitol Hill, and we remember that every time we walk through Congressional Cemetery and see Ruth Ann's obelisk with the words: "Look it up." Her presence is still being felt coming from that grave site in the cemetery, and through this lectureship in her honor in the old lodge hall she loved.