

MIETRO

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PHOTO BY JAMES A. HAZELL—THE WASHINGTON POST

Mary Nusser and husband Jon Paiks leave the service for William Wallace Brown Jr. at St. John's Episcopal Church.

Homeless Once, But Now at Peace

Prestige Burial Culminates Lone Odyssey

By **DEBBI WILGOREN**
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William Wallace Brown Jr., a former street person who fought for 23 years to reclaim a home he said he had signed away while drunk, was given a permanent resting place yesterday on the grounds of a prestigious District church.

A dozen of Brown's friends—including two former members of Congress, a molecular biologist and a top patent lawyer—looked on solemnly as the urn containing Brown's ashes was placed near those of other parishioners in a small burial garden outside St. John's Episcopal Church, across from the White House.

Brown, who died Oct. 17 at age 68 of an apparent heart attack, "really understood that the kingdom of God is for all of us," the Rev. Luis Leon said later. "It doesn't matter about ethnic back-



Charles Salomonson, a homeless friend of Brown's, attends part of the service before hurrying to look for a warm place to spend the frigid day.

ground, race or class—all the things that we allow to divide us but that in God's eyes are not really important."

During the Eucharist service, church member Dolph Hatfield read a passage from Zechariah 14:4-9 that he said was "very fitting for Mr. Brown":

Then the Lord my God will come, and all the holy ones with

him. On that day there shall not be either cold or frost . . . at evening time there shall be light.

"In a way, I think, Mr. Brown's kind of getting his just deserts now," Hatfield said of the church burial. In interviews and tearful remembrances yesterday, he and others described Brown's life as

See **BROWN**, B6, Col. 1

Church Bids Farewell to a Friend

BROWN, From B1

filled with frost but also with light.

Brown lived on the streets near the White House in protest for 15 years. He was obsessed with the lawyer who he said swindled him out of the Alexandria house his family left him—and resisted paying a court-ordered settlement and interest that in 1993 totaled \$50,000.

Daily, he walked to the U.S. Capitol to display a poster board of newspaper headlines about stubbornness, heroism and justice denied. He hoped some lawmaker would take on his case and help him get the house back.

That never happened. But Brown, who battled back from alcoholism, created a spiritual home for himself at St. John's—known as the "Church of the Presidents" because nearly every U.S. head of state since James Madison has worshiped there. Eventually, he moved to an apartment that friends from the church and elsewhere found for him.

Brown is said to have first entered St. John's in 1989, after spotting then-President George Bush on his way inside and asking Bush to pray for him.

"No," Bush answered, according to church members. "Come inside with us and pray for yourself."

Brown, a large man who loved jazz and years ago worked for the Virginia electric company and as a grocery bagger, became a regular at the 8 a.m. service.

He always had a crumpled dollar bill for the silver collection plate. He sat in the red upholstered pews and knelt to accept the Communion wafer at the marbled altar with a quiet dignity that impressed fellow parishioners.

"In the eyes of God ... the homeless and the most important are one and the same," said Hatfield, who introduced himself to Brown after watching another worshiper snub him. Hatfield, who became Brown's closest



BY JAMES A. PARCELL—THE WASHINGTON POST

The Rev. Luis Leon presides over the service for Brown, who lived on the streets near the White House for 15 years.

friend, invited him for a meal or took him grocery shopping every Sunday after church.

Brown, whose struggle was depicted on the front page of *The Washington Post* in 1992, also befriended commuters who passed his sidewalk outpost. One of them, Mary Nusser, came from Bowie yesterday to attend his funeral. She brought a plastic bag of Brown's prized headlines, each preserved in Scotch tape, and offered them to parishioners as keepsakes.

"With Liberty and Justice and Free Speech for All," said the one

picked by former U.S. congressman Sonny Montgomery (D-Miss.), who always sat near Brown and Hatfield in church. Brown had crossed out the word "all" and written in "some."

Carol Hylton, of Palisades, a teacher who occasionally bought clothes for Brown, chose "Right and Remembrance." Lawrence Goffney, former commissioner of patents, picked "Hero of His Tribe"—because that's what he was, Goffney said.

Another friend, Charles Salomonson, a homeless man who spends his nights on the steps of

St. John's, attended the Eucharist but did not stay for the funeral. His girlfriend was waiting outside in frigid Lafayette Square guarding their shopping cart of belongings, and Salomonson, 39 wanted to find a warm place for them to spend the day.

Brown likely would have understood. His hands once grew so stiff with cold that he was unable to put on gloves offered by passerby.

"At least he was happy," Salomonson said of Brown. "He had found God, and he had found his family again, in the church."