

## ABSTRACT

Title of Thesis: CAPITAL CONSTRUCTIONS: RACE AND  
THE REIMAGINING OF WASHINGTON,  
D.C.'S LOCAL HISTORY IN THE  
TWENTIETH CENTURY

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From the time of its creation to the present day, Washington, D.C. has been conceptualized as a symbol of the United States, rather than a city in its own right. Such a view disregards the idea that Washington, D.C. possesses a local history. Through the investigation of two recognized historic districts—Georgetown and U Street—this thesis explores how Washington, D.C.'s local history has been commemorated. Examining the constructed nature of these historic districts—the “reimagining” of them—reveals that over the course of the twentieth century, Washington, D.C.'s local African American history has been both erased as well as embraced. Furthermore, the recognition of these two areas as historic has had dramatic repercussions for residents of these neighborhoods.

CAPITAL CONSTRUCTIONS:  
RACE AND THE REIMAGINING OF WASHINGTON, D.C.'S LOCAL HISTORY  
IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

By

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## Introduction

From the time of its inception to the present day, Washington, D.C. has been envisioned, in the words of city planning historian John W. Reps, as “exist[ing] almost entirely as a governmental city. Its raison d’etre is national administration, the buildings for the federal establishment occupy its commanding sites, and the majority of its citizens find employment in the myriad tasks of governing a large and complex nation.”<sup>1</sup> Configuring the city in this way ignores the fact that Washington is and always has been a city as well as a capital, a home to flesh-and-blood inhabitants with histories—and a collective history—that exist independent of the presence of the federal government. The question then becomes, has the local history of Washington been commemorated, and if so, how?

To shed light on the issue, I have investigated two case studies: Georgetown and U Street, two Washington, D.C. neighborhoods that have been recognized as historic. Over the course of the twentieth century, both of these areas have seen massive changes to their local reputation as well as to their demography. In her work *A Golden Haze of Memory: The Making of Historic Charleston*, Stephanie Yuhl describes the way in which early-twentieth-century groups of elite white Southerners “reinvented” Charleston, South Carolina’s past through a variety of different means, from historic preservation to writing to painting, in order to confront the threats posed by modernity as well as to reclaim a lost sense of social superiority.<sup>2</sup> Throughout her

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<sup>1</sup> John W. Reps, *Monumental Washington: The Planning and Development of the Capital* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967), xiii-xiv.

<sup>2</sup> Stephanie Yuhl, *A Golden Haze of Memory: The Making of Historic Charleston* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 6.

analysis, Yuhl terms this process of reinvention “re-membering” in order to emphasize the active nature of the enterprise.

This thesis is about this reinvention or re-membering, both as a phenomenon (the fact that it happened) and as a process (how and why it happened). I maintain that this same sort of remembering has taken place in the Georgetown and U Street areas of Washington D.C. Over the course of the twentieth century, both of these neighborhoods have been reimagined; a crucial part of this process has been the establishment of them as historic. The first case study, Georgetown, is the oldest part of Washington, but was not defined as historic until the 1920s and 1930s, when historic preservationists restored many of the oldest Georgetown residences. Fifty years later, the U Street area of the city, a historically African American neighborhood that serves as my second case study, underwent a transformation that was similar in scope.

As this thesis will demonstrate, the reimagining of Georgetown and U Street was informed by the particular understanding of Washington as a symbol of the nation. Indeed, this perception of D.C. provided the framework within which Georgetown and U Street were defined as historic. As well, the reimagining of both Georgetown and U Street has hinged on issues of race. I chart the imagining of D.C. from the nineteenth century, when the city was envisioned as the domain of whites, to the twentieth century, which saw the creation of historic Georgetown and historic U Street, one of which worked to reinforce this image of Washington, the other to contradict it. I argue that part of the “historicization” of these areas was the coding of them as either “white” or “black” spaces (with their histories racialized accordingly),

and that these interpretations were products of the time periods during which they were carried out.

At the core of this exploration of Georgetown, U Street, and Washington, D.C. are several broader questions: how does a place become historic, and what are the forces that shape it? In particular, what role do market forces play in this process, in the form of historic preservation and cultural tourism? How does the existence of historic neighborhoods influence the popular vision or understanding of a city, and vice versa?

### **The Creation of the Historic**

At the root of this notion of re-membering is the concept of collective memory. In recent years, scholars from fields as disparate as psychology, history, and cultural studies have produced a body of work large enough to merit the naming of a new subfield: memory studies. Drawing on the work of French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs, most memory scholars now agree that groups learn about and engage in “remembering” the events of the past, much as individuals do.<sup>3</sup> For both groups as well as individuals, this “remembering” is a social process, a construction, molded and shaped by a variety of different, often competing pressures. Thus, how we understand the past is subject to the conditions—political, economic, and cultural—of the present.

Consequently, as symbols of collective memory, historic sites are also constructions. Those places that we understand as “historic,” such as civil war battlefields, Frederick Douglass’s home, and the former internment camp at

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<sup>3</sup> Maurice Halbwachs, *The Collective Memory*, trans. Francis J. Ditter, Jr., and Vida Yazdi Ditter, Introduction by Mary Douglas (New York: Harper & Row, 1980).

Manzanar, to name a few, exist because we, as a society, deem them worthy of remembering.<sup>4</sup> Memory scholars refer to places and structures that embody memory as “sites of memory,”<sup>5</sup> or “technologies of memory,”<sup>6</sup> mechanisms through which collective memory is formed and perpetuated.

As social constructions, the existence of historic sites may have less to do with the actual historical realities of a place than with the political, economic, and social power structures of contemporary society. The widespread lack of sites commemorating the history of minority groups in the United States, particularly African Americans, serves as just one example of the ways that social conditions, such as racial prejudice, can influence the establishment (or lack thereof) of historic sites. Hence, throughout this thesis I refer to “historic” Georgetown or Historic U Street (that is, using quotation marks and capitalization) to delineate the constructed nature of the historicity of these places.

Once established, the interpretation of historic sites is not set in stone; the stories that they tell will vary according to changes in the greater society. Edward Linenthal makes this point clear in his analysis of the commemoration of American battlefields, which he labels “sacred spaces” to denote the fact that they are revered

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<sup>4</sup> On the development of civil war battlefields as historic sites, see Edward Linenthal, *Sacred Ground: Americans and Their Battlefields*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1993); on Frederick Douglass’s home and other African American historic sites, see Jeffrey C. Stewart and Fath Davis Ruffins, “A Faithful Witness: Afro-American Public History in Historical Perspective, 1828-1984,” in *Presenting the Past: Essays on History and the Public*, ed. Susan Porter Benson, Stephen Brier, and Roy Rosenzweig (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986), 307-336; on Manzanar National Historic Site, see Robert T. Hayashi, “Transfigured Patterns: Contesting Memories at the Manzanar National Historic Site,” *The Public Historian* 25:4 (Fall 2003): 51-71.

<sup>5</sup> Pierre Nora, “Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Memoire,” *Representations* 26 (Spring 1989): 7-24.

<sup>6</sup> Marita Sturken, *Tangled Memories: The Vietnam War, the AIDS Epidemic, and the Politics of Remembering* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

within American collective memory.<sup>7</sup> As Linenthal explains, the views of the past offered by sites such as Lexington and Concord and Little Bighorn have undergone revision over the course of their existence. Linenthal's research also reveals how sites of memory can be interpreted in many different ways. For example, the sites of war that Linenthal examines continue to be literal battlefields, "spaces where Americans of various ideological persuasions come, not always reverently, to compete for the ownership of powerful national stories."<sup>8</sup>

As Linenthal indicates, historic sites often become contested and are pulled into national dialogue because they are so important to our sense of history, and therefore, to our sense of identity. As Benedict Anderson has made clear, a shared history is crucial to creating a shared national identity.<sup>9</sup> This facet of collective memory raises intriguing questions about the collective memory of Washington, D.C., itself a symbol of national identity.

### **Creating the Historic City**

With these ideas of collective memory and historic site-making in mind, a number of scholars (such as Stephanie Yuhl) have investigated the twentieth-century "creation"—that is, the social construction—of "historic" neighborhoods, cities, and regions in the United States, such as New York's Lower East Side and Times Square areas, New Orleans, and the entire regions of New England and the Southwest.<sup>10</sup> As

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<sup>7</sup> Linenthal, 1.

<sup>8</sup> Linenthal, 1.

<sup>9</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (London: Verso, 1991).

<sup>10</sup> See, for example, Anthony J. Stanonis, *Creating the Big Easy: New Orleans and the Emergence of Modern Tourism* (Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 2006); Hasia R. Diner, Jeffrey Shandler, and Beth S. Wenger, ed., *Remembering the Lower East Side:*

their work demonstrates, these scholars have explored the political, social, and economic factors that have led, either directly or indirectly, to establishing these areas as “historic.”

One such factor that has played a role in shaping public ideas of historic areas, particularly urban areas, is tourism. As Yuhl’s narrative indicates, while the establishment of “historic” Charleston was not carried out solely to attract tourist dollars, this was one of the end results. The past created by these Charleston residents was not only usable, but also marketable, eventually resulting in the creation of “Historic Charleston,” “a burgeoning tourist entity that lured thousands of history-hungry visitors to the city annually.”<sup>11</sup> Yuhl’s work reveals how the marketing of a neighborhood, city, or region to tourists has an undeniable impact on the conceptualization of place.

This is a thread that runs through many scholarly works on the creation of “historic” cities: marketing the city to tourists involves commenting and capitalizing on the city’s past, thus affecting the collective memory of the place. In his exploration of the development of the modern concept of New Orleans, appropriately titled *Creating the Big Easy*, Anthony J. Stanonis describes how part of this creation process entailed “reinventing the urban past”—for example, through the restoration of

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*American Jewish Reflections* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2000); Hal K. Rothman, ed., *The Culture of Tourism, the Tourism of Culture: Selling the Past to the Present in the American Southwest* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2003); Dona Brown, *Inventing New England: Regional Tourism in the Nineteenth Century* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1996); William R. Taylor, ed., *Inventing Times Square: Commerce and Culture at the Crossroads of the World* (New York: The Russell Sage Foundation, 1991); and Briann Greenfield, “Old New England in the Twentieth-Century Imagination: Public Memory in Salem, Deerfield, Providence, and the Smithsonian Institution” (Ph.D. diss., Brown University, 2002).

<sup>11</sup> Yuhl, 7.

buildings in the French Quarter and the reinvention of Mardi Gras—in order to expand New Orleans’ tourist base and combat the city’s image as dangerous and depraved.<sup>12</sup>

This connection between tourism, memory, and the making of historic places and memory landscapes has grown even more inextricable with the rise of what is known as cultural, or heritage, tourism. As a phenomenon, cultural tourism has been taking place in the United States for the majority of the twentieth century, since the days of Colonial Williamsburg and Henry Ford’s Greenfield Village. Phoebe Kropp charts the development of California’s Spanish missions as tourist attractions, explaining how the perception of these missions as the remnants of a romantic past made them an overwhelming draw for tourists, and thus led to a “re-imagining of El Camino Real,” the scenic highway that connected them.<sup>13</sup>

However, the label “cultural tourism” denotes a relatively new twist on this: the conscious attempt to capitalize on Americans’ interest in the past, and to use the commemoration of particular pasts as a means of economic development. Cultural tourism has been defined as “travel directed toward experiencing the arts, history, and special character of unique places.”<sup>14</sup> Cultural tourism enterprises include museums, historical walking tours, historical sites, and the like. The title of a 1998 pamphlet published by Virginia’s Department of Historic Resources to promote cultural

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<sup>12</sup> Stanonis, 23.

<sup>13</sup> Phoebe Kropp, “In Search of History and Romance On El Camino Real,” in *The Culture of Tourism, the Tourism of Culture*, 40.

<sup>14</sup> Kathryn Schneider Smith, *Capital Assets: A Report on the Tourist Potential of Neighborhood Heritage and Cultural Sites in Washington, D.C.* (Washington, D.C.: D.C. Heritage Tourism Coalition, 1999), 2.

tourism, “Putting Virginia’s History to Work,” captures this marriage of cultural and economic goals.<sup>15</sup>

In the context of the creation of historic sites, cultural tourism has played a large and complicated role. In a very real way, cultural tourism makes the past a commodity to be purchased and consumed. Cultural tourism holds within it the risk of telling marketable, easily digested stories rather than complex, multi-layered ones. In marketing the past, cultural tourism also inherently affects collective memory and sense of place. In describing the impact of tourism on the Southwest, Hal Rothman comments, “Much of the physical landscape of the region, its public symbolism, the construction of its roads, trails, and even cities reflected a process that took cultural history, planed off its rough edges, and placed it in a neat little wrapper that was intelligible to the traveling classes.”<sup>16</sup> Rothman cites San Antonio as a particular example of this “packaging” of “an exotic but smoothed past.”<sup>17</sup> Rothman also points out that cultural tourism can sometimes result in the objectification of particular groups and pasts, the transformation of them into spectacles: as he says, along with “learning and reverence,” cultural tourism “sells... dismay at the past.”<sup>18</sup>

To be fair, cultural tourism also holds within it a promise of exposing people to new ideas and ways of seeing the world. Some proponents of cultural tourism aspire to use tourism as the “hook” to engage people in dialogue about stories that might otherwise be ignored, or to garner funding for projects that unearth less popular

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<sup>15</sup> *Tourism Handbook: Putting Virginia’s History to Work* (Richmond, Virginia: Department of Historic Resources).

<sup>16</sup> Hal K. Rothman, “Introduction: Tourism and the Future,” *The Culture of Tourism, the Tourism of Culture*, 7.

<sup>17</sup> Rothman, “Introduction,” 8.

<sup>18</sup> Rothman, “Introduction,” 10.

historical narratives. These potential benefits should not be overlooked. However, historically, tourism (cultural or otherwise) has affected historical narratives and historical sites in ways that scholars and critics deem negative; hence, Rothman's indictment of tourism as a "devil's bargain."<sup>19</sup>

Historic preservation (the protection and conservation of old buildings) is another important factor that shapes our understanding of what is historic. As Rudy Koshar suggests in his work on German historic preservation efforts, "National monuments, and [official] memorial spaces account for only a small part of the built environments' 'commemorative capital,' its capacity to foster an awareness of the past."<sup>20</sup> Koshar's work illustrates that historic preservation is an act of memory-making, and that restored old buildings are sites of memory as well. Similarly to tourism, historic preservation is a cultural phenomenon that has undergone substantial revisions within the twentieth century. Though the 1930s saw increased interest in preservation, the 1960s era federal historic preservation legislation initiated a sea change in the practice of preservation in the United States.

Following this legislation, individuals and institutions (most notably the federal government) alike began to work to save old buildings. Government sponsorship of historic preservation had a significant impact on the creation of historic sites around the country, as well as on the understanding of what it means for a building or place to be "historic." Under the 1966 National Historic Preservation Act, which spelled out the criteria for a building to be listed on the National Register

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<sup>19</sup> Hal K. Rothman, *Devil's Bargains: Tourism in the Twentieth-Century American West* (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 1998).

<sup>20</sup> Rudy Koshar, *Germany's Transient Pasts: Preservation and National Memory in the Twentieth Century* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 5.

of Historic Places, thousands of buildings, neighborhoods, and landscapes were designated as “historic.” The 1960s era federal preservation legislation also created tax break incentive programs in order to encourage individuals and developers to restore old homes.

Like cultural tourism, historic preservation, as it is currently practiced, can affect both positive and negative changes in the historic landscape. Oftentimes, when old buildings are restored, their economic value rises. When an entire neighborhood is revitalized, property values (and taxes) may rise to such an extent that the property owners cannot afford to continue to reside in the area. The declaration of a property or neighborhood as a historic district usually requires owners to maintain their properties in particular ways; again, owners of houses in historic districts cannot afford to do this sometimes. To summarize, historic preservation has the potential to result in the gentrification of an area, and the displacement of long-standing communities of people.

### **Imagining D.C.: An Exploration in Three Parts**

This thesis is broken down into three chapters. To set the scene, Chapter One examines the development of Washington, D.C. as a concept. This chapter begins with an examination of how the city’s original planners imagined D.C., and how this vision has persisted over the course of the city’s history. I pay particular attention to the development and role of the National Mall, as it was situated to be the ceremonial center of the national city. In keeping with my focus of the impact of tourism on the formation of a city “identity,” in order to understand the conceptualization of

Washington, I examine the representation of the city in urban tourism guides.

Throughout my analysis, I investigate the racialized nature of this imagining, that is, how the city was imagined in exclusively white terms.

Chapter Two deals with Georgetown, the oldest continuously settled section of the city. The heart of this chapter is a discussion of the 1930s-era transformation of Georgetown's reputation and demography. In their search for cheap, affordable housing, young New Deal government workers began to renovate Georgetown's older dwellings. The area came to be appreciated not only for its affordable housing, but also for its quaint and historic atmosphere. As the area grew more desirable, Georgetown was slowly transformed into an exclusively white neighborhood, with its history as a racially integrated area forgotten, and its African American residents compelled to move out.

The subject of Chapter Three, the U Street neighborhood, known as D.C.'s "Black Broadway," stands as both similar as well as a counterpoint to Georgetown. As I demonstrate, many of the same forces that worked to transform Georgetown have been at work in U Street's recent revitalization. However, while these pressures constructed Georgetown as a white area with a white history, they have had the opposite result on U Street. The area's African American past has been acknowledged, to the extent that U Street is now configured to represent D.C.'s African American past.

On a personal note, this thesis stems from my lived experience as a resident of the D.C. area (first in the city proper, and then in Silver Spring, Maryland) for the past three and a half years. As a newcomer to Washington, D.C., I learned quickly

that only tourists and politicians referred to the city as “Washington.” Instead, I grew accustomed to saying, “I live in the District,” or “I live in D.C., in Dupont Circle.” Clearly, there were two sides to my new home. While I learned to appreciate the perks of living in “official Washington” (particularly the free Smithsonian museums), my enjoyment of the city stemmed more from my experiences exploring the areas off the Mall. My research and analytic framework have been the result of long walks through D.C.’s “historic” areas.

## Chapter One:

### City of the Nation: Imagining Washington, 1800-1920



**Figure 1: The Lincoln Memorial: even at night, tourists flock to the iconic structures that have come to define Washington, D.C.**

In 1913, in the introduction to a guidebook to Washington, D.C., Vermont Supreme Court Justice Wendell Phillips Stafford proclaimed, “The capital of a nation... must be in a very true sense, a city that is set on a hill and which cannot be hid... whether we will it so or not, it will become a symbol—a symbol of the great Republic whose visible throne is here.”<sup>21</sup> Stafford continued to describe the role of the capital city as “a city which is the outward and visible sign of the inward and

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<sup>21</sup> Wendell Phillips Stafford, “Introduction,” in James Bryce, *The Nation’s Capital* (Washington, D.C.: B.S. Adams, 1913), 11.

spiritual life of a free and advancing people,” arguing that such a place “must be a work of art.”<sup>22</sup>

Though Stafford’s comments might seem typical of a politician, they epitomize the commonly held view of Washington during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In this chapter, I deconstruct this view, analyzing the factors that played a role in creating it. Within my discussion, I look at how city planners in the late 1800s and early 1900s imagined the city, and how these concepts became permanently embedded in Washington’s landscape. As well, I have drawn on tourist guidebooks and other travel literature dating to the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. A number of scholars have probed the connection between the representation of cities in guidebooks and the development of particular urban identities; as I discuss, this is the case with Washington, D.C. Through these guidebooks, Washington’s “identity” was solidified in the public imagination.

These forces—the development of Washington by city planners and politicians, and the representation of it by tourism promoters and travel writers—shaped the physical and metaphorical construction of Washington. Through these pressures, Washington took on the identity of the federal city, a place representative of the glory, the moral righteousness, and the beauty of the entire nation. In accordance with the racial norms of the time, this identity depended on the removal of African Americans from the cityscape.

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<sup>22</sup> Stafford, 13-15.

## City of the Capitol

In the introduction to a volume of essays comparing the capital cities of Berlin and Washington, D.C., historian Andreas Daum offers a few thoughts on the unique qualities of capital cities. Throughout history, says Daum, capital cities have been conceived of as representative of the country as a whole. Whether or not they are the most populous city of the country, the most beautiful, or located in the geographic center of the nation, capital cities are constructed to symbolize the country in a number of ways. To start, in most cases, they exist as the seat of the federal government. As well, Daum relates, their landscape works “to articulate a national identity.”<sup>23</sup> Daum goes on to explain that this articulation is carried out through “spatial signifiers” and “constructed spaces,” such as the layout of streets and the architecture of federal buildings.<sup>24</sup> These spaces exist to project the image, purpose, and history of the entire country to domestic visitors and foreigners. As well, capital cities have a “preservative function”: they stand as “nation-states’ repositories of memory.”<sup>25</sup> Capital cities are oftentimes home to a country’s national archives and national art and history museums. As well, capital cities preserve and maintain the nation’s collective memory through memorial statues and other structures.

Within this context, Washington, D.C. both adheres to and deviates from the traditional model of a capital city. As I will discuss, like other capital cities, Washington has been conceptualized as both a symbol of the United States and the

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<sup>23</sup> Andreas Daum, “Capitals in Modern History: Inventing Urban Spaces for the Nation,” in *Berlin-Washington, 1800-2000: Capital Cities, Cultural Representation, and National Identities*, ed. Andreas Daum and Christof Mauch (Washington, D.C.: German Historical Institute, 2005), 4.

<sup>24</sup> Daum, 17.

<sup>25</sup> Daum, 19.

country's "repository of memory." However, unlike other capitals, these roles have informed Washington's identity in dramatic and unique ways. In other words, historically, Washington's role as the capital of the United States has been the determining factor in the creation of the city's identity.

This is due in part to the fact that unlike many European capitals, which possessed identities as cities prior to taking on the role of national capital, D.C. was (for the most part) an entirely planned city. This is not to say that there were no residents of the area prior to the city's establishment in 1791; indeed, there were many plantations and farms in the area, not to mention the villages of Georgetown and Alexandria. However, the vast majority of the city's development came after its establishment as the capital. Thus, Washington has had a pre-determined identity since the beginning of its existence as a city. While Paris and London are the capital cities of France and England, respectively, these cities' identities encompass much more than simply their roles as capital cities. Washington is the Capital, rather than a city that happens to be the seat of the federal government.

Though I have been speaking of capital cities' metaphorical "construction," it is important to note that Washington literally was built from the ground up in order to best represent the nation. Washington's identity-building began with the plan for the city created by Pierre L'Enfant and approved by George Washington. This plan served to "articulate [America's] national identity" both explicitly and implicitly. L'Enfant envisioned a networking of crisscrossing streets named for different states of the Union, whose intersections would form public squares that would be

maintained by individual states.<sup>26</sup> The layout of the capital city would also represent the Constitution, with Pennsylvania Avenue linking the Capitol and the White House, symbols of two branches of the government.<sup>27</sup> L’Enfant’s plan also called for a “grand avenue” linking the Capitol and the President’s House, a space that would later become the Washington Mall.<sup>28</sup> In L’Enfant’s eyes, the layout of Washington would represent the diversity of the nation while highlighting the glory of its ideals. All in all, as Sarah Luria comments, “Not only would the city serve as home to the national government, it would provide a site where the abstract concept of the nation could be experienced as a physical reality—something a citizen could point to, visit, and admire.”<sup>29</sup>

While some aspects of L’Enfant’s plan—such as the Capitol building and the White House—were put into place relatively quickly, others floundered in the face of lack of funding, and it would eventually take most of the nineteenth century before the original vision of the capital city even came close to being realized. During the early to mid-1800s, Washington was most often described as a vast empty landscape, dotted with a few impressive buildings (such as the Capitol), thus giving the impression of the ruins of an ancient civilization.<sup>30</sup>

During this time, Washington’s reality clashed with that which both its founders and the public had come to imagine it to be. Flaws and shortcomings in the

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<sup>26</sup> Rubil Morales-Valesquez, “Imagining Washington: Monuments and Nation Building in the Early Capital,” *Washington History* 12 (Spring/Summer 2000): 19.

<sup>27</sup> Sarah Luria, *Capital Speculations: Writing and Building Washington, D.C.* (Hanover, New Hampshire: University Press of New England, 2006), xxiii.

<sup>28</sup> Reys, 21.

<sup>29</sup> Luria, xxiii.

<sup>30</sup> Walter Erhart, “Written Capitals and Capital Topography: Berlin and Washington in Travel Literature,” in *Berlin-Washington, 1800-2000*, 59.

city were highlighted by the expectations of grandeur held by visitors and encouraged by L'Enfant's plan. In a notable and oft-quoted example of this, Charles Dickens proclaimed Washington "the City of Magnificent Intentions," noting the city's "spacious avenues, that begin in nothing and end in nowhere; streets, miles long, that only want houses, roads, and inhabitants."<sup>31</sup> Dickens' commentary indicates the strength of Washington's imagined identity: as historian Catherine Cocks explains, "Despite its admittedly grand public buildings, Washington came in for a considerable amount of criticism precisely because its local conditions did not live up to the promise of republican splendor."<sup>32</sup>

### **Creation of the Modern Washington**

The McMillan Commission of 1901 reinvigorated L'Enfant's plan and created the modern Washington, both in a literal and figurative sense. Spurred by the contemporary "city beautiful" movement, which emphasized social uplift through the beautification of the built and natural environment, the Commission sought to restore Washington's reputation as the capital city by beautifying it. To carry out this goal, the Commission erected numerous Beaux-Arts government buildings, Union Station, and perhaps most importantly, the National Mall.

The creation of the Mall represents the McMillan commission's emphasis on memory. While L'Enfant's plan for the city was designed to visually represent the country and its people, it was not until the McMillan Commission that the landscape of Washington was used to stimulate memory. One facet of this transformation of

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<sup>31</sup> Charles Dickens quoted in Erhart, 57.

<sup>32</sup> Catherine Cocks, *Doing the Town: The Rise of Urban Tourism in the United States, 1850-1915* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 38.

Washington into a memory landscape was the construction of dozens of memorial statues scattered throughout downtown Washington. Many of these statues depicted Revolutionary War heroes, such as Major General Comte Jean de Rochambeau, or “founding fathers” such as Daniel Webster.<sup>33</sup> The presence of these statues led a German tourist to remark in 1924 that Washington was a “marble town—monuments on every corner.”<sup>34</sup> While it may not have been the original goal of L’Enfant, the work of the McMillan Commission resulted in the sense of Washington as a spur to remembrance: “In the case of Washington, D.C., we witness an entire federal city that was designed as a classical monument.”<sup>35</sup> All in all, the cumulative result of the changes wrought during the time of the McMillan Commission was the transformation, or perhaps more accurately, the redefinition, of Washington as a “memorial oasis.”<sup>36</sup>

Central to the McMillan Commission’s plan, and to this sense of Washington as a “memorial oasis,” was the development of the National Mall. If the entire city of Washington functions as a site of memory, then the Mall serves as its center. Geographically defined by symbols of the spirit of the country (officially, it stretches from the Capitol Building to the Washington Monument, but is understood to include the area from the Capitol to the Lincoln Memorial), the Mall “asserts the identity of the city as capital.”<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Cultural Tourism D.C., “Outdoor Sculpture,” <<http://www.culturaltourismDCorg/index.htm>>

<sup>34</sup> Alexander Roda Roda quoted in Erhart, 74.

<sup>35</sup> Janet Ward, “Monuments of Catastrophe: Holocaust Architecture in Washington and Berlin,” *Berlin-Washington, 1800-2000*, 156.

<sup>36</sup> Ward, 157.

<sup>37</sup> Christof Mauch, “Capital Gardens: The Mall and the Tiergarten in Comparative Perspective,” in *Berlin-Washington, 1800-2000*, 201.

While the natural elements of the Mall—the vast stretch of lawn and the botanical gardens—were an important part of the McMillan Commission’s vision for the space, the Mall is best known for the monuments and memorials that are located on it and the Smithsonian Institution museums that line its edges. These structures are evidence of the Mall’s imagining as the “pantheon of national memory.” Furthermore, the existence of these institutions creates a “reference work in American history” that presents a lesson in “American triumph and success.”<sup>38</sup> In other words, the Mall was conceived to portray those people, events, and values deemed critical to the American identity, and those who have played a role in making the United States a great nation.

This representation necessarily engages the issue of citizenship, that is, who is an American, and who is to be remembered. To be on the Mall is to be front and center in American consciousness: on the Mall, physical space denotes metaphorical space. Thus, for most of the twentieth century, the history lesson presented on the Mall has narrated the experiences and achievements of white, male Americans. Historically, the achievements of other segments of the population, such as women and African Americans, have been totally absent from the commemorative structures located on the Mall.<sup>39</sup> While the Mall (along with all of Washington) was intended to

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<sup>38</sup> Mauch, 213.

<sup>39</sup> Though the Lincoln Memorial arguably might be considered a homage to the president who ended slavery, Scott Sandage persuasively argues against this characterization of the monument. In his article, “Civil Rights and the Lincoln Memorial,” Sandage contends that the creation of the Lincoln Memorial had little to do with Lincoln’s role in ending slavery, and mostly to do with his role in the “economic and political reunion of North and South”: “The Lincoln Memorial was conceived of as a symbol of national consensus, linking North and South on holy, national ground.” Scott Sandage, “A Marble House Divided: The Lincoln Memorial, the Civil Rights Movement, and the Politics of Memory,” *Journal of American History*, 80:1 (June 1993): 139-141.

be the visual expression of American democratic ideals, this intention did not play out in practice.

Ironically, representatives of these populations have used the space of the Mall to counter this historic lack of representation. To be more specific, this idea of the Mall as representative of American memory has also served as the rationale for using it as the site of national protests and marches. Different groups have used the space of the Mall in order to contrast the reality of the United States with the message of American “triumph and success” represented on it.<sup>40</sup> Arguably the use of the Mall as a particular site of protest (as opposed to the space in front of the Capital, Pennsylvania Avenue, or other places in downtown Washington) began in 1939 with Marian Anderson’s NAACP-sponsored concert on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial. As historian Lucy Barber discusses, Anderson’s concert set the stage for A. Philip Randolph’s 1941 Negro March on Washington; though it was cancelled, Randolph planned to employ the symbolism of the Lincoln Memorial, and the Mall as a whole, in order to convey the injustice of segregation in the armed forces and defense sector. Arguably the most famous use of the Mall to protest inequality was the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, during which Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. gave his famous “I Have A Dream” speech.

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<sup>40</sup> See Lucy G. Barber, *Marching on Washington: The Forging of an American Tradition* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002) and Barber, “Marches on Washington and the Creation of National Public Spaces, 1984 to the Present,” in *Berlin-Washington, 1800-2000*, 285-303.

## **Tourism and the Development of Washington's Constructed Identity**

As I have discussed, city planners and politicians imprinted the understanding of Washington as the federal city on its physical landscape. In this section of Chapter One, I examine another source of imagining, that of tourist guidebooks, and their effect on the perception of Washington. While Washington had attracted visitors (particularly foreigners) since its inception, Washington as a tourist attraction is a facet of the mid-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. As I will discuss, the presence of tourists, and the advent of literature created to guide them, has had an impact on the city's imagining. Tourist guidebooks and other literature shaped the experiences of visitors to Washington by highlighting particular sites and experiences; as well, they informed armchair travelers' understanding of Washington. As one guidebook author described his purpose in writing,

To all such—those who have seen the city, and those who have not—this work is offered as a means of pleasure and instruction. The former can enjoy once more the delights of a visit to the 'Seat of Government,' and live over again in memory the pleasures they once experienced; and the latter, by the comforts of their own firesides, it is hoped and believed, obtain a more intimate knowledge of the Federal City from the pages of this work, than they could by a mere visit to Washington.<sup>41</sup>

These guidebooks serve as an invaluable source in determining Washington's identity during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. As Walter Erhart relates, "In reading travel literature—or in traveling ourselves—we encounter not one city or the 'real' city but rather a constellation of experiences, appearances, fantasies, and pre-written texts that create the cities we know."<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> James D. McCabe, *Behind the Scenes in Washington* (New York: Continental Publication Co., 1873), 9.

<sup>42</sup> Erhart, 52.

From the mid nineteenth to the early twentieth centuries, Americans began to visit a variety of cities, including Washington, D.C. Changes in technology and shifts in social attitudes and cultural norms meant that by the turn of the century, many Americans were choosing to spend their leisure time visiting cities in addition to mountains, forests, and beaches. This new type of travel experience necessitated guidebooks in order to assist visitors in making their journeys.

What drew visitors to Washington? As they had from the beginning of the city's establishment in 1800, many came to observe "the new democracy in action."<sup>43</sup> However, scholar Diane K. Skvarla concludes, "In reality, most Americans were simply not interested in seeing their new lawmakers."<sup>44</sup> Then again, visitors may have succumbed to tourism promoters' claims that the journey to Washington was a pilgrimage required of patriotic Americans. Declared one writer in 1902, "Every true American should have pride in the beautiful city of Washington. All that counts for the glory of the only true republic on earth is centered in this historic capital."<sup>45</sup>

More frequently, visitors to Washington came to behold the city's striking architectural achievements. Indeed, according to guidebooks and travel literature of the nineteenth century, there was little else to Washington other than awe-inspiring federal buildings. In other words, during the nineteenth century, guidebooks to Washington, D.C helped to shape the identity of the city as filled only with government buildings and bureaucrats. In his 1869 guide, *The sights and secrets of the national capital*, John B. Ellis wrote, "As a general rule, there is little to see after

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<sup>43</sup> Diane K. Skvarla, "Nineteenth Century Visitors," *Washington History* 1:1 (Spring 1989): 7.

<sup>44</sup> Skvarla, 8.

<sup>45</sup> Thomas Fleming, *Around the Capital with Uncle Hank* (New York: Nutshell Publishing Co, 1902), 1.

one has explored the public buildings and grounds. The city does not offer many attractions to a stranger, and few care to remain after seeing the National property.”<sup>46</sup>

Ellis’s description of the capital epitomizes the view of Washington provided to visitors during this time period. His account reflects less Washington’s post-Civil War population boom, and more the vision of Washington as a place of marble hallways and little else. As Cocks relates, “Long before any other American city, Washington offered itself as primarily an aesthetic and historical object for visitors.”<sup>47</sup> Guidebooks during the late nineteenth century served tourists by giving descriptions of the architecture of the Capitol, instead of offering sketches of “local color,” as did many urban guides of the time.<sup>48</sup> As Skvarla argues, particularly during the early to mid nineteenth centuries, guidebook authors focused nearly exclusively on the Capitol building, with some description reserved for the White House.<sup>49</sup> Wrote the author of *Behind the Scenes of the Capitol*, “Here is the great Capitol, the most majestic and beautiful edifice on the Continent, which affords so much pleasure to the lover of the beautiful ... Here are gathered the stately and imposing edifices of the Patent-Office, and the Departments of State, the Treasury, and the Post-Office, each in itself a worthy object of pride to the whole country.”<sup>50</sup>

In the twentieth century, tourist guidebooks actively shaped visitors’ (and armchair travelers’) sense of Washington. During the earliest years of urban tourism, tourism professionals and guidebook writers relied upon, and in fact created, a sense

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<sup>46</sup> John B. Ellis, *The sights and secrets of the national capital: a work descriptive of Washington City in all its various phases* (Chicago, IL: Jones, Junkin & Co., 1869), 55.

<sup>47</sup> Cocks, 39.

<sup>48</sup> Cocks, 37.

<sup>49</sup> Skvarla, 10.

<sup>50</sup> McCabe, 9.

of cities as having distinct “personalities.” As Cocks argues, this strategy helped to solidify Americans’ sense of the city as the site of leisure and pleasure, and to alleviate their concerns about urban safety by “portraying urban landscapes as tidy artistic compositions.” All in all, “The idea of an urban personality packaged a city as a salable commodity for a national clientele.”<sup>51</sup>

This “packaging” of Washington reinforced the identity that had proliferated from the time of the city’s conception. Charles Pepper’s 1900 *Every-day life in Washington* emphasizes the places and people of the federal government; he remarks on such “every-day” occurrences such as the inauguration of new presidents and other circumstances of “pomp and pageantry.” Much like Ellis’s guide, Pepper offers the reader descriptions of federal buildings such as the Treasury Department, the White House, and the Capitol building.

Still, unlike the view of Washington offered by Ellis, Pepper’s account also makes note of Washington’s “picturesque and historic suburbs” and “notable and palatial residences.”<sup>52</sup> In other words, Pepper’s view of Washington takes tourists beyond the federal core of Washington. As Pepper’s account makes clear, though, for the most part, when early twentieth century tourist guidebooks did venture off the Mall, the focus remained on Washington’s stately and beautiful character.

This view of Washington included distinct ideas about the local residents of the city. Within Ellis’ mention of “strangers,” and in Pepper’s descriptions of the customs of the federal city, one can see the seeds of the idea of Washington as a place with “insiders” and “outsiders.” Washington insiders, it was understood (and still is),

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<sup>51</sup> Cocks, 145.

<sup>52</sup> Charles M. Pepper, *Every-day life in Washington* (New York: the Christian Herald, 1900), xi.

were privy to the inner workings of life in the capital. Much as Washington came to be known exclusively as the federal city, all Washington residents were seen as bureaucrats. As Ellis wrote in 1869, “Every man, woman, and child in Washington, is a politician. The people inhale politics with the air they breathe, and talk and think of but little else.”<sup>53</sup>

In the vision of Washington promoted by travel writers, these local residents were also white. While the city would not achieve a majority African American population until the mid-twentieth century, African Americans still made up a significant percentage of the population. However, this population was not represented in the imagining of Washington as carried out by tourism promoters and guidebook writers. As discussed earlier, city planners and politicians configured Washington as a space to showcase and celebrate the best of American culture—which, during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, meant the world of white Americans. Thus, historically, there have been no invocations of African Americans or African American history on the Mall. Similarly, tourism promoters and travel writers configured Washington as a wholly white city. Even if these writers did give readers a taste of Washington beyond the federal core of the city, only rarely did they mention the city’s African American residents.

One exception to this is when African Americans were portrayed as a spectacle. As Catherine Cocks explains, many urban guidebooks during the early twentieth century offered readers inside looks into areas of the city populated by ethnic and racial minorities, such as San Francisco’s Chinatown and the Jewish and Italian quarters of New York and Chicago. In Washington, this phenomenon

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<sup>53</sup> Ellis, 183.

occurred along racial lines; Washington's "quaint ethnics" were the members of its African American populations. Often, travel writers directed visitors to public markets, such as D.C.'s Central Market, so that they might observe African American life; at the market, one author wrote, "'quaint old darkies offer for sale old fashioned flowers and 'yarbs,' live chickens, and fresh-laid eggs ... smoking cob pipes and crooning wordless melodies just as they used to in 'befo' de wa' days.'"<sup>54</sup>

Travelers who visited the areas inhabited or frequented by "quaint ethnics" under the direction of travel writers took part in a phenomenon known as "ethnic slumming," a facet of the urban tourism experience increasingly popular at the end of the nineteenth century. In addition to offering written accounts of areas of the city such as Chinatown, tour operators created actual tours of these neighborhoods, ushering visitors through at night or taking them to visit ethnic restaurants. However, ethnic slumming (at least in the form of tours) predominated in New York and San Francisco, and occurred less frequently in Washington, D.C. Not surprisingly, tour operators in Washington, D.C. escorted travelers to the Capitol building and to the White House; "colorful" slums did not fit into the imagining of Washington.

Travel writers also mentioned African Americans in the context of Washington's exceptionalism. African Americans were utilized to illustrate Washington's status as *la crème de la crème*, as a city worthy of its status as capital. Wrote one author, "The District of Columbia has a large proportion of colored inhabitants. There are many thousands of these either employed in the Government service or in trade and industry, and they comprise an unusually large number of owners [of property]. A great majority of them are thrifty and industrious and no city

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<sup>54</sup> Cocks, 200.

of the country makes a better showing for its colored population.”<sup>55</sup> Echoed another, “The Washington negro is in a class by himself—light-hearted and good-natured, shooting craps when there are no customers in sight, or shrilly whistling some ragtime ditty.”<sup>56</sup> This last quote illustrates historian Howard Gillette, Jr.’s comment that in early travel literature, “African Americans tended to be ignored—their presence, if acknowledged at all—referred to genteelly and in a patronizing manner.”<sup>57</sup>

By and large, though, travel writers imagined Washington without mentioning the presence of African Americans. Despite the many contributions of Washington’s African American population to the development of the city, they were not included in the official view of it. In Washington, African Americans could construct the Capitol building, but they were not present in those guides that interpreted it to Washington visitors.

### **Concluding Remarks**

As I have discussed, by the early twentieth century, the concept of Washington as the federal city was firmly embedded in the landscape of the city as well as in the popular imagination. City planners had created a city that represented the spirit and memory of the country through landscape and architecture; this view of D.C. was perpetuated through the work of travel writers and guidebook publishers.

As the capital city, during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Washington

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<sup>55</sup> Pepper, 41.

<sup>56</sup> Fleming, 169.

<sup>57</sup> Howard Gillette, Jr., “Washington, D.C. in White and Black: The Social Construction of Race and Nationhood,” in *Composing Urban History and the Constitution of Civic Identities*, ed. John J. Czaplicka and Blair A. Ruble (Washington, D.C.: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2003), 197.

needed to possess certain characteristics: monuments, memorials, architectural splendor, and lawmakers. In contrast, the local aspects of D.C., particularly its African American population, were ignored. In Chapter Two, I explore how this idea of Washington, D.C. informed the reinvention of Georgetown during the mid-twentieth century, and how, as in the city at large, Georgetown became known as a place reserved exclusively for whites

## Chapter Two:

“A Great Deal of Fashion Has Come to Georgetown”.<sup>58</sup>

### Making Washington’s Oldest Neighborhood Historic

Wandering through the streets of Georgetown on a recent, rainy fall day, away from the crowds and the bustle of M Street, admiring the architectural beauty all around me, I caught myself marveling at the fact that I was walking on the same cobblestone streets as eighteenth century colonial tobacco traders, nineteenth century aristocrats, and twentieth century Senators and Presidents. Even with an eye untrained to recognize architectural styles, I could discern the ages of the houses surrounding me: their craggy brick sides flecked with moss, they seemed to sink into the sidewalks. I longed to explore tiny, picture-perfect row houses, nestled next to one another and stretching barely ten feet wide. Catching glimpses of hidden gardens, I could practically see ladies in pillbox hats and Jackie O suits sipping lemonade and gossiping over finger sandwiches. A few minutes later, I realized that I (the detached, objective scholar) had succumbed to the spell of “Historic Georgetown.”

As my experience demonstrates, for Washington’s residents and visitors alike, the name “Georgetown” denotes the home and playground of Washington’s richest and most famous and politically powerful citizens. It is understood that the people who live in Georgetown are well dressed, well schooled, well heeled, well connected—and white. This vision of Georgetown is so pervasive that is hard to

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<sup>58</sup> Grace Dunlop Ecker, *A Portrait of Old Georgetown* (Richmond, Virginia: Garrett & Massie, Incorporated, 1933), xii.

imagine that it has not always been the case. In today's popular imagination, Georgetown's racial and socioeconomic homogeneity is taken for granted. Similarly, the sense of Georgetown as a historic area also is accepted as a given. In fact, this understanding of Georgetown is a relatively recent phenomenon, solidified during the first half of the twentieth century. This chapter explores the transformation of Georgetown over the course of the twentieth century. I use the general term "transformation" to denote a number of smaller, interconnected shifts in Georgetown's racial and socioeconomic demographics, its local, national, and international reputation, and its relationship to Washington, D.C.

Most historians have pointed to this transformation as a product of the New Deal era, which saw an influx of residents into Georgetown. However, as Dennis Gale asserts in his 1982 PhD dissertation on historic preservation in Georgetown, "However dramatic Georgetown's decline and restoration may appear in retrospect, it must be remembered that it was a process characterized by gradualism... the energies of two or three generations of residents brought not a simple before-and-after tale of renewal but rather an enduring, erratic, sometimes imperceptible process of change."<sup>59</sup> Over time, white, upper-class Georgetown residents put into place their vision of Georgetown as the most historic and the most elite area of the city.

As I will discuss, "Historic Georgetown"—as both a real and an imagined, constructed place—left no room for African Americans. The transformation of Georgetown hinged on the notion of the area as genteel, as the home of

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<sup>59</sup> Dennis E. Gale, *Restoration in Georgetown, Washington, D.C., 1915-1965* (Ph.D. diss., George Washington University, 1982), 22. Gale's dissertation offers an invaluable and virtually the only scholarly, in-depth discussion of social, cultural, and economic factors that led to the preservation of Georgetown.

“distinguished men and women.”<sup>60</sup> “Historic Georgetown” was a space defined by beauty and charm, a place where homes of architectural beauty, restored and well-maintained, lined cobblestone streets. The racial standards of the time dictated that in order to exist within this vision, residents could only be white. Thus, while African American residents of Georgetown were not subject to a systematic, government-sponsored relocation project, the creation of historic Georgetown hinged on their elimination from the area and the history books. Part of the vision of “Historic Georgetown” included the “cleaning up” of areas of the neighborhood perceived as dirty and unsightly, such as Georgetown’s alley dwellings; most often, these areas were the sites of African American homes and businesses. African Americans existed only on the fringes of Georgetown’s historical narrative as it was constructed during the 1920s and 1930s, and they had no place in the Georgetown of the twentieth century.

### **Georgetown’s Early History**

Platted as a town in the state of Maryland in 1751, Georgetown existed as a distinct entity even after the establishment of the District of Columbia in 1791. During the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, Georgetown was a thriving community centered on the tobacco trade, and the village served as virtually the sole source of provisions for the burgeoning capital. By the 1820s, the growth of the District slowed the growth of Georgetown; the community also floundered in the face of a dying tobacco trade. However, by the mid-nineteenth century, the town had found new sustenance through the establishment of the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal,

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<sup>60</sup> John Clagett Proctor, “Old Georgetown and Early Settlers,” *Washington Sunday Star*, 7 December 1930, 12.

which terminated in Georgetown, thus making it a key part of a regional shipping trade. Also during this time, following the Civil War, Georgetown lost its sovereignty and was brought under the jurisdiction of the territorial government of the District of Columbia.

While the Georgetown of today is made up almost entirely of white, wealthy residents, historically, this has not always been the case. Since its establishment through the mid-twentieth century, Georgetown was home to a significant population of African American residents. The District of Columbia was carved out of the two states with the largest nineteenth-century concentration of African Americans in the United States (Maryland and Virginia), and Georgetown was the most densely populated area in the immediate area surrounding Washington; thus, it makes sense that the area would have a high proportion of African American residents.<sup>61</sup> Records indicate that by 1810, African Americans made up over a third of Georgetown's population.<sup>62</sup> Prior to the Civil War, many of these African Americans were slaves, but as was the case throughout Washington City (as it was known at the time), many had bought or been given their freedom.<sup>63</sup> Though the character and reputation of Georgetown would shift a number of times, these demographics remained more or

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<sup>61</sup> Letitia Woods Brown, *Free Negroes in the District of Columbia, 1790-1846* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), 17.

<sup>62</sup> Kathryn Schneider Smith, "Georgetown," in *Washington at Home: An Illustrated History of Neighborhoods in the Nation's Capital*, ed. Kathryn Schneider Smith (Northridge, CA: Windsor Publications, 1988), 22.

<sup>63</sup> The number of free African Americans in the District increased steadily over the course of the nineteenth century, from approximately 30% in 1810, to 50% in 1830; by 1860, nearly 80% of Washington's African Americans were free. Woods, 11. In her examination of free African Americans in the District, Woods discusses how slavery in Washington was more "open-ended" than elsewhere in the United States, with owners "willing to accept a variety of work relationships," and sometimes "converting life slavery to service for a time." Woods, 14.

less constant through the 1930s: “From 1776 to the New Deal, one-third of the population of Georgetown was African American.”<sup>64</sup>

In terms of Georgetown’s nineteenth and early twentieth century housing patterns, a number of historians have pointed to Georgetown as an “integrated” neighborhood, because not only was the area home to both African American and white residents, but it possessed what one local historian has deemed a “checkerboard quality.” Census records indicate that African Americans often lived side by side with white residents, or in small clusters sprinkled throughout the area; there were also a few larger African American enclaves such as Herring Hill in East Georgetown. However, while these two populations may have been physically proximate, and thus technically integrated, by no means did they live on equal terms or in equivalent conditions. In this way, historian Kathryn Schneider Smith comments, Georgetown’s race relations resembled those of a small Southern town.<sup>65</sup> Smith argues that this residential pattern, and these race relations, remained consistent after the Civil War and well into the twentieth century. As she states, “Black and white were physical neighbors, but their relationships were proscribed by social conventions.”<sup>66</sup>

These residential patterns continued into the twentieth century, even in the face of increased segregation throughout the rest of Washington, D.C. In *Black Georgetown Remembered*, scholar Kathryn M. Lesko notes, “By all accounts, racial relations in turn-of-the-century Georgetown reflected a unique co-existence that

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<sup>64</sup> Tanya Edwards Beauchamp, *Georgetown Historic District*, [brochure] (Washington, D.C.: District of Columbia Historic Preservation Office, 1998), 5-6.

<sup>65</sup> Smith, “Georgetown,” 23.

<sup>66</sup> Smith, “Georgetown,” 27.

would characterize Georgetown for the next forty years.”<sup>67</sup> However, Lesko admits that segregation was the organizing principle behind any outward racial harmony: “Although race relations in Georgetown remained cordial throughout the first half of the twentieth century, segregation was still integral to the conduct of everyday life in the black community.”<sup>68</sup> Drawing on anecdotal evidence, Smith echoes this statement with her comment, “It is clear that the friendly public acceptance of black neighbors was couched in a system of black deference to whites.”<sup>69</sup> As Dennis Gale reiterates, “Blacks who grew up in Georgetown seem to remember the community as a friendly place where blacks and whites enjoyed generally pleasant relations, and because of employment and residential patterns, came into frequent contact. Yet, they also remember a setting where blacks were decidedly in an inferior status.”<sup>70</sup>

Nevertheless, while Georgetown’s “integration” may not have been full-fledged, community historians argue that Georgetown’s residential pattern—and the stability of its African American community—is still distinctive. African Americans living in Georgetown built schools and churches, ran small businesses and medical practices, and participated in fraternal societies and sports leagues. Though many African American Georgetowners worked in service to their white neighbors, or were

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<sup>67</sup> Kathleen M. Lesko, general editor and contributing author, and Valerie Babb and Carroll R. Gibbs, contributing authors, *Black Georgetown Remembered: A History of its Black Community From the Founding of ‘The Town of George’ in 1751 to the Present Day* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 1991), 43. Lesko’s volume is less a traditional academic scholarly history and more a celebration of the life of a community; nevertheless, it is an invaluable collection of information pertaining to the African American heritage of Georgetown.

<sup>68</sup> Lesko, 43.

<sup>69</sup> Kathryn Schneider Smith, *From Port Town to Urban Neighborhood: The Georgetown Waterfront of Washington, D.C., 1880-1920* (Dubuque, Iowa: Kendall/Hunt Publishing Company, 1989), 108.

<sup>70</sup> Gale, *Restoration in Georgetown*, 98.

laborers, throughout the nineteenth century there existed a notable population of African American businessmen and professionals.

### **The Creation of “Historic Georgetown”**

While Georgetown had flourished as the terminus of the C and O Canal, this phase of the neighborhood’s history ended in 1889, when a flood devastated the already-outmoded canal. By the turn of the century, Georgetown’s local and regional prominence was waning. Especially along the banks of the Potomac, Georgetown had a gritty, industrial feel to it; its landscape included “the industrial smokestacks of a rendering plant, the Capital Traction Company’s coal-fired power plants, several large ice warehouses, and sprawling stone and gravel companies.”<sup>71</sup> In fact, the presence of so many manufacturing plants led to the zoning classification of Georgetown as “industrial” in 1920.<sup>72</sup> Many of Georgetown’s wealthier citizens moved to more suburban neighborhoods, and the area became much less economically diverse; as Lesko relates, “Georgetown became a neighborhood increasingly populated by working class citizens of both races.”<sup>73</sup> As a longtime Georgetown resident remembered, “I never boasted about where I grew up until I was well into middle age...in the 1920s and ‘30s, Georgetown was on the wrong side of the tracks.”<sup>74</sup>

In contrast to newer dwellings in other parts of the District, Georgetown’s nineteenth-century houses appeared to potential residents to be “backward”—many

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<sup>71</sup> Lesko, 41.

<sup>72</sup> Lesko, 44.

<sup>73</sup> Lesko, 42.

<sup>74</sup> Jessie Nimnom Burruss, “When Georgetown Was On the Wrong Side of the Tracks,” *Washington Post*, 23 July 1987, J1.

lacked electricity or indoor plumbing—and “dowdy.” And, as Smith points out, to Washington residents used to highly segregated living conditions, the “mixed [racial] nature of the population...must have added a sense that the place was out of date.”<sup>75</sup> Lesko also notes that after 1910, many single-family houses “stood vacant or were turned into boarding houses.”<sup>76</sup>

However, though Georgetown’s socioeconomic standing may have shifted towards the working class, a number of wealthier residents remained. Reminiscing in 1987 about growing up in Georgetown, Pauline Gaskins Mitchell, a longtime African American resident of Georgetown, commented, “Georgetown in the ‘20s was primarily a working-class community, but had scatterings of wealthy people principally along N, Q, and R Streets. Their estates or expensive homes were never more than a block or two from the less pretentious homes of the middle class or the substandard houses of the poor.”<sup>77</sup>

These wealthier residents and mansion-owners would play a key role in the reimagining of Georgetown through historic preservation. In describing the transformation of Georgetown as a gradual process, Gale emphasizes changes that occurred in the 1910s and very early 1920s, specifically, the restoration, or “remodeling” as it was termed at the time, of colonial-era houses in Georgetown. This remodeling helped to draw attention to Georgetown’s historic and architectural resources and pave the way for the later, larger-scale preservation. This was particularly the case because a number of these “remodelers” were members of the

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<sup>75</sup> Smith, *Washington at Home*, 27.

<sup>76</sup> Lesko, 42.

<sup>77</sup> Pauline Gaskins Mitchell, “Growing Up Black In ‘The Village’ West of Rock Creek,” *Washington Post*, 23 July 1987, J1.

social and political elite. Robert Todd Lincoln, son of Abraham Lincoln, and Newton D. Baker, Secretary of War under Woodrow Wilson, carried out some of these early restorations. Perhaps most notable was the 1920 renovation of the Dumbarton Oaks estate by Robert Bliss, who later became the United States ambassador to Argentina.

The participation of Georgetown's wealthier residents in civic associations also helped to pave the way for the transformation of Georgetown. Established in 1878, the Georgetown Citizens Association [GCA] remains Washington's oldest neighborhood association.<sup>78</sup> A brief look through the early-twentieth-century era minutes and papers of the GCA reveals that the members of the association concerned themselves mostly with issues of public life such as traffic problems, road conditions, the installation of public utilities, and the upkeep of schools and public libraries. While these minutes reveal a strong community spirit and investment in Georgetown's livability, they do not mention the preservation of the built environment as a goal or value of the association.<sup>79</sup>

The exception to this is a 1924 pamphlet titled "The Future of Georgetown." This document was produced by a handful of GCA members, including such prominent community members as Mr. and Mrs. Dean Acheson, who called themselves the "Homeowners' Association." As this pamphlet makes clear, Georgetowners in the early 1920s felt that developers were threatening the quality of

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<sup>78</sup> Citizens Association of Georgetown, "About CAG," <<http://www.cagtown.org/aboutcag.html>> The organization is now known as the Citizens Association of Georgetown; however, I use the term "Georgetown Citizens Association" throughout this thesis, as this was how the group was known during the specific time period of my study.

<sup>79</sup> Georgetown Citizens Association Papers, boxes labeled "GCA Minutes 1920-1929," "GCA Minutes 1930-1939," "GCA Minutes 1940-1949," "GCA Minutes 1951-." Peabody Room, Georgetown Branch of the District of Columbia Public Library.

their neighborhood. The years during and immediately after World War I saw a rise in D.C.'s population and, consequently, a need for more urban housing.

Georgetowners involved in the Homeowners' Association feared (correctly) that developers wished to raze older buildings in order to construct high-rise apartment buildings, and they wrote the pamphlet as part of their successful campaign to convince Congress to impose height restrictions on Georgetown buildings, a measure that was adopted by Congress in June 1924. As Gale writes, this lobbying effort on the part of the GCA constituted an attempt to "employ the relatively untested mechanism of zoning" as a means of preserving Georgetown's character.<sup>80</sup> While "The Future of Georgetown" does not explicitly name the area's architectural resources as part of Georgetown's character, the publication marks a turning point in the imagining of Georgetown. In other words, the actions taken by the Homeowners Association indicate an investment in protecting Georgetown's built environment.

Though the transformation of Georgetown arguably began in the 1910s with the remodeling of individual properties, the pace of this redefinition quickened during the 1920s. More and more property owners began to restore eighteenth and nineteenth century houses. Through an examination of the building permits issued for renovation in select areas of Georgetown, Gale concludes, "Repair and renovation activity seems to have crept upward very gradually throughout the 1920s."<sup>81</sup>

These individual restorations led to a noticeable shift in Georgetown's local reputation. An examination of local press coverage reveals that the 1920s and early 1930s saw unprecedented attention paid to "historic Georgetown." During this time,

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<sup>80</sup> Gale, *Restoration in Georgetown*, 108.

<sup>81</sup> Gale, *Restoration in Georgetown*, 81.

journalists writing for local papers praised Georgetown's unique history and character. Perhaps most notably, the Washington *Sunday Star* ran a series of columns on Georgetown's history written by local amateur historian John Clagett Proctor. These columns combined commentary on Georgetown's history (particularly as it connected to the history of Washington, D.C.) with descriptions of "famous places" that could still be visited by readers.<sup>82</sup>

Along these same lines, the *New York Times* and the *Washington Sunday Star* both ran a story about Georgetown on Christmas Day, 1927, in which Richard Oulahan noted, "[Georgetown's] streets retain their old-time quaint narrowness, its houses their ancient architecture ... Georgetown has preserved its individuality and character while standardization surrounds it. Outsiders are recognizing that and paying tribute."<sup>83</sup> Continued Oulahan:

Everywhere are reminders of the glory of the old town and those inhabitants of it who helped make the nation's history... the ancient Maryland Colonial community, famous as a part before and for some time after the Revolution, is beginning to be appreciated at last... Newcomers are just as rigidly insistent as its old families, descendents of those who made it and keep it true to original ideas, that it shall retain that Georgetown atmosphere which political absorption by the national capital has not served to influence.<sup>84</sup>

Oulahan's article is typical of the journalistic treatment of Georgetown during this time period. Many of these articles were quick to note Georgetown's unique architecture as well as its independence from Washington, D.C. Wrote Oulahan, "In

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<sup>82</sup> John Clagett Proctor, "Old Georgetown in History of District," *Washington Sunday Star*, 27 March 1932, 16.

<sup>83</sup> Richard V. Oulahan, "Georgetown Holds Old-Time Prestige," *New York Times*, 25 December 1927, E1.

<sup>84</sup> Oulahan, E1.

its own heart and mind Georgetown is Georgetown and scorns the capital's patronage."<sup>85</sup>

Not surprisingly, Proctor's articles and Oulahan's piece described contemporary Georgetown, and the area's history, in exclusively white terms. Proctor's pieces emphasize the achievements of prominent former (white) residents of Georgetown, such as Benjamin Stoddert, first Secretary of the Navy, and William Wirt, former Attorney General, as well as many of the original (white) settlers of the area, many of whom came from Scotland. No mention is made of the neighborhood's contemporary or historic African American residents.

The sole exception to this is an anecdote about Yarrow Mamout, a former slave and Georgetown resident immortalized in a portrait painted by Charles Wilson Peale in 1819. Descriptions of Mamout (identified by Procter as "an old Negro known as Yaro") are reminiscent of characterizations of African Americans made by other travel writers during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In other words, Procter focused on Mamout as a "quaint ethnic." To introduce a passage ostensibly "quoting" Mamout on his passage to freedom, Procter wrote, "Fond of conversation, he often, in broken language, relates the story of his life, which we insert here as a specimen of curious dialect."<sup>86</sup> Along these same lines, Oulahan recognized the non-white segment of Georgetown's population in a paternalistic way characteristic of the times. In his description of contemporary Georgetown at

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<sup>85</sup> Oulahan, E1.

<sup>86</sup> Procter, "Old Georgetown and Early Settlers," 12.

Christmastime, Oulahan wrote, “Farm negroes, men and women, mingle with the congested throng, a laughing contingent full of the spirit of Christmas.”<sup>87</sup>

### **“A Fashionable Place to Live”**

The image of Georgetown continued to shift with the New Deal era. The 1930s saw the influx of large numbers of educated, intellectual young people to Washington, all looking for affordable places to live. Georgetown’s location, adjacent to the downtown business and political corridor, was a primary draw. As Constance McLaughlin Green notes, “The convenience of the location and the abiding charm of the shabby little village had begun to have its effects in the late 1920s. Impecunious young New Dealers moved into the cramped little houses when restored.”<sup>88</sup> In addition to increasing the demand for Georgetown housing, in choosing to live in Georgetown, these New Dealers further increased the area’s visibility. As Gale relates, these young, ambitious, and oftentimes well-known government officials brought a certain intellectual vigor and youthful cachet to the neighborhood.<sup>89</sup> An early 1930s *Washington Post* article noted, “Georgetown has completed a strange cycle of history. Again it has become a fashionable place to live.”<sup>90</sup>

These developments in Georgetown continued to draw the attention of local journalists. Indeed, the history and restoration of Georgetown was such a popular topic in Washington papers during the 1930s that William D. Beall lamented in the

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<sup>87</sup> Oulahan, E1.

<sup>88</sup> Constance McLaughlin Green, *The Secret City: A History of Race Relations in the Nation’s Capital* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967), 236.

<sup>89</sup> Gale, *Restoration in Georgetown*, 117.

<sup>90</sup> “Only Eight Prerevolutionary Houses Left Standing in Georgetown Today,” *Washington Post*, 14 August 1933, 8.

*Washington Post* in 1932, “So much has been written about ‘Dear Old Georgetown,’—its present appellation” that he wonders if anyone will still care to read his reminiscences.<sup>91</sup> Beall’s comment illustrates the amount of popular press articles on Georgetown during this time period; as well, it alludes to the idea of Georgetown as a distinct, new entity.

Until the late 1930s, the preservation of Georgetown’s built environment came about through private restorations of individual properties, as well as the 1924 zoning law. However, toward the end of the 1930s, Georgetown’s wealthy, white residents began to pay more attention to, and work to preserve, the area’s architectural resources. The efforts of a group known as the Progressive Georgetown Citizens Association [PGCA] were at the forefront of this movement. Founded in 1926, the organization was created by a number of female Georgetown residents in response to the fact that the Georgetown Citizens Association restricted its membership to men only. While generally the PGCA tackled many of the same issues as the GCA, “As the 1930s drew to a close, the Progressives resolved that eighteenth-century architecture in Georgetown was to be a leading concern.”<sup>92</sup>

Thus was born the legislation that would become Public Law 81-808, commonly known as the Old Georgetown Act. Drawing on oral history testimony from PGCA members, Gale writes, “Aware that communities such as Alexandria, New Orleans, and Charleston had established historic districts, Dorothea De Schweinitz, an active Progressive member, met with a neighbor in 1949 and drafted

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<sup>91</sup> William D. Beall, “Georgetown Resident Recalls Noted Homes,” *Washington Post*, 3 July 1932, M7.

<sup>92</sup> Gale, *Restoration in Georgetown*, 140.

the text for a bill establishing such a district in Georgetown.”<sup>93</sup> The resulting legislation, passed September 22, 1950, made any construction, reconstruction, alteration, or demolition of any private or semipublic building within the Georgetown Historic District subject to review and approval by an architectural view board, which would be convened and administrated by the Commission of Fine Arts.

The passage of the Old Georgetown Act finalized the transformation of Georgetown. This legislation cemented Georgetown’s reputation as a special place worthy of particular protection. By putting Georgetown’s built environment under the jurisdiction of the Commission of Fine Arts, Congress raised the neighborhood up to the level of the National Mall. The Old Georgetown Act demonstrated a clear investment on the part of the federal government in protecting Georgetown. Today, Georgetown remains the only non-public area of the city to fall under the jurisdiction of the Commission of Fine Arts.

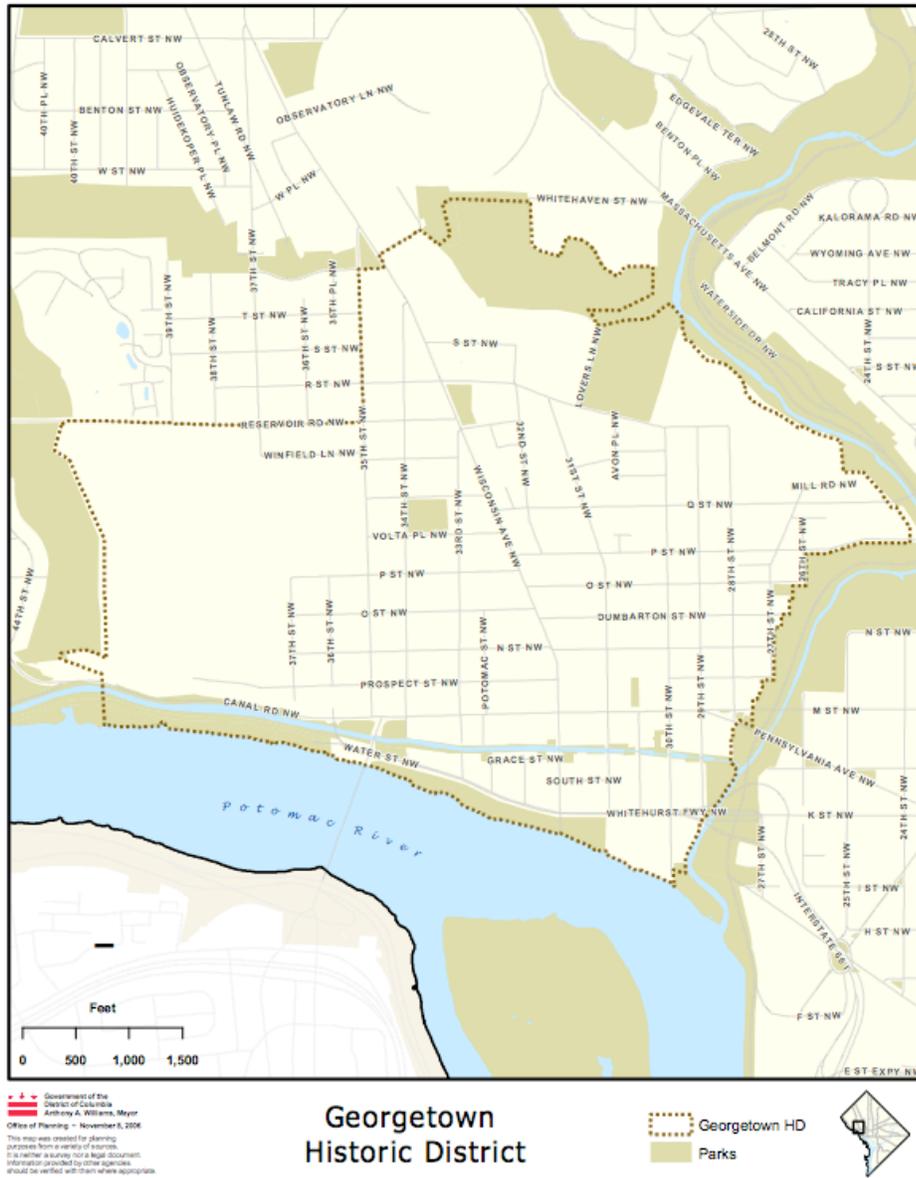
The Old Georgetown Act also marks one of the first instances of the federal government intervening to protect the historic and architectural resources of a specific urban neighborhood. Prior to the 1966 National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA), the federal government was only minimally involved in the protection of these types of resources. For this reason, historic preservationists generally have celebrated this groundbreaking legislation.<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> Gale, *Restoration in Georgetown*, 221.

<sup>94</sup> It is worth noting that because the Act was a new type of government action, it was not subject to the same sort of review that now characterizes the declaration of a historic district. Under the 1966 NHPA, before a neighborhood or area can be listed as a historic district on the National Register of Historic Places, a public hearing must be held. No such public (non-Congressional) hearing was held to consider the repercussions of the Old Georgetown Act. See Gale, *The Impact of Historic District Designation in Washington, D.C.* (Washington, D.C.: The Center for Washington Area Studies, 1989).

**Figure 2: Georgetown Historic District, established by the 1951 Old Georgetown Act. Map courtesy of the Office of Planning, District of Columbia City Government.**



## Making Georgetown White

However, the Old Georgetown Act had dramatic detrimental effects on Georgetown’s African American population. As more and more houses were restored, prices in the area rose, and many working-class residents, including much of

Georgetown's African American population, sold their properties to eager buyers. In this way, Georgetown's population rapidly became more racially and economically homogenous. As Lesko relates, "Many families simply could not afford to comply with new zoning restrictions and were forced out by renovation costs. Often black families had to close the boarding houses that provided both their incomes and cheap, affordable rentals for their black tenants as well. Such houses were now required to become single family dwellings."<sup>95</sup>

Dennis Gale argues that his study uncovered no "organized, mutually supported campaign" to use the preservation of Georgetown's historic houses as a means of "remov[ing] Georgetown's poorer families" or its African American population.<sup>96</sup> However, while this may not have been an *articulated* goal of the Georgetown newcomers and civic organizations, it was likely a "goal supported by many" of the white, wealthy preservationists responsible for the passage of the Old Georgetown Act.<sup>97</sup> Certainly it was a byproduct of their actions. As I have discussed, the vision of Georgetown constructed by these wealthy, white elites was tinged with racism. The very fact that the GCA was segregated by race through the 1950s is evidence that racial prejudice was deeply ingrained in the organization.<sup>98</sup>

The treatment of Georgetown's alleys exemplifies this unspoken connection between "cleaning up" the area and the removal of African Americans. Washington,

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<sup>95</sup> Lesko, 97.

<sup>96</sup> Gale, *Restoration in Georgetown*, 312.

<sup>97</sup> Gale, *Restoration in Georgetown*, 312.

<sup>98</sup> "Proposed Amendment to the Constitution of the Georgetown Citizens Association." According to the 1948 GCA Constitution, the organization denied membership to African Americans as well as to those members who would "refuse to answer the question, 'Are you a Communist?' in the negative." In 1945, the GCA admitted women to its ranks. Georgetown Citizens Association Papers, box labeled "GCA Minutes 1940-1949," Peabody Room, Georgetown Branch of the District of Columbia Public Library.

D.C.'s alley dwellings had been targeted by housing reformers for much of the early twentieth century. As James Borchert makes clear in his notable study *Alley Life in Washington*, white, upper-middle-class social workers and politicians viewed Washington's alleys as dens of iniquity and breeding grounds for pathological behavior.<sup>99</sup> Located throughout the city, these alleys housed a majority African American population; as Borchert comments, "By 1897... blacks now made up 93% of alley residents, and black alley dwellers accounted for nearly one-fourth of the city's nonwhite population. Of the 237 inhabited alleys in the Federal City, nearly 70% were totally segregated."<sup>100</sup> Georgetown was home to a number of these alley communities.<sup>101</sup> A 1943 *Harper's Bazaar* article titled "Bedlam, D.C." described the Georgetown alley known as Bell's Court; its title leaves no confusion as to the author's view of the alley and its residents.<sup>102</sup> The author of this article, a newly established resident of Georgetown, discusses peering up into an alley adjacent to her property; she reports that she was "not even noticed by my black neighbors, who were completely engrossed in singing, talking, fighting, washing, dressing, playing cards or crap, with dogs or chickens, or sleeping..."<sup>103</sup>

As Borchert explains, alley reform became a popular issue in both the Progressive and the New Deal eras. This agitation culminated in the 1934 Alley

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<sup>99</sup> James Borchert, *Alley Life in Washington: Family, Community, Religion, and Folklife in the City, 1850-1970* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1980). In providing the context for his study, Borchert cites Charles Weller, *Neglected Neighbors: Stories of Life in the Alleys, Tenements, and Shanties of the National Capital* (Philadelphia: The John C. Winston Company, 1909).

<sup>100</sup> Borchert, 42.

<sup>101</sup> Lesko names four alley communities in Georgetown: "East Place... Poplar Place... Cecil or Cissell Place... and Bell's Court or Bell or Bells Court." Lesko, 82.

<sup>102</sup> Harriet Crowley, "Bedlam, D.C.," *Harper's Bazaar*, July 1943, cited in Mary Mitchell, *A Walk in Georgetown* (Barre, Massachusetts: Barre Publishers, 1966), 81.

<sup>103</sup> Crowley cited in Mitchell, 81.

Dwelling Authority, an agency charged with overseeing the “discontinuance” of alley dwellings after 1944.<sup>104</sup> The underlying rationale for cleaning up Washington’s alleys was that such places interfered with the ability of the Capital to stand as the most beautiful, representative city of the country. As John Ihlder, one of the leading proponents of the alley improvement efforts, said in a speech to the National Capital Park and Planning Commission,

If Washington is to represent us fairly among the great world capitals...it must provide dignified, spacious, comfortable living conditions for those whose work calls them here or whose inclination prompts them to become residents. The prestige and appeal of the capital do not lie wholly in its governmental structures, but do lie largely in its dwellings.<sup>105</sup>

Georgetown’s alley dwellings were not demolished whole-scale, as were others in Washington. With the area’s rise in popularity, alley dwellings there became extremely valuable real estate, to the extent that “in 1952 citizens’ groups involved in the restoration movement successfully engineered repeal of the ban on alley dwellings that was to go into effect the following year.”<sup>106</sup> In the case of Bell’s Court, the housing was condemned by the city, and then bought and restored by developers, renamed “Pomander Walk,” and finally rented to new tenants (at nearly ten times the price that they had previously been rented for). Commented William A. Millen in an 1951 *Washington Evening Star* article, “Georgetown is witnessing the evolution of one of its historic alleys from a slum to highly sought-after rental

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<sup>104</sup> Borchert, 52.

<sup>105</sup> John Ihlder cited in Howard Gillette, Jr., *Between Justice and Beauty: Race, Planning, and the Failure of Urban Policy in Washington, D.C.* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1995), 135. Gillette, Jr., provides an insightful analysis of Ihlder’s role in alley dwelling reform during the 1930s and 1940s; Ihlder was also a Georgetown resident and a member of the GCA.

<sup>106</sup> Borchert, 54.

property...The area has gone white, and the little colored colony has found quarters elsewhere.”<sup>107</sup> The transformation of Bell’s Court can be seen as a microcosm of the changes that were wrought in Georgetown during the 1930s through the 1950s: African American properties previously considered rundown and shabby were “cleaned up,” restored, and became some of the area’s most quaint and charming housing options.



**Figure 3: Pomander Walk, formerly Bell’s Court, Georgetown. October 2006.**

All in all, Georgetown’s reimagining and the concurrent demographic shifts associated with it were products of the social, political, and cultural atmosphere of the 1920s and 1930s, both in Washington, D.C. as well as the United States in general. This time period saw increased racial tension among whites and African Americans, which manifested in a number of ways, from violent race riots (such as the one

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<sup>107</sup> William A. Millen, “Condemned Slum in Georgetown Alley Goes High Hat As Homes Redone,” *Washington Evening Star*, 14 September 1951, B1.

occurring in Washington in 1919) to the rise of racially restrictive housing covenants to keep African Americans out of particular communities. Racially segregated housing and neighborhoods became a standard fact of life across the country. For example, while housing reform was a facet of the New Deal, the policies put in place to carry out this reform did not include integrated public housing.

While residential segregation was not a new institution in D.C.—the establishment of LeDroit Park in 1873 as an upscale housing establishment for whites only testifies to this—the early twentieth century saw an intensifying of residential segregation.<sup>108</sup> Across the city—and in cities across the country—much clearer lines were drawn to delineate “white” and “black” neighborhoods. Howard professor William H. Jones commented in his 1929 study of African American housing conditions that in Washington, “White people with considerable social and economic status—the class that is capable of maintaining the racial solidarity of the community by prejudice and public opinion—do not prefer to live in culturally heterogeneous communities.”<sup>109</sup>

This increased residential segregation across the city necessarily informed the reimagining of Georgetown. White, wealthy elites in Georgetown, such as those involved in the burgeoning preservation movement and in the Georgetown Citizens Association, sought to preserve what they saw as the area’s special character. Not only did African Americans clash with their vision of Georgetown, they were thought to damage it. During the 1920s and 1930s, particularly in Washington, D.C., African

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<sup>108</sup> Ronald M. Johnson, “From Romantic Suburb to Racial Enclave: LeDroit Park, Washington, D.C., 1880-1920,” *Phylon* 45:4 (4<sup>th</sup> qtr., 1984): 264-270.

<sup>109</sup> William H. Jones, *The Housing of Negroes in Washington, D.C.* (Washington, D.C.: Howard University Press, 1929), 59.

Americans dwellings were consistently perceived as unsightly and unsanitary. As became the case throughout the country, the presence of African Americans in predominantly white neighborhoods was thought to disrupt the image of the neighborhood and to bring down property values.<sup>110</sup> There is evidence to suggest that white Washingtonians moved to Georgetown precisely because it was becoming a homogenous community: in his description of the transition of LeDroit Park from an upper-class, white neighborhood to a more middle-class African American area, Ronald M. Johnson relates that with the influx of African Americans in the early 1900s, at least one white LeDroit Park resident relocated to Georgetown, perhaps in the hopes of reclaiming the elite, white neighborhood atmosphere that he had once enjoyed.<sup>111</sup>

### **“Historic Georgetown” Solidified**

Following the passage of the 1950 Old Georgetown Act, the reimagining of Georgetown was complete. Commemorative activities during the 1950s and 1960s only helped to reinforce this image of Georgetown as historic, white, and wealthy. Georgetown’s bicentennial, celebrated by area residents in 1951, was one of these events. To commemorate the bicentennial, residents launched a three-day long festival, complete with a parade featuring Georgetowners in colonial-era costume. In addition, 1951 saw the launching of an exhibit at the Library of Congress featuring

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<sup>110</sup> On the origins of these perceptions, see Kevin Fox Gotham, “Urban Space, Restrictive Covenants and the Origins of Racial Residential Segregation in a US city, 1900-50,” *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 24:3 (September 2000), 616-633. Gotham, a sociologist, argues “the adoption and application of racially restrictive covenants helped nurture and reinforce emerging racial stereotypes that identified black living space and culture with deteriorating neighborhoods and dilapidated housing.” Gotham, 618.

<sup>111</sup> Johnson, 268.

the history of Georgetown. The GCA lobbied Congress for a commemorative stamp, and installed small plaques with the colonial name of the street alongside Georgetown's real street signs.<sup>112</sup> All of these commemorative activities helped to cement the reputation of Georgetown in the minds of Washington residents and visitors.

The scale and type of historic preservation activities in Georgetown grew as well. In the early 1950s, a small group of area residents grew concerned about the potential demolition of a cluster of buildings located at the corner of 30<sup>th</sup> and M Streets, known as the Thomas Sim Lee Corner. Named for their builder, a governor of Maryland during the Revolutionary War, these structures dated to the late 1700s and early 1800s. In order to preserve the buildings, these preservationists initiated what Gale terms "private market restoration," forming a corporation—Historic Georgetown, Inc.—that bought the buildings with the plan of restoring them for use as retail spaces.<sup>113</sup> This development marks an early instance of the historic preservation technique of adaptive reuse.

These commemorative activities were also accompanied by national media coverage of Georgetown. The neighborhood was featured in articles in prominent periodicals such as the *Saturday Evening Post* (1948), *National Geographic* (1953), and the *Economist* (1960).

All of these articles commented on Georgetown's rise-fall-rise narrative: its colonial prominence, its decline into shabbiness, and its contemporary revival by

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<sup>112</sup> Letter, Stanton Kolb to "Neighbors," 1 October 1951. Letter, Harold B. Hinton to Sen. Henry Cabot Lodge, Jr., 12 March 1951. Georgetown Citizens Association Papers, box labeled "GCA Minutes 1951- ." Peabody Room, Georgetown Branch of the District of Columbia Public Library.

<sup>113</sup> Gale, *Restoration in Georgetown*, 302.

historic preservationists. These publications discussed this trajectory primarily in terms of Georgetown's tenacity of spirit. As the subtitle of the *National Geographic* article proclaimed, "A proud colonial port, made part of young America's new capital, refused to be abolished and now sees its old identity restored."<sup>114</sup> The writers of these articles painted Georgetown as a place that had never fully given in to being dominated by encroaching Washington.

In the eyes of these writers, Georgetown's transformation also was significant for its sheer scope; that is to say, the fact that the once-shabby part of town could now be attracting such a high volume of political and social notables. Both the *Saturday Evening Post* and *National Geographic* articles provided their readers with lists of Georgetown's well-known residents; the *Economist* noted that Georgetown "has more inhabitants listed in 'Who's Who' than any other place so small."<sup>115</sup> Remarked Henry and Katherine Pringle in the *Saturday Evening Post*, "Distinguished, historic, quaint, old-world, cultured, and celebrity-packed are among the adjectives applied to the most widely known residential part of Washington."<sup>116</sup>

In discussing Georgetown's notoriety, these articles hinted at the national and international scope of Georgetown's reputation: "Georgetown's fame goes far beyond the readers of the society columns. It has been spread all over the world by members of the diplomatic corps. Newly arrived diplomats, particularly those in the lower ranks, try to get houses in Georgetown—because they have heard about it, because it

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<sup>114</sup> William A. Kinney, "Washington's Historic Georgetown," *National Geographic*, April 1953, 513.

<sup>115</sup> "District Within A District," *The Economist*, 28 May 1960, 867.

<sup>116</sup> Henry F. Pringle and Katharine Pringle, "Georgetown on the Potomac," *Saturday Evening Post*, 20 March 1948, 33.

provides a correct address.”<sup>117</sup> Similarly, the *Economist* noted, “There are more than twenty towns and villages called Georgetown scattered about the United States and Canada, but only one, Georgetown on the Potomac River, is internationally fashionable...as Chelsea and Mayfair (Georgetown has the character of both) are celebrated far beyond London, so Georgetown is well known beyond the District of Columbia.”<sup>118</sup>

As well, these articles pointed out the contrast between Georgetown and Washington. Unlike Washington, Georgetown was intimate, familiar, a true community: “Being so small, the place is neighborly. It is possible to borrow an egg or a cup of sugar, although requests for a bucket of ice cubes are more common.”<sup>119</sup> Echoed William F. Kinney in *National Geographic*, “To come from ‘the city’ to tranquil Georgetown is like being transported to a tight little village, remote and pleasant. There is a serenity about its narrow colonial streets with their uneven sidewalks of red brick.”<sup>120</sup>

In constructing their vision of Georgetown, these articles placed African Americans at both the center and the periphery of the area’s transformation. Both the *Saturday Evening Post* and the *Economist* articles took note of the fact that Georgetown’s renaissance affected the racial demography of the area. The *Economist* noted, “Most of the poor, both colored and white, have now vacated their ramshackle and often tiny homes, leaving them to be remodeled by the affluent and artistic.”<sup>121</sup> Pringle and Pringle commented that the rising popularity of Georgetown, “combined

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<sup>117</sup> Pringle and Pringle, 172.

<sup>118</sup> “District Within a District,” 867.

<sup>119</sup> Pringle and Pringle, 33.

<sup>120</sup> Kinney, 515.

<sup>121</sup> “District Within A District,” 367.

with the acute housing shortage, is slowly but surely forcing out the Negroes, who occupied the section after it fell from prosperity and glory more than 100 years ago.”<sup>122</sup> Therefore, these articles conveyed the sense that it was *through* the transformation of the area from integrated to predominantly white that Georgetown had achieved its elite status and quaint charm. These articles also hinted at the fact that Georgetown’s evolution was not quite complete, and that the area required more “cleaning up”: in the *Saturday Evening Post*, Pringle and Pringle discussed the squalor of Georgetown’s unrestored areas, remarking, “Georgetown is a compound of Greenwich Village’s Bank Street, Belgrave Square in London, and the Negro sections of the most backward cities of the Deep South.”<sup>123</sup> These articles also reinforced the nostalgic vision of Georgetown’s African American history. Kinney’s comments in *National Geographic* on Georgetown’s past African American residents evoked the paternalism of Oulahan’s 1927 *New York Times* article: “On Christmas Eve, from colonial times until the Emancipation Proclamation, bands of slaves went through town singing carols in soft, rich voices.”

While these articles positioned Georgetown in contrast to Washington, they made clear that Georgetown’s prestige, and the sense of it as historic, derived from its relationship with Washington, D.C. Part of the vision of historic Georgetown was of the neighborhood as the traditional home of important men of the past: politicians, government clerks, and merchants, who had played a role in the construction of the nation’s capital. As twentieth century Georgetown became the home of many prominent civil servants, and its national and international reputation grew, this facet

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<sup>122</sup> Pringle and Pringle, 172.

<sup>123</sup> Pringle and Pringle, 33.

of its sense of place took on an even greater meaning. Even as Georgetown was lauded as a place apart from the capital, it derived its sense of history and of historical importance from its inhabitants “who helped make the nation’s history” in their service to the federal government.

In this view of Georgetown, these inhabitants that had graced its hallowed streets and contributed to the building of the nation, were almost entirely white. The racial standards of the early to mid-twentieth century precluded this view of Georgetown’s history from including African Americans in any roles besides loyal and devoted slaves. In the eyes of the white elites, such as the members of the Georgetown Citizens Association, who participated in the construction of historic Georgetown, “history” was the realm of white people. Not surprisingly, the interpretation of Georgetown’s history that was solidified during this time period ignored the agency of African Americans in creating a stable community, and the integrated nature of the community. By definition, Historic Georgetown celebrated the achievements of white Georgetowners. Again, this interpretation was a product of the social, political, and cultural conditions of the early to mid-1900s. The vast majority of historic sites during this time period reinforced the racial hegemony of the United States; virtually none offered positive portrayals of African Americans or documented their achievements and contributions to society.

### **“Historic Georgetown” as Modern Tourist Commodity**

The 1960s saw both a solidification of Georgetown’s national and international renown and the continued development of its reputation as home to the

social and political elite. Georgetown's connection with the Kennedy family—John F. Kennedy resided there off and on from 1947 to 1960, and Jacqueline Kennedy returned after his assassination—only helped to bolster this perception of the area. The 1960s and early 1970s also saw increased commercial development in Georgetown; more specifically, during this time period, high rents forced out many of the locally run and family businesses that had historically been present in the area. Replacing these old-time businesses were high-end boutiques and national chain stores.<sup>124</sup>

Both of these factors helped to make Georgetown a tourist destination. From the 1960s to the present, “historic Georgetown” has been a commodity marketed to tourists. Georgetown began to be featured in guidebooks as early as the 1950s: the 1953 American Automobile Association “Guide To America” cites Georgetown as a specific site of interest before mentioning even the Capitol or the White House.<sup>125</sup> However, as Kathryn Lesko comments, “Looking back, old Georgetowners see that it was in the late 1960s and early 1970s that the ‘tourist trade’ merchants and developers really fastened their grip on Georgetown. Glossy promotional literature, as well as numerous newspaper and magazine articles, routinely touted the stylish boutiques, exotic restaurants and quaint ambience both locally and nationally.”<sup>126</sup> Today, Georgetown is a favorite destination of tourists; the area has joined the monuments and the Mall as part of the Washington “schlep,” as novelist Christopher

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<sup>124</sup> Gale, 319.

<sup>125</sup> American Automobile Association, *Guide to America: A Treasury of Information About its States, Cities, Parks and Historical Points of Interest* (Washington: Public Affairs Press, 1953), 121.

<sup>126</sup> Lesko, 113-114.

Buckley terms it.<sup>127</sup> They are drawn not only by the premiere restaurants, shopping, and bars located in the neighborhood, but also by the sense of Georgetown as a historic site and as an integral part of the city.

### **Rescuing a Hidden History: “Black Georgetown Remembered”**

Georgetown’s racial homogeneity remains part of its sense of place. The process of Georgetown’s racial and socioeconomic homogenization that had begun in the 1940s persisted through subsequent decades; in fact, it became even more deeply entrenched.<sup>128</sup> By 1960, only nine percent of Georgetown residents were African American.<sup>129</sup> These demographics have informed the contemporary perception of Georgetown. In a city where two-thirds of the residents are African American, Georgetown is understood as a bastion of elite white culture. The widespread misconception among Washington residents about the lack of a Metro stop in Georgetown is indicative of this perception of the area as white, wealthy, and elite. As transportation historian Zachary Schrag points out, “Many believe that WMATA [Washington Metro Area Transit Authority] planned a station for Georgetown, then withdrew its plans in response to opposition from politically influential residents who feared that the subway would bring undesirables—the poor, the criminal, the

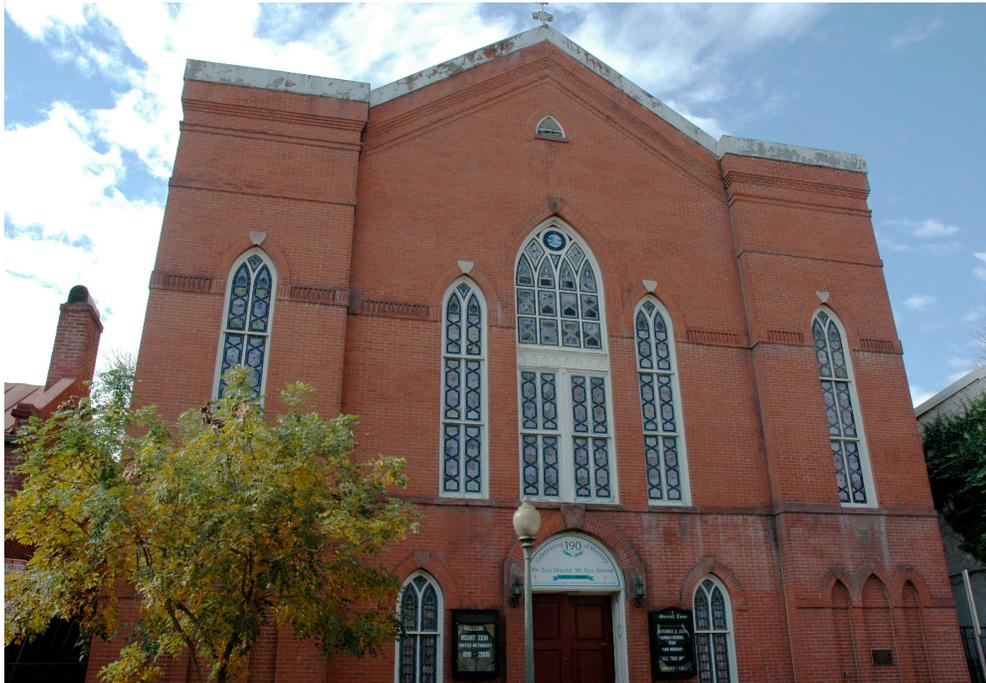
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<sup>127</sup> Christopher Buckley, *Washington Schleppe Here: Walking in the Nation’s Capital* (New York: Crown Journeys, 2003). A guidebook to walking tours in D.C., it focuses almost solely on the National Mall. Buckley, Jr.’s title may be a pithy play on words, but it reminds us that a tour, literally, a schlep, of “official” Washington is still a rite of passage for many Americans.

<sup>128</sup> Ron Shaffer, “Georgetown: Fewer Than 250 Blacks,” *Washington Post*, 8 January 1972, B1-B7.

<sup>129</sup> Lesko, 42.

nonwhite, and the tacky—to their exclusive neighborhood.”<sup>130</sup> In fact, Schrag points out, a Metro station in Georgetown was never a viable option, due to the technical problems of locating a station there and the lack of a large commuter population. Still, the fact that this story persists—to the point of being understood as common knowledge among Washingtonians—symbolizes Georgetown’s reputation. Georgetown, it is understood, is not a place for the “poor, the criminal, the nonwhite, and the tacky”—and whose residents possessed both the inclination and political clout to keep it wealthy, white, and genteel.



**Figure 4: Mt. Zion United Methodist Church, 1334 29<sup>th</sup> Street, NW, Georgetown. October 2006.**

While Lesko argues that during the late 1960s and early 1970s “little attention was given by the media to the social history of the community, particularly of the

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<sup>130</sup> Zachary Schrag, *The Great Society Subway: A History of the Washington Metro* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006), 155.

original black contribution,” it was also during this time period that several “black Georgetown” landmarks were added to the National Register of Historic Places.<sup>131</sup> Two of these were the Mt. Zion United Methodist Church and its associated cemetery, the Mt. Zion Cemetery, both of which were added to the Register in 1975. The late 1980s and early 1990s saw community efforts to restore Georgetown’s African American past to the popular imagination. The Mt. Zion Community House, added to the Register in 1975, was restored in 1985 for use as a community center and museum documenting the history of African American life in Georgetown.<sup>132</sup>

Most recently, a documentary on “black Georgetown” was produced in conjunction with Georgetown University’s bicentennial celebration, which led to the writing of Lesko’s *Black Georgetown Remembered: A History of Its Black Community From the Founding of “The Town of George” in 1751 to the Present Day*. The release of both the documentary and the book sparked press coverage of Georgetown’s African American history: a number of articles in area newspapers featured interviews with current and former African American residents of Georgetown.<sup>133</sup>

A variety of factors can be seen at work in these efforts at commemorating Georgetown’s African American community, and preserving the physical evidence of it. To begin, as a result of the changes wrought by the Civil Rights movement and the

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<sup>131</sup> Lesko, 114.

<sup>132</sup> Gayle Young, “Historic Cottage in Georgetown To Be Museum,” *Washington Post*, 1 September 1984, E1-E9.

<sup>133</sup> See, for example, Charles Bempohl, “Georgetown Honors a Rich African-American Legacy,” *Northwest Current*, 19 February 2003, 27-29; Charles Elder, “Video Traces Era When Georgetown was Poor, Black, Neighborly,” *Washington Post*, 16 February 1989, J1; Sarah Booth Conroy, “Finding the Soul of a Place: A Black History of Georgetown,” *Washington Post*, 23 February 1992, F1; Elizabeth S. Clare, “In the Presence of the Past,” *Washington Post*, 16 February 1990, N6.

advent of the “new social history,” the late 1960s and 1970s saw an increased interest in and awareness of African American history, and consequently in recognizing and protecting African American historical sites, on the part of both African Americans and whites.<sup>134</sup> This new sensitivity towards African American history led to the official declaration of many sites connected to African American history as “historic” and listed on the National Register of Historic Places, as the federal government revised their criteria of what was historically and architecturally significant.<sup>135</sup> This has been the case in Washington, D.C. in particular, as historians, preservationists, and city officials have realized the importance of commemorating African American history in a city with a majority African American population. As I will discuss in Chapter Three, the recognition of U Street’s African American past stands as evidence of this increased attention.

However, in the case of Georgetown, these efforts have made only moderate inroads in rethinking the neighborhood’s history with an eye to its African American past, or to changing the public understanding of it: on a recent (2006) walking tour of Georgetown, offered through Cultural Tourism DC, the guide made no mention of the area’s African American history. Similarly, a 2006 *Washington Citypaper* article named Georgetown “D.C.’s Whitetown”<sup>136</sup> and a recent 2006 *Washington Post* article

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<sup>134</sup> See, for example, Fath Davis Ruffins, “Mythos, Memory, and History,” in *Museums and Communities: The Politics of Public Culture*, ed. Ivan Karp, Christine Mullen Kreamer, and Steven D. Lavine (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1992). As well, based on the newspaper coverage of Georgetown’s African American history (all four articles cited were written in February), African American history month has done much to increase awareness of local African American history.

<sup>135</sup> Antoinette J. Lee, “Cultural Diversity and Historic Preservation,” *CRM* [Bulletin of the National Park Service, Cultural Diversity] 15:7 (1992): 1-2.

<sup>136</sup> John Metcalf, “Black Guide to Georgetown,” *Washington Citypaper*, 4 August 2006, 18.

remarked on the “hidden history” of Georgetown’s African American past.<sup>137</sup> It appears that while it was possible to reinvent Georgetown’s identity in the early twentieth century, the resulting historic narrative has become deeply entrenched in Georgetown’s sense of place.

### **Concluding Remarks**

The twentieth century saw the transformation of Georgetown from a shabby, working-class area to the site of million-dollar residences housing the wealthy elite and renowned politicians; from a racially integrated neighborhood to an all-white enclave; and from a dowdy, backward village to Washington, D.C.’s first federally recognized and protected historic area. These changes were enacted both through external factors (such as the influx of residents into the District during the New Deal) and through the work of wealthy, white Georgetown residents, who sought to protect what they viewed as Georgetown’s unique way of life. Accompanying these changes—in fact, a key part of them—was the growing sense of Georgetown as a historic neighborhood, as the home of important men who had helped to build the national capital. On the whole, this interpretation of Georgetown’s past did not include the African Americans who had made up one-third of the area’s population for more than a century. Georgetown’s history was imagined in this particular way in accordance with the racial standards of the time, which dictated that history was the realm of white men —particularly when it pertained to the national capital. In the next chapter, I explore how a “transformation” was wrought in another part of

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<sup>137</sup> Andrew Stephen, “Georgetown’s Hidden History,” *Washington Post*, 16 July 2006, Section B01.

Washington, D.C.: that of U Street, NW. As I describe, this transformation yielded very different results.

### Chapter Three:

#### “You Street” and the “New U”:

#### Visions of African American Life and History on U Street, NW



**Figure 5: Urban palimpsest: 13<sup>th</sup> and U Streets, NW. October 2006.**

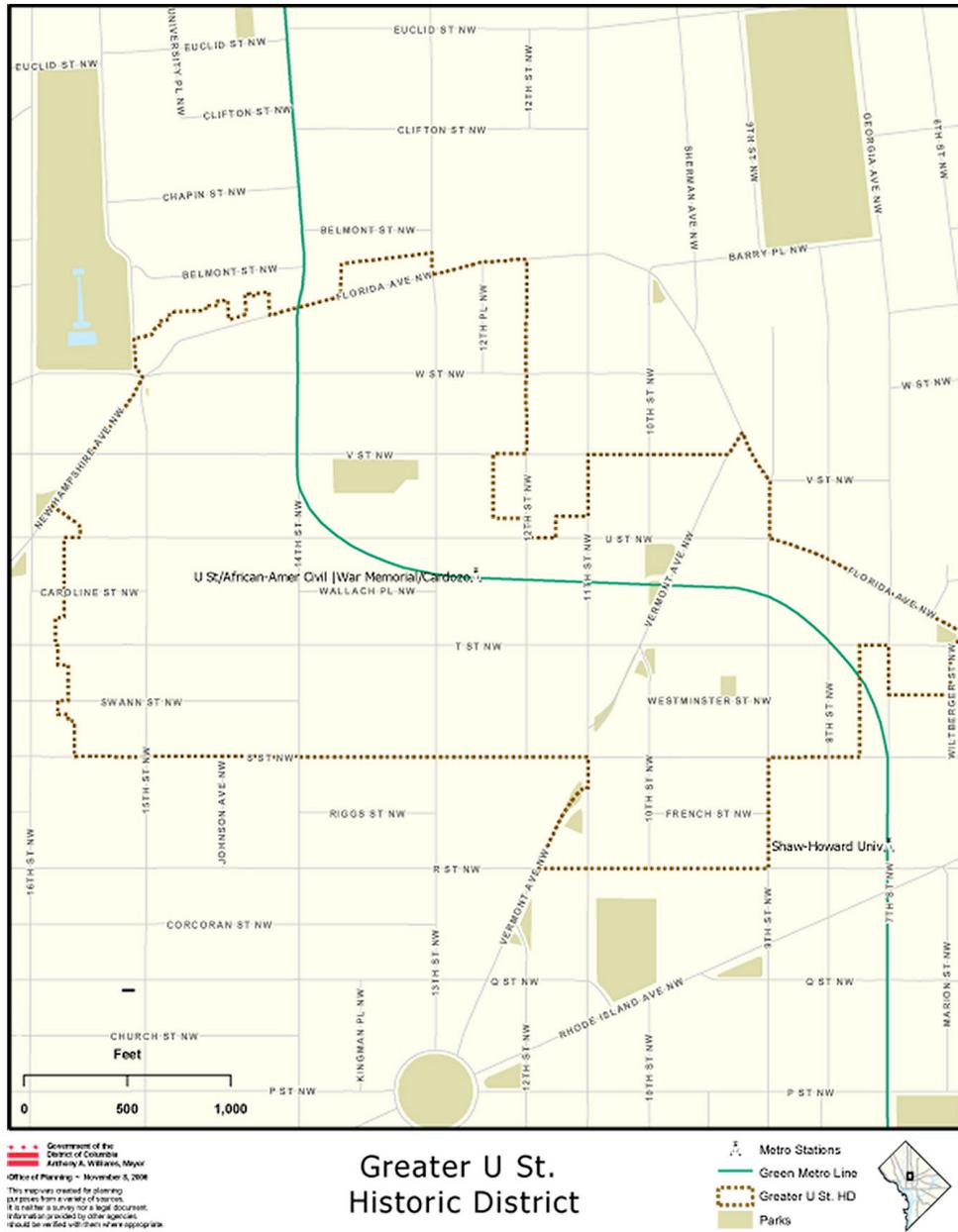
Another fall day, another walk around town, only this time under a cloudless blue sky. On this unseasonably warm day, I find myself at the corner of 16<sup>th</sup> Street and U Street, NW. A glance down 16<sup>th</sup> Street yields a glimpse of the White House; the Washington Monument stands tall in the distance. I ramble eastward down U Street. As I walk, I play a cultural critic’s version of the child’s game “I Spy”: what do I see? Above me, green signs hang on lampposts, reading “See it! Be Inspired! Historic U,” with a drawing of the African American Civil War Memorial, located down the street at 12<sup>th</sup> and U. I walk past nineteenth century roughhouses, which now house shoe stores and vintage clothing boutiques and upscale furniture shops, luxuries to lure yuppie consumers. At 14<sup>th</sup> and U, I stop and look around: I stand next

to McDonald's and across the street from the Reeves Municipal Building. One block up, a massive construction project is underway; a sign promises expensive condos coming in the near future. BMWs, Hummers, and Volvos zoom by on the street. From a mural on the side of a building, Duke Ellington peers down on commuters emerging from a Metro Stop. Across the street, a placard relates the history of the area. Continuing my walk, I pass a small, white building that once housed a silent movie theater: this is Ben's Chili Bowl, "a Washington landmark since 1958." A few blocks down, at the recently reopened jazz club Bohemian Caverns, pictures of the jazz greats that once performed there line the windows.

As I hope to have conveyed through this description, dotting the landscape of U Street are signs of the recent changes in the neighborhood, markers of the forces shaping these changes, and symbols of how U Street's history has been continually invoked as part of these changes. I contend that, like Georgetown, U Street has undergone a transformation over the course of the twentieth century. As I did in Chapter Two, I use the term "transformation" to connote both the gentrification of the area, and the solidification of the notion of U Street as historic. As in the case of Georgetown, I argue that these two developments are inextricably connected. Changes that helped to secure U Street's reputation as "historic"—such as the preservation of historic landmarks, and the mapping of the area by cultural tourism advocates—also increased the demand for housing along U Street and brought new businesses to the area. Today, the neighborhood is the site of some of D.C.'s hottest restaurants, trendiest nightspots, and most cutting-edge boutiques.

The pivot on which this reinvention has spun has been U Street's African American past. As in the case of Georgetown, the transformation of U Street has depended on it being defined as historic. However, while in Georgetown this process resulted in the erasure of African American history from the narrative, the reimagining of U Street has had the opposite result. While Georgetown's African American past has been ignored, U Street's has been embraced, to the extent that U Street has become virtually synonymous with D.C.'s African American history. I argue that this shift is the product of an increased societal recognition and awareness of African American history and achievements over the past fifty years. However, this celebration of U Street's past does not guarantee that the area will remain a stronghold of African American life and culture. U Street's transformation means that long-time residents of the area may eventually be priced out of the neighborhood, just as they were in Georgetown.

Before beginning any analysis of U Street, it is important to establish the parameters of the area in question. Roughly defined, U Street is understood to include the area framed by 7<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> Streets, NW, and S and W Streets, NW (although technically the boundaries of the official Greater U Street Historic District fall slightly outside of these borders) [see Figure 6, page 67].



**Figure 6: Greater U Street Historic District. Map courtesy of the Office of Planning, District of Columbia City Government.**

The boundaries of U Street relate to its history: the definition of this portion of D.C. as a distinct place dates to the growth of businesses and entertainment venues during the early twentieth century. Consequently, “U Street” is a non-political designation, used colloquially. U Street is also part of the district known as “Shaw,” the boundaries of which are drawn slightly beyond those of U Street. The designation of

the neighborhood as “Shaw” occurred during the 1960s, when the area was named after a nearby junior high school. Anecdotal evidence suggests that many Shaw residents (and residents of the District in general) regard the designation as arbitrary and irrelevant.<sup>138</sup> For the purposes of this paper, the neighborhood in question will be referred to as “U Street” as this seems to be the term by which the area is most commonly known.

### **The History of U Street**

While U Street has existed as a residential area of the District since the beginning of the nineteenth century, most historians, cultural tourism promoters, and area developers have focused on U Street’s development as a center for Washington’s African American community during the early years of the twentieth century.<sup>139</sup> The area had been home to African Americans since the Civil War, due to its proximity to the Freedman’s Hospital (managed by the Freedman’s Bureau) and Howard University, the preeminent university in the nation for American Americans.<sup>140</sup> Until

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<sup>138</sup> Kathryn S. Smith, “Remembering U Street,” *Washington History* 9:2 (1997): 32. See also Stephanie Frank, “‘If We Own the Story, We Own the Place’: Cultural Heritage, Historic Preservation, and Gentrification on U Street,” MA thesis (University of Maryland, 2005), 5.

<sup>139</sup> It is important to recognize that until the early 1990s, little scholarly work had focused on the history of Washington’s U Street neighborhood. The journal *Washington History*, produced by the Historical Society of Washington, D.C., is the source of a number of scholarly articles on U Street. See Michael Andrew Fitzpatrick, “‘A Great Agitation for Business’: Black Economic Development in Shaw,” *Washington History* 2:2 (1990): 48-73; Smith, “Remembering U Street,”; Michele F. Pacifico, “Don’t Buy Where You Can’t Work: The New Negro Alliance of Washington,” *Washington History* 6:1 (1994): 66-88; Dana Lanier Schaffer, “The 1968 Riots in History and Memory,” *Washington History* 15:2 (2003): 4-33; Mara Cherkasky, “For Sale to Colored: Racial Change on S St. NW,” *Washington History* 8:2 (1996): 40-57; Patricia M. Cook, “‘Like the Phoenix’: The Rebirth of the Whitelaw Hotel,” *Washington History* 7:1 (1995): 4-23.

<sup>140</sup> Kimberly Prothro Williams, *Greater U Street Historic District* (Washington, D.C.: Office of Historic Preservation, Department of Planning, District of Columbia City Government, 2003), unpaginated.

the turn of the century, however, the neighborhood was largely multiracial in its demographics. As I discussed in Chapter Two, the years between 1900 and 1930 saw a heightening of racial tensions that resulted in an increase in residential segregation throughout the city. Different neighborhoods rapidly became more racially homogenous; whereas Georgetown became whiter, the African American community centered along U Street saw an unprecedented flourishing.<sup>141</sup> While new streetcar lines enabled whites to relocate beyond the boundaries of the downtown city core into new suburban developments, racially restrictive housing covenants prevented African Americans from taking advantage of these new housing sites. The result was that U Street shifted from a multiracial area to an African American enclave.<sup>142</sup> It is likely that this newly-developed African American area of the city included former Georgetown residents. As discussed in Chapter Two, African Americans living in Georgetown during the first decades of the twentieth century were slowly priced out of the housing market there, and some of these families may have chosen to relocate to the U Street area.

Effectively forced to live in a specific area of the city, this population of African Americans residing in the U Street area created institutions that spoke to their needs in a segregated city. To begin with, U Street was the city's center for black businesses: between 1886 and 1920, the number of African American businesses in

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<sup>141</sup> This time period also saw the growth of Washington, D.C.'s African American population in general, as this was the era of large-scale African American migration from the rural South to Northern cities. In the context of Washington, many young, single women relocated to the District to work in the domestic service sector. See Elizabeth Clark-Lewis, *Living In, Living Out: African American Domesticity in Washington, D.C., 1910-1940* (Washington, Smithsonian Institution Press, 1994).

<sup>142</sup> Trieschmann, Sellin, and Callcott, Section 8, Page 17-18.

the U Street area grew from fifteen to over three hundred.<sup>143</sup> The area played host to other services built by and for African American Washingtonians, such as the Whitelaw Hotel, the only premiere hotel for African Americans in the city. The institution of these businesses meant that the African Americans living and working on U Street during this time period literally built their own environment: a number of the extant buildings on U Street, such as the Industrial Savings Bank, located at 11<sup>th</sup> and U, were created by African American business owners and architects during the early and mid twentieth century.

As well, during this time, U Street grew to exist as the primary entertainment district for African Americans in Washington. A number of jazz clubs were established in the area, fostering such notable talents as Duke Ellington, arguably U Street's most famous native son. Along with these jazz clubs, the Howard Theater, built in 1910, provided a performance space for some of the country's most prominent jazz and blues artists. U Street was also home to a number of first-run movie theaters, most notably the Lincoln Theater.

The popularity of U Street's theatres, clubs, and restaurants was multifaceted. Perhaps most notably, these venues allowed African Americans to enjoy top-quality entertainment without confronting the humiliating experience of segregation. At the Lincoln Theater, for instance, African Americans could view first-run Hollywood movies in an environment that replicated the grandeur and comfort of Washington's downtown, all-white picture palaces. As well, many of these entertainment venues also served as de facto community centers for Washington's African American population. The Lincoln Colonnade, a ballroom attached to the Lincoln Theater,

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<sup>143</sup> Fitzpatrick, "A Great Agitation for Business," 49.

hosted university socials, meetings of fraternal organizations, and charity fundraisers, as well as performers such as Fats Waller, Bessie Smith, the Mills Brothers and Lena Horne.<sup>144</sup>

In addition to acting as the center for African American entertainment options, U Street was the place to be for more cerebral pursuits. During the early twentieth century, the area served as home to prominent African American intellectuals, such as historian Carter G. Woodson, Alain Locke, Langston Hughes, Paul Lawrence Dunbar, and Mary McLeod Bethune.<sup>145</sup> Many of these intellectuals were active in organizations that worked to improve the situation of African Americans in the United States, from the NAACP and the National Urban League to the New Negro Alliance, which pushed for African American labor rights during the 1930s, making U Street the site of both social justice activism as well as intellectualism.<sup>146</sup>

All of this led to the creation of U Street as a closely-knit “city within a city.”<sup>147</sup> In her classic 1967 work on Washington, D.C.’s African American history, Constance McLaughlin Green argued that Washington’s African Americans lived in a “secret city,” created by segregation, and hidden to the eyes of D.C.’s white society. Wrote Green, “Virtually from the beginning [of the city’s history] white citizens of the District of Columbia manifestly were acquainted with only the most obvious facts about how free Negroes lived... Indeed at every point before mid-twentieth century...

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<sup>144</sup> Luci Blackburn, “Lincoln Theatre,” National Register of Historic Places Registration Form, 27 October 1993, Section 8, Page 4.

<sup>145</sup> Kathryn S. Smith, “Remembering U Street,” 30.

<sup>146</sup> Pacifico, 68.

<sup>147</sup> Trieschmann, Sellin, and Callcott, Section 8, Page 17. “City Within A City” is also the title of the Greater U Street Heritage Trail (a project sponsored by Cultural Tourism D.C.).

colored Washington was psychologically a secret city all but unknown to the white world round about.”<sup>148</sup>

The U Street neighborhood both was part of this secret city as well as its most notable example.<sup>149</sup> Many long-time U Street residents have mentioned the autonomy and self-sufficiency of the neighborhood during the 1920s and 1930s, and the support networks that the neighborhood afforded its residents. Remembered one former resident, ““We had everything we needed right in our community...our churches, our schools—banks, department stores, food stores.””<sup>150</sup> Another asserted, ““Shaw *was* a family.””<sup>151</sup> In literature and in the African American press, U Street was often referred to as “You Street.” This pun can be taken as indicative of African Americans’ sense of ownership of the area: “You Street” was *their* street.

In fact, the U Street area as a whole served as a meeting space for Washington’s African American community. In scholarly and popular press articles commemorating U Street’s “golden age,” the area is consistently remembered as a community gathering place for the entirety of Washington’s African American population, not just residents of the area. As D.C.’s “Black Broadway,” U Street drew African Americans from all over the city to dine at upscale restaurants, cheer their favorite jazz performer at the Howard or Republic Gardens, see a first-run movie, or

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<sup>148</sup> Green notes that the term “secret city” did not originate with her, but was “first assigned to the Negro city in an anonymous article in *Crisis* in 1932.” Green, viii.

<sup>149</sup> Surprisingly, Green does not offer much description of the cohesiveness and prominence of the U Street neighborhood, though she does remark that in the early 1900s, “U Street in northwest Washington was becoming the colored Connecticut Avenue.” Green, 179.

<sup>150</sup> Kathryn Schneider Smith and Marya McQuirter, *A Guide to the Historical Resources of Shaw* (Washington, D.C.: The Thurgood Marshall Center for Service and Heritage, 1996), 13. In compiling this guide, in 1996 Smith and McQuirter convened discussion sessions during which about 75 residents and former residents gathered to reminisce about U Street.

<sup>151</sup> Smith, “Remembering U Street,” 35.

simply stroll up and down U Street dressed in their best clothes. Recalled Arthur Ashe, who used to pass through the area as a young tennis player, “In Washington, the corner of 14<sup>th</sup> and U was the grapevine. The cream of black society and everybody else passed through there, so if you were at 14<sup>th</sup> and U, you knew where the parties were, you knew who was in town, you knew if there was trouble. You were in the know.”<sup>152</sup> Another former patron echoes Ashe’s comments: “‘U Street—for black people that is where you came. You didn’t have to live in this area to be part of U Street. We all converged on this place, regularly.’”<sup>153</sup> For African Americans “converging” there, U Street was not only the place to be, but it was the place to be elegant and fashionable: “‘You had to wear a tie to walk down U Street’” is a frequent refrain of those who remember the area in its heyday.<sup>154</sup>

U Street existed as the premiere entertainment district for Washington’s African American population, and a predominantly African American residential area, through the 1950s. Beginning in the late 1950s, however, U Street’s prominence within the African American community waned. As I have discussed, U Street thrived because segregation forced African Americans to live in certain parts of the city. During the late 1940s and early 1950s, the Supreme Court ruled against both racially restrictive real estate covenants and the segregation of public spaces. These changes in law meant that African Americans could reside anywhere in the city and patronize any businesses and social institutions they wished. Thus, desegregation led to the dispersal of U Street residents to other parts of Washington and the Virginia

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<sup>152</sup> Arthur Ashe quoted in Juan Williams, “14<sup>th</sup> and U: When Being There Meant Something,” *Washington Post Magazine*, 21 February 1988, W23.

<sup>153</sup> Smith, “Remembering U Street,” 34-35.

<sup>154</sup> Smith, “Remembering U Street,” 35.

and Maryland suburbs; as well, because African Americans were no longer restricted to shopping and eating only along U Street, the businesses there faced competition from restaurants and stores throughout the city. These conditions created shifts in community dynamics; many long-time residents moved away from the area, and businesses were forced to close. These occurrences along U Street were not unique; as historian Robert Weyeneth points out, “In one of the great ironies of the civil rights movement, desegregation undermined the historic need for black business districts and contributed to the economic hardship experienced by black businesses that could not make the transition.”<sup>155</sup>

The 1968 urban riots following the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. caused further fracturing of the community. As historian Dana Lanier Schaffer relates, King’s assassination “provided the spark” that ignited the anger of many African American District residents.<sup>156</sup> Drawing on oral history interviews, Schaffer relates, in recalling the riots, “African Americans described a widespread resentment toward generations of political, civil, and especially economic injustice.”<sup>157</sup> African Americans throughout the United States faced unequal conditions, but these disparities were particularly prevalent in Washington. King’s assassination in April 1968 touched off nearly two weeks of looting, arson, and destruction carried out by mobs; most of this destruction took place along the U Street corridor as well as along Seventh Street, NW and H Street, NE. According to Schaffer, mobs targeted white-owned businesses, though a number of African American businesses were damaged

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<sup>155</sup> Robert Weyeneth, “The Architecture of Racial Segregation: The Challenges of Preserving the Problematical Past,” *The Public Historian* 27:4 (Fall 2005): 39.

<sup>156</sup> Schaffer, 6.

<sup>157</sup> Schaffer, 6.

as well; to protect themselves, African American store owners installed signs in their windows reading “soul brother” to indicate their affiliation with the African American community.<sup>158</sup> In the end, the Washington riots “resulted in 13 deaths and \$24 million in insured property damage, a physical devastation more extensive than in any other riot-stricken city across the country.”<sup>159</sup>

City efforts to rebuild the riot-affected areas faltered in the face of continuing tension between government officials and area residents about the best way to proceed. Thus, the riots had severely detrimental and long-lasting effects on the U Street corridor. Physically, much of the area remained in ruins through the late 1960s and early 1970s; many store owners elected not to rebuild, and moved away from the area. Perhaps more importantly, the damage incurred during the riots brought down property values and gave U Street the reputation of a crime-stricken area.<sup>160</sup>

Even before the 1968 riots, however, U Street had changed. A 1965 *Washington Post* article describes the changes wrought by integration on U Street: “Many [U Street merchants] realize that they have lost the dubious advantage of a segregated market and that they’ll have to enter the mainstream of business or fold... Scattered among the bustling taverns and restaurants and white-owned movie theaters on U Street are dozens of vacant stores, silent warnings to incompetent entrepreneurs.”<sup>161</sup> As this article indicates, the loss of businesses along U Street resulted in boarded-up and abandoned buildings, which became prime real estate for

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<sup>158</sup> Schaffer, 18-19.

<sup>159</sup> Schaffer, 6.

<sup>160</sup> Schaffer, 26.

<sup>161</sup> William J. Raspberry, “Negro Business Looks Bearish,” *Washington Post*, 17 October 1965, E2.

drug activity and prostitution. By the mid-1970s, U Street had earned a reputation as one of the most dangerous areas of the city.

How was U Street imagined during this time period? *Washington Post* coverage of the area during the 1960s and 1970s records frequent stabbings, killings, prostitution, and police shootouts with drug dealers. While journalists sometimes commented on U Street's history as an African American business and entertainment district, this history was treated as a distant, dream-like memory; the focus of these pieces was the contemporary crime and drug activity.<sup>162</sup> The suggestion of legislation to rename U Street for Prince Hall, the founder of the oldest African American fraternal lodge and the namesake of the Masonic lodge located on U Street, is indicative of the imagining of the area during this time period: the idea of U Street as so unredeemable as to warrant a new name to wipe the slate clean.<sup>163</sup>

### **Creating Historic U Street: Precursors**

While a 1978 *Washington Post* article discussed the 'revival' of U Street (in the context of the newly reopened Casbah jazz club),<sup>164</sup> U Street's renaissance (and development as a "historic" district) arguably began in the early 1980s. A July 1983 *Washington Post* article notes,

It sounds like a fantasy to rival Cinderella: 14<sup>th</sup> and U Streets NW, a city crossroad that has become a synonym for drug use and prostitution, turning into a revitalized intersection with new housing, shops and offices. But this is the ambitious vision of

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<sup>162</sup> See, for example, Courtland Milloy, "River of Darkness: 14<sup>th</sup> Street: Once a Mainstream, Recently a Backwater, Flowing Strong Again, Always a Frontier," *Washington Post Magazine*, 23 November 1980, 14.

<sup>163</sup> Marcia A. Slacum, "Masons Want U Street Named For Founder," *Washington Post*, 5 December 1983, D5.

<sup>164</sup> Neil Henry, "Reviving U Street with the Sounds of Jazz and Soul," *Washington Post*, 3 August 1978, D.C.3.

the 14<sup>th</sup> and U Street area under an effort being planned by the District government, community groups and the largest private developer in that neighborhood.<sup>165</sup>

This article correctly points out both the hardships facing U Street, as well as the two factors that would play the largest role in its redevelopment: the D.C. city government and private development. The decision to locate the Frank D. Reeves Municipal Building, located at 14<sup>th</sup> and U Streets, NW, was a conscious move on the part of then-Mayor Marion Barry to symbolize the “the city’s firm commitment to spurring the renewal of one of Washington’s more notorious areas.”<sup>166</sup> In constructing the new government offices on U Street, Barry hoped that development would spring up around the Reeves building, thus helping to stimulate the area’s economy.

Another facet of the city’s strategy to revitalizing the area was the decision to locate a Green Line metro stop on U Street. However, the Metro line had much more gradual effects than the Reeves center. Construction on the Metro stop began in 1987, and continued for the next four years, finally reaching completion in 1991. Throughout much of the construction phase, the arrival of the Metro actually had a detrimental effect on the revitalization of the area: businesses on U Street suffered tremendously from the noise and congestion created by building the station, and approximately 100 businesses were forced to close.<sup>167</sup> However, overall, the location

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<sup>165</sup> Sandra Evans Teeley, “City Center is Gleam in Vision of 14<sup>th</sup> and U Changes,” *Washington Post*, 10 July 1983, C1.

<sup>166</sup> Eric Pianin, “New City Building Only Half the Battle,” *Washington Post*, 16 August 1984, D.C.1.

<sup>167</sup> Linda Wheeler, “Nightmare on U Street: Metro Work Puts Up Barriers to Business,” *Washington Post*, 15 April 1987, B1. Linda Wheeler, “True Grits: Shaw Merchants Start to Cash In on the Green,” *Washington Post*, 18 November 1991, B3. For more on the effect of Metro construction on area businesses, see Schrag, 217-218.

of the Metro helped to increase the area's visibility and provide patrons to the small businesses located there.<sup>168</sup>

Along with the construction of the Reeves building and the U Street Metro Station, the late 1980s saw increased private real estate and commercial development in the area. One of the key players in this development was Jeffrey Cohen, a D.C.-area developer and close friend of Marion Barry's. Cohen began buying a number of U Street properties during the mid-1980s, envisioning a neighborhood-wide revitalization of the U Street area through the development of several new properties and an outdoor plaza. One of these properties was the Lincoln Theater, formerly one of the most popular and elegant movie theaters in the area, located at 1215 U Street NW. The role of the Lincoln Theater in the revitalization of U Street deserves particular attention.



**Figure 7: The restored Lincoln Theatre, 1215 U Street, NW. October 2006.**

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<sup>168</sup> Wheeler, "True Grits," B3.

## **The Revival of the Lincoln Theater**

Jeffrey Cohen bought the Lincoln in 1983. However, Cohen was forced to declare bankruptcy in September 1991, and the restoration of the theater was taken over by the D.C. city government. This restoration was completed in 1994, and the Lincoln opened as a performing arts venue in February 1994.

Clearly, the city played a key role in restoring the Lincoln. Much of the city's interest in restoring the theater was economic in nature. The city government saw the \$4 million dollar price tag of preserving the theater to be a worthy investment in restoring the area. In announcing that plans for the theater's revitalization were on schedule, then-Mayor Sharon Pratt Kelly asserted, "When reopened, the Lincoln will be a significant economic development catalyst, increasing business activity for existing business [sic] and attracting new restaurants, shops, clubs and office [sic] in the area. This means more jobs for residents and more revenue for the city."<sup>169</sup>

Along with recognizing the revenue potential of restoring the Lincoln, the city recognized the importance of the history of the theater. Through a nomination prepared by the Office of Business and Economic Development of the D.C. city government, the Lincoln Theater was successfully added to the National Register of Historic Places in October 1993. Kelly commented subsequently on the historic nature of the theater: "At last we see *our* history restored and beautified again... We want [tourists] to see more than the Washington Monument. We want them in our community... The reopening of the Lincoln is considered the heart of the

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<sup>169</sup> "News Release," Office of Business and Economic Development, Government of the District of Columbia, 13 March 1992, located in "Shaw" vertical file, Washingtoniana Division, District of Columbia Public Library.

revitalization of U Street NW.”<sup>170</sup> This remark is telling: while Kelly expresses a desire to communicate the history of D.C.’s African American population to tourists, ultimately, the history of the theatre is considered a tool through which to bring about economic revitalization.

The restoration of the theater drew immediate and widespread attention from the local media. Indeed, the Lincoln restoration stands as the moment in which the popular press (namely the *Washington Post*) began to write copiously about the revival of the U Street district. The resulting newspaper articles positioned the theater as a symbol of the revitalization of the U Street area. Commented one journalist, “The Lincoln’s rise and fall and rise... has mirrored the life cycle of this neighborhood just north of downtown D.C.”<sup>171</sup>

Another theme of this journalistic coverage was the idea of the Lincoln Theater as not only symbolic of the area’s revitalization, but a critical component of it as well. Nathea Lee, executive director of the U Street Theatre Foundation at the time of the Lincoln’s reopening, was quoted as stating, “It’s incredible how many people remember the theater, and it was inevitable that the city would catch that fever and realize that if this community is to be revitalized, getting the theater finished was a key step.”<sup>172</sup> This feeling apparently was shared by existing and potential area business owners: commented Virginia Ali, co-owner of Ben’s Chili Bowl, the famous eatery next door to the Lincoln, “The Lincoln is a landmark, and once [restored], it will bring people to U Street... there aren’t many drawing cards left up here. We need

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<sup>170</sup> Roxanne Roberts, “The New Jewel of U Street: Lincoln Theatre’s Gala Return,” *Washington Post*, 2 May 1994, G1.

<sup>171</sup> Jon Cummings, “Glory Days Recaptured in Washington, D.C.,” *Inside Arts: The Magazine of the Association of Performing Arts Presenters*, 1 June 1995, 26.

<sup>172</sup> Cummings, 26.

the Lincoln.”<sup>173</sup> A 1995 *Washington Post* article describing the “rebirth” of the area stated, “[Many] merchants point to the historic Lincoln Theater in the 1200 block of U Street as the deciding factor when they looked for places to open their businesses.”<sup>174</sup>

As a result of the Lincoln’s restoration, for the first time, writers and politicians imagined U Street as a historic area worthy of celebration and protection. Even more so than the arrival of the Reeves center and the construction of the Metro stop, the restoration of the theater, and the media attention that it garnered, solidified the public sense of U Street as both a historic neighborhood and an up-and-coming part of D.C. For these reasons, I argue that the restoration of the Lincoln stands as one of the key moments in the redefinition of the U Street area.

### **Restoring Other U Street Landmarks**

The Lincoln Theater was not the only historic structure on U Street to be revitalized during the early to mid-1990s (though it was by far the most notable restoration). A number of other important U Street buildings were restored during this time period. For the most part, these restorations were carried out through the cooperation of community groups and developers, with the goal of preserving the history of the area while also contributing to its economic revitalization. The preservation of these landmarks played a central role in the construction of historic U

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<sup>173</sup> Linda Wheeler, “D.C. to Finish Lincoln Theatre Restoration,” *Washington Post*, 15 August 1991, C1-C4.

<sup>174</sup> Linda Wheeler, “A Whole New U: Businesses Spring Up Along Historic Street in NW,” *Washington Post*, 26 December 1995, B01.

Street: they nurtured the physical landscape of historic U Street, won media attention, and attracted additional businesses to the area.

One of these notable restorations was the Whitelaw Hotel, located at 13<sup>th</sup> and T Streets, NW. Established in 1919 as a premiere hotel for African Americans, it was one of few such hotels that existed in Washington during the era of segregation. The Whitelaw was built by African Americans as well as for them: the hotel was funded by John Whitelaw Lewis, the owner of the Industrial Savings Bank (also located on U Street), and designed by an African American architect. Though the hotel prospered during U Street's heyday, it too was adversely affected by the end of segregation in Washington, and by the 1960s and 1970s it had fallen into severe disrepair and become a haven for drug addicts. The hotel was closed by the city in 1977 due to building code violations, sat vacant, and finally sold to a series of developers. It changed hands a number of times during the 1980s, but was bought in 1991 by Manna, Inc., a non-profit corporation that develops affordable housing. Thanks to Manna's work, the Whitelaw was restored in 1992, and successfully nominated to the National Register of Historic Places in 1993.<sup>175</sup>

Like the Whitelaw Hotel and the Lincoln Theater, the True Reformer Building was constructed to serve the needs of D.C.'s African American population (though unlike the Whitelaw and the Lincoln, which were built during the 1920s, the True Reformer building was erected in 1903). The headquarters of a Richmond, Virginia-based African American fraternal organization, the Grand United Order of True Reformers, the building was "conceived, built, designed, and patronized by African

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<sup>175</sup> Cook, "Like the Phoenix," 9.

Americans.”<sup>176</sup> In addition to serving as the headquarters for the True Reformers, the building also played a role in the community by housing a concert hall as well as other businesses. Although the building passed out of the control of the True Reformers in 1910, it remained a center for U Street’s African American community.<sup>177</sup> By the 1970s, though, much of the building stood vacant. Nominated to the National Register of Historic Landmarks in 1989, the building was bought by a developer in 1996, and sold to the non-profit Public Welfare Foundation in 1999 for use as their headquarters. The building now also houses the African American Civil War Memorial Freedom Foundation and Museum.

The 12<sup>th</sup> Street YMCA building, renamed the Anthony Bowen YMCA in 1972 and now known as the Thurgood Marshall Center for Service and Heritage, was the home of the first African American Young Men’s Christian Association, founded in Washington in 1853 by former slave Anthony Bowen. Designed by African American architect William Sidney Pittman and funded in part by philanthropist Julius Rosenwald, the 12<sup>th</sup> Street YMCA was built in 1912 to serve as a meeting and recreational space for U Street’s youth and adults. It contained a swimming pool, a basketball, a library, and numerous rooms to accommodate overnight guests. When the main branch of the YMCA relocated to a different part of Washington in 1982, the building was closed “due to mounting operational costs, declining membership, an accumulated deficit, and concern for the safety of the children.”<sup>178</sup> The building

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<sup>176</sup> Cultural Tourism DC, “True Reformer Building,” African American Heritage Trail Database, <[www.culturaltourismDC.org](http://www.culturaltourismDC.org)>

<sup>177</sup> Linda Wheeler, “On U St., Blacks Created a Powerful Symbol,” *Washington Post*, 19 January 1999, A1.

<sup>178</sup> “Twelfth Street Young Men’s Christian Association,” National Historic Landmark Nomination Form, 1994, 17.

was sold to a non-profit trust created to protect the building, which aided in the declaration of it as a National Historic Landmark in 1994. Restorations were begun in 1998, and in 2000 the Thurgood Marshall Center for Service and Heritage launched operations there. The Marshall Center offers exhibits documenting the history of the U Street area; as well, it provides office space for a number of non-profit organizations.

### **Reimagining Historic U Street: Popular Press Coverage**

The restoration of these prominent U Street historic landmarks, combined with increased business enterprise following the completion of the Metro stop, resulted in a wave of popular press articles, particularly in the *Washington Post*, about the “revival” of U Street. The journalistic treatment of U Street was both evidence of, as well as a factor in, the making of U Street as a historic area. This press coverage was key in helping U Street make the transition from being popularly conceived as a dangerous part of town to a trendy place with a historic past.

As mentioned earlier, this wave of positive press began with articles that accompanied and narrated the restoration of the Lincoln Theater in the early 1990s, and continued into the late 1990s and early 2000s. Going beyond simply recording particular changes or developments (such as the restoration of the Whitelaw or the institution of the Greater U Street Heritage Trail), these articles commented on the transformation of the U Street neighborhood in its entirety, using language such as “renewal,” “rebirth,” and “reinvention” to describe the changes taking place on U Street.

More than one author summed up the shift in U Street's reputation and conception with the label, "the New U." Take, for example, a 1998 *Washington Post Magazine* article, which discussed the various stages of U Street's history:

Some streets, some neighborhoods, get one life. It's all they need. Others, if they're lucky, or special, get more than one. Like U Street... In the beginning, there was the old U. The first U. Black U... the heart of black cultural, economic and social life in segregated Washington... the next U was the post-riot U... and then it was lights out for a quarter-century... And now, in 1998, at the end of this separation and court-ordered coming together, there is a third U, also known as the New U. It is mixed—black and white living together, along with yellow and brown.<sup>179</sup>

On the whole, these articles were overwhelmingly positive in their analysis of the U Street's shifting definition. Though the article cited above discusses racial tensions that remain in the "New U," and the fact that the area is "still evolving," the overall tone of the piece is on U Street's importance as a historic area, as well as its potential to become the center of Washington's nightlife and a multicultural oasis in a city still relatively polarized by race.

Many of these articles publicized U Street's wealth of new businesses, particularly trendy new restaurants, clubs, and bars. As early as 1993, journalists were writing about U Street's burgeoning scene: "From funky coffeehouses to ethnic cuisine to theaters and art galleries and nightclubs, the U Street corridor between 12<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> streets NW is undergoing a cultural revolution, the likes of which hasn't been seen since the metamorphosis of Adams-Morgan in the early 1980s."<sup>180</sup> In a sense, articles such as these were travel narratives; they treated U Street as an intriguing foreign city and introduced readers to its undiscovered treasures.

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<sup>179</sup> Mary Battiata, "Landscape: U Street," *Washington Post Magazine*, 1 February 1998, W13.

<sup>180</sup> Joel Glenn Brenner, "On U Street, A U-Turn to Renewal," *Washington Post*, 6 November 1993, E1.

In fact, U Street served as the subject of so many *Washington Post* articles during the early 1990s that *Post* writer Eve Zibart was moved to write in 1994,

There are a great many good things to say about the nightspots in New U, and we've said most of them: the serious (that they've brought younger, more prosperous, more culturally and ethnically mixed Washingtonians to the once nearly deserted Cardozo/U Street neighborhood); the socioeconomic (that these are grass-roots entrepreneurs investing in the inner city and self-empowering and such); the silly (that they've replaced 14th Street's red lights with black lights); and the cynical (that thrift-store decor has become as cookie-cutter as fern bars).<sup>181</sup>

Zibart's comments illustrate both the quantity and the quality of U Street press coverage during this time period. Zibart continued, "It might be time to set a few things straight -- that the U Street Corridor is in danger of becoming awfully plastic."<sup>182</sup> With this statement, Zibart asserts her opinion that the reimagining of U Street was complete—that, in fact, the area had lost its "edgy" character that had made it unique and attractive in the first place.

In the imagining of U Street carried out by these journalists, U Street's history takes center stage. All of these articles mention U Street's history as part of their description of the new scene. While it may have been positioned as the "new Adams-Morgan," U Street's African American past made it distinct from any other area in the city. Thus, just as in the case of Georgetown, the popular press treatment of U Street helped to solidify the sense of the area as an important historic place. However—and this point is crucial—unlike Georgetown, it is U Street's *African American* past that is featured in these articles. Whereas the journalistic treatment of Georgetown in the 1940s and 1950s helped to wipe away that area's African

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<sup>181</sup> Eve Zibart, "Trendy Signs for U Street," *Washington Post*, 10 June 1994, N13.

<sup>182</sup> Zibart, N13.

American past, these articles worked to solidify the sense of U Street as an important African American historic area.

### **Remembering Historic U Street: Cultural Tourism Development**

This press coverage of U Street's arrival also paved the way for the arrival of cultural tourism efforts by establishing the perception of the area as having rid itself of the crime and vice that had previously plagued it. Thus, this press coverage, and the vision of U Street that it publicized, made the neighborhood navigable for cultural tourism.

The non-profit organization Cultural Tourism DC (CT/DC) has played a key role in making the U Street area "historic." Originally known as the D.C. Heritage and Tourism Coalition, the organization was founded in 1996. According to their website, the goals of CT/DC are to: "increase awareness of local cultural institutions among visitors and residents; promote pride and appreciation for Washington's arts and heritage; serve as a resource for neighborhoods seeking to develop their cultural tourism potential; and create more tax revenue, jobs, and business opportunities for the city."<sup>183</sup> CT/DC functions as a coalition of "more than 185 cultural and neighborhood organizations," as well as creating and promoting their own programming. Their website, the organization's main means of disseminating information, features information about upcoming events sponsored by members, general visitor information, cultural attractions (such as museums) throughout the city, historic neighborhoods, and historic tours and trails.

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<sup>183</sup> Cultural Tourism DC, "About Us—Overview," <[www.culturaltourismDC.org](http://www.culturaltourismDC.org)>

As their name and statement of goals make evident, CT/DC exemplifies the marriage of cultural and economic enterprises that the term “cultural tourism” has come to denote. While CT/DC seeks to expose residents and visitors to Washington’s “hidden treasures,” they do so in the context of increasing revenue for the city.

CT/DC’s impact on U Street’s sense of place began as early as 1997, through work done by the organization’s founding executive director, Kathryn S. Smith. In 1997, Smith was the co-curator of a temporary outdoor exhibit exploring the history and memory of U Street; the exhibit was mounted on a Metro construction fence and occupied the space until 1999. This project led to the creation of the “City Within a City: Greater U Street Heritage Trail,” a project launched in 2001 and co-sponsored by Cultural Tourism DC. The Greater U Street Heritage Trail is a self-guided walking tour, which uses a written pamphlet and a series of large placards posted throughout the U Street area to narrate the history of the neighborhood.

CT/DC’s Heritage Trail, particularly the placards located at various points along U Street, has played an essential role in publicizing the area’s past. These placards literally mark the landscape of U Street as “historic.” In other words, they act as a legitimizing force: U Street has been recognized as a historic place by an official authority. They are obvious and attention grabbing; while visitors to U Street may not notice the restored historic buildings, or may not have read the countless newspaper articles about U Street’s past, the markers are hard to miss.

These placards, and the accompanying pamphlet, also establish CT/DC’s version of the history of U Street. CT/DC focuses on U Street’s “golden age,” that of the 1920s through the 1950s. According to CT/DC, the story of U Street is a clear

“rise-fall-rise” narrative, defined by the rise of the neighborhood as Washington’s premiere African American community, its descent following desegregation and the 1968 riots, and its climb back up during the 1990s and twenty-first century to become one of Washington’s most hip, trendy areas. CT/DC emphasizes U Street’s self-sufficiency, the small-town feel of the area, and the presence of institutions such as the Industrial Savings Bank that demonstrate African American initiative and business enterprise.<sup>184</sup>

As scholar Stephanie Frank points out in her 2005 MA thesis, CT/DC’s version of the U Street story was the result of a (conscious or unconscious) choice to narrate the history of the area in a particular way. Drawing on oral history interviews with stakeholders connected to the U Street community, Frank contends that the CT/DC narrative offers only one of many possible interpretations of the area.

For example, one trope that has arisen in the “remembering” of U Street is the comparison of it to Harlem, specifically, predating and rivaling Harlem. While this analogy was made as early as the 1930s,<sup>185</sup> CT/DC solidifies this interpretation of U Street through their walking tour titled, “Before There was Harlem, There was U Street.” In making this comparison, CT/DC comments on U Street’s parallels to Harlem in its vibrant performing arts scene and tight-knit African American community, as well as on the fact that some of the key figures of the intellectual arm

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<sup>184</sup> Paul K. Williams and Kathryn S. Smith, *City Within a City: Greater U Street Heritage Trail*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition (Washington, D.C.: the Historical Society of Washington, D.C. and Cultural Tourism D.C., 2005).

<sup>185</sup> The guide to Washington produced by the Federal Writers Project in 1937 commented, “The area in the vicinity of Georgia Avenue and U Street represents the east end of Washington’s ‘Little Harlem,’ a region of Negro movies, beer parlors, poolrooms, and beauty salons.” Federal Writers’ Project, Works Progress Administration, *Washington, City and Capital* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. G.O, 1937), 710.

of the Harlem Renaissance, such as Langston Hughes and Alain Locke, lived and worked on U Street before relocating to Harlem.

However, CT/DC does not draw the parallel between U Street and Harlem to include the more risqué elements associated with Harlem.<sup>186</sup> To be more specific, historians have characterized Harlem as a “liminal” space, or an “interzone,” which both whites and African Americans of all social strata patronized in order to transgress the boundaries of what was considered morally, socially, and sexually appropriate for their genders, races, and classes.<sup>187</sup> The possibility of whether or not U Street served precisely the same function has not been explored by CT/DC or by scholars, though preliminary evidence suggests that this may have indeed been the case. In her work on African American women and the criminal underground economy, scholar Sharon Harley discusses the life of Odessa Marie Madre, the “Queen of Washington’s Underworld”; according to oral history sources, Madre operated “two illegal saloons and an elaborate bookmaking operation at 16<sup>th</sup> and U Street, N.W.”<sup>188</sup>

At the very least, evidence hints at the area as the playground of a hedonistic, decadent crowd. Another interpretation of the contemporary pun on the area’s name, “You Street,” besides indicating ownership of the space, is that U Street was a place

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<sup>186</sup> Frank, 38.

<sup>187</sup> For an analysis of Harlem as a liminal space (one of many throughout New York City), see George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890-1940* (New York: BasicBooks, 1994); for an analysis of the “interzone,” see Kevin J. Mumford, *Interzones: Black/White Sex Districts in Chicago and New York in the Early Twentieth Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997).

<sup>188</sup> Sharon Harley, “Working for Nothing but for a Living’: Black Women in the Underground Economy,” in *Sister Circle: Black Women and Work*, ed. Sharon Harley and the Black Women and Work Collective (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2002), 56.

for indulgence, to focus on *you*. As a 1946 article in the African American periodical *Newspic* commented, “Even rain has beauty along Washington’s glittering You Street after dark. Pleasure-seekers, desiring to stir up the moonbeams of their souls, spend most of their time and money in the theaters, night clubs, dance halls and business establishments along this main stem.”<sup>189</sup>

The 1925 epistolary novel *When Washington Was in Vogue* also suggests this idea of U Street as a place to throw off the constraints of everyday life. Written by native Washingtonian Edward Christopher Williams, and originally published anonymously in the African American newspaper *The Messenger*, the novel gives the reader an unparalleled feel for the sights and sounds of African American Washington during the 1920s. Williams’ narrator, Davy Carr, passes judgment on the self-indulgent behavior of the patrons of U Street nightclubs, theaters, and bars:

I took a walk up You Street while finishing my cigar, and watched the crowds coming out of the three movie theaters and at the entrances of the two or three well-known dance halls. As I look upon our folks on these days of prosperity, it is borne in upon me that we are indeed a pleasure-loving people, that we love display for its own sake, and fine clothes and the gauds of life... of course, I believe in pleasure as a natural and proper element in a well-ordered and normal life, but I fear, somehow, that we have the proportions wrong.<sup>190</sup>

In addition to downplaying the more risqué elements of U Street, CT/DC characterizes the U Street experience as almost entirely an African American story, with emphasis placed on the area’s African American businesses.<sup>191</sup> Such a narrative draws the focus away from U Street’s white residents and business owners, as well as

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<sup>189</sup> “Washington’s U Street,” *Newspic*, April 1946, unpaginated.

<sup>190</sup> Edward Christopher Williams, *When Washington Was in Vogue: A Love Story*. Previously published anonymously as *The Letters of Davy Carr* in *The Messenger*, January 1925-June 1926. Edited by Adam McKible (New York: HarperCollins, 2003), 33.

<sup>191</sup> Frank, 37.

those of other ethnicities, which existed alongside the area's African American population. Similarly, the focus of CT/DC's story is on middle-class residents, an emphasis that ignores the working class segment of the population. Finally, CT/DC maintains a clear spotlight on the 1920s to the 1950s, which "overlooks the positive strides during [the 1960s and 1970s] when the neighborhood hosted a flourishing of black arts, radicals, institutions, and jazz clubs in the 1960s and 1970s."<sup>192</sup>

All of this is not to say that CT/DC misinterprets the history of U Street in a radically inappropriate or ahistorical way. More, it is important to recognize that the version of U Street's history is just that: a version, an interpretation. No historian will deny that the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s saw a flourishing of African American artistic expression and business enterprise on U Street, or that the area hosted a predominantly African American population during this time period. As well, it is clear that drugs and crime became an acute problem in the U Street neighborhood during the 1970s and early 1980s. CT/DC chose to emphasize these aspects of the U Street story over others. This choice does not necessarily lead to a wholly inaccurate picture, but it does remain a less comprehensive narrative.

The question then becomes, why did CT/DC choose to present the history of U Street within this context, that is, with an emphasis on U Street's "golden age" of African American business, entertainment, and intellectual life? The most logical answer is that this version of the U Street story was the most palatable and marketable to a wide audience. In other words, CT/DC's narrative is the product of the "smoothing" process described by Hal Rothman, in which complicated stories, or those that threaten to disrupt the dominant paradigm, are brushed away.

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<sup>192</sup> Frank, 40.

In truth, this question—why CT/DC selected to present a particular historical narrative over another—is only part of a much larger question, one which is at the heart of my exploration of U Street’s revitalization: at this particular historical moment, why has U Street been imagined in the ways that I have described? Before answering this question, there is one more factor to investigate: that of U Street’s residential and commercial real estate boom.

### **Living and Working on the “New U”**

U Street’s transformation is bound up with the renewed interest in it as a place to live and work. While this demand for real estate may appear to have skyrocketed over night, like the general transformation of the area, it has been a gradual process. Articles in the *Washington Post* as early as the late 1970s and early 1980s chart a renewed interest in U Street residential property, noting the arrival of property-owners who had begun to renovate dilapidated townhouses. Admittedly, the area did not see the level of private restoration as did Georgetown in the 1920s and the 1930s; in this case, individual property owners have done less work in the reimagining of the area’s sense of place. However, private restoration has played a role.

Private restoration, along with commercial and real estate development, occurred even during the peak of U Street’s drug and criminal activity. A 1980 *Washington Post* article about the brutal murder of an elderly neighborhood resident provides a tragic commentary on this: “The neighborhood has a number of retired and elderly residents who have lived there for years. In recent months, those residents have been joined by young professionals who have renovated the sturdy row houses.

Such renovations usually bring sales offers much larger than the older residents had ever expected, and [the victim] had apparently received some offers.”<sup>193</sup> Private restoration increased steadily as crime rates fell and the reputation of the area as an affordable alternative to other high-priced areas grew; newspaper coverage during the late 1980s and early 1990s consistently mentions renovations of the housing stock carried out by newcomers to the area.

Journalists described these newcomers as “urban pioneers” braving the city’s “last frontier.” At the time this analogy was made, in the early 1980s, it helped to further the sense of the area as dangerous and crime-ridden, as a “fallen” area in need of salvation. This analogy also added the dimension of race to the situation: while newspaper articles claimed that newcomers to the area were not necessarily white, this analogy effectively racialized the long-time residents and the newcomers. One new white resident of the area, also a District of Columbia police officer, noted in 1980 that to live in Shaw, “You have to have a pioneer attitude or the Indians will get you.”<sup>194</sup>

Toward the end of the 1980s, developers as well as individuals began to take an interest in the area. Encouraged by factors such as the arrival of the Metro, and of new businesses, developers began to buy older buildings and vacant lots, renovate them, and put them back on the market. This development has only escalated since the late 1980s, and the early 2000s has seen a particular development boom.

Statistics kept by the Historic Preservation Review Board, part of the D.C. city

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<sup>193</sup> Athelia Knight, “‘Nice Lady’ Beaten to Death: Murder Shocks Neighbors in NW,” *Washington Post*, 12 April 1980, B1.

<sup>194</sup> Linda Wheeler, “Shaw, Old and New: City’s Last Frontier,” *Washington Post*, 15 June 1980, A1.

government's Office of Planning, indicate a dramatic escalation in the number of permit applications for changes to the area's historic buildings since the neighborhood was declared a historic district in 1998. In 1999, 63 permit applications were reviewed by the Historic Preservation Review Board; in 2005, 332.<sup>195</sup> In 2006, these numbers placed U Street as second only to the historic districts of Capitol Hill and Georgetown in terms of the overall number of permit applications reviewed.<sup>196</sup>

Interestingly, while real estate developers started buying and selling properties in the area during the mid-1980s, it was not until the mid-1990s that these properties were marketed as located on "U Street." A 1988 *Washington Post* article describes new development west of 14<sup>th</sup> Street, but discusses how real estate developers were attempting to capitalize on the popularity of the adjacent Dupont Circle neighborhood by calling the area around 14<sup>th</sup> and U Streets "Dupont East." By the mid-1990s, properties in the area were considered part of the neighborhood labeled "U Street." This fact is further evidence of U Street's reimagining: as popular press articles began to tout the area's history, developers made this a marketable feature of houses in the neighborhood. This ploy has continued: developers of new apartment buildings and luxury condominiums still draw on the history of the area as a means of promoting and selling these spaces. A particularly conspicuous example of this marketing of the past in the context of real estate is the Ellington, a mixed-use building which features

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<sup>195</sup> "21<sup>st</sup> Annual Report to the Council of the District of Columbia," Historic Preservation Review Board, District of Columbia Office of Planning, March 2000, 13; "27<sup>th</sup> Annual Report to the Council of the District of Columbia," Historic Preservation Review Board, District of Columbia Office of Planning, March 2006, 27.

<sup>196</sup> "27<sup>th</sup> Annual Report," 27.

restaurants and shops on the ground floor with apartments above, named for U Street's most famous resident.

Even for newcomers to the area who have not bought apartments in buildings like the Ellington, U Street's history has been an incentive to move there. The same 1993 *Washington Post* article that cited attractions such as trendy boutiques and nightspots also claimed, "But the biggest draw by far to the community, say those who live there, is its rich cultural heritage."<sup>197</sup> This is a common theme in articles detailing U Street's transformation, that is, the story of residents drawn to the area because of its history as an African American community. Noted one newcomer, who bought and restored a 100-year-old townhouse in 1998, "I definitely like the idea of living in a historic neighborhood. This was the Black Broadway. This was an African American neighborhood."<sup>198</sup> Quotes such as this are testimony to the strength of U Street's reimagining: the image of "Black Broadway" has become solidly attached to the neighborhood.

What has been the effect of these newcomers, and the area's increased popularity, on long-time area residents and businesses? A 2001 *Washington Post* article titled "Going Upscale on U St.: Wave of High-Priced Housing Developments Brings Praise, Concern for Once-Blighted Neighborhood" discusses the diversity of viewpoints surrounding the gentrification of the neighborhood.<sup>199</sup> While some area residents and businesspeople, real estate agents, and developers celebrate U Street's

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<sup>197</sup> Brenner, E1.

<sup>198</sup> Linda Wheeler, "Recovering a Part of D.C. History," *Washington Post*, 3 October 1998, G01.

<sup>199</sup> Daniela Deane, "Going Upscale on U Street: Wave of High-Priced Housing Developments Brings Praise, Concern for Once-Blighted Neighborhood," *Washington Post*, 24 March 2001, H01.

development as a trendy, premiere place to live and work, others worry about the impact of these changes on the older, more working-class residents, and the mom-and-pop businesses.

These concerns are well founded. Evidence suggests that U Street's development as a site of expensive housing and retail spaces has taken its toll on residents who cannot afford U Street's new cost of life. Transportation historian Zachary Schrag discusses the "accelera[tion] of the transformation" of the U Street area by the construction of the Green Line in 1991: "While a boon for the neighborhood, the Green Line has been a threat to the neighborhood's residents."<sup>200</sup>

More recently, a 2004 *Washington Post* article discusses the case of a small apartment building located on 14<sup>th</sup> and W Streets NW. Condemned by the city, ownership of the building was turned over to the former tenants, in the hopes of enabling them to renovate the building. However, these tenants, including some immigrant, non-English speaking families, found it too difficult to navigate the complex process of restoration, and elected to sell the building to a developer. The former tenants were paid \$114,000 for each apartment; the developer has decided to sell the entire building, for an asking price of \$4.4 million.<sup>201</sup> This example is reminiscent of the speedy and dramatic turnaround of the Bell's Court alley dwellings in Georgetown.

U Street's gentrification has also affected area businesses. One notable example is that of Sisterspace, a bookstore and community gathering place that was located at 15<sup>th</sup> and U Street until 2004. Faced with a huge increase in rent,

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<sup>200</sup> Schrag, 218.

<sup>201</sup> Debbie Wilgoren, "Ex-Owners Aghast at NW Building's Turnaround," *Washington Post*, 12 January 2004, B01.

Sisterspace's owners entered into a protracted legal battle with the owners of the building and finally were evicted from their retail space. While a 2004 *Washington Post* article points out, "Because most of the new construction [on U Street] is on lots that were vacant for years, few businesses have been displaced," the eviction of Sisterspace demonstrates the potential damage that gentrification of the area can have on local businesses.<sup>202</sup>

Issues of race underscore these concerns about the displacement of area residents. To be precise, some area residents feel that even as the cultural tourism promoters and city boosters proudly (and loudly) celebrate the area's African American heritage, the area's current African American residents are being forced out, or at the very least, that the area is losing its African American identity. U Street's demographics are indeed changing: census data indicate that the percentage of the area's residents claiming African American heritage has declined steadily over the last quarter-century, particularly in the last fifteen years.<sup>203</sup> While some applaud the multicultural, multiracial demography of the New U, others have voiced ardent concerns about the loss of the core African American population.

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<sup>202</sup> Debbie Wilgoren, "U Street Bookstore Eviction Set; Owners Denounce Corridor's Yuppification, Vow to Resist," *Washington Post*, 27 June 2004, C01. See also Paul Schwartzman, "In Shaw, Fighting Eviction, Change; Co-Owner of Cafe Protests a Loss of Black Culture, Spirit," *Washington Post*, 15 December 2005, T03.

<sup>203</sup> The U Street area encompasses two D.C. census tracts, 4300 and 4400; between 1990 and 2000, the population of African American residents residing within these two census tracts declined by 19% and 14%, respectively. NeighborhoodInfo D.C., "D.C. Census Tract Profile: Tract 4300," and "D.C. Census Tract Profile: Tract 4400" <<http://www.neighborhoodinfoDC.org/>>

## **Concluding Remarks**

As I have discussed, the public perception of Washington's U Street neighborhood has shifted dramatically over the course of the twentieth century. This perception, which includes a distinct historical narrative, has been created through a variety of forces, all of which have shaped and molded it into what it is today: the most celebrated example of Washington, D.C.'s African American past. City planners and politicians, non-profit and community groups, cultural tourism professionals, and real estate brokers have all contributed to this redefinition. Ironically, the recent popularity of the area, the product of the new acclaim of U Street as "Black Broadway," now threatens long-time residents who were part of this historical moment.

As I alluded to earlier in this chapter, the most pressing question in understanding the revitalization of U Street is, why was it imagined in this particular way? Why was this particular thread—the social and cultural life of U Street's African American residents during the 1920s and the 1930s—teased out to be featured above all others? The answer to this question has much to do with both America's and D.C.'s racial politics at the turn of the twenty-first century. To begin, I argue that this overwhelming attention to U Street's African American past, much like the recent efforts to uncover Georgetown's "hidden" African American history, is the result of widespread awareness of and interest in African American history over the past fifty years. With the cultural, social, and political changes wrought during the 1960s and 1970s, it has become evident that to ignore African Americans in interpreting American history is to miss a critical piece of the puzzle. Furthermore,

not only have already established historic sites begun to investigate this, but also new sites have developed—have “become historic”—precisely because they are part of the African American narrative. Such is the case of U Street.

This has particularly been the case with the recognition of D.C. as a predominantly African American city. Drawing on the legacy of Washington’s African American intellectualism and activism of the early twentieth century, African American activists centered in Washington in the 1960s and 1970s forced politicians and the general public to recognize the size of the African American population along with its particular needs and history. This awareness has grown with the advent of home rule, under which D.C. has been guided by African American mayors. These historical conditions have created a political and cultural atmosphere within which U Street’s African American past could not be overlooked. Thus, Mayor Sharon Pratt Kelly’s comment, in the context of the restoration of the Lincoln Theater, “At last we see *our* history restored and beautified again.”<sup>204</sup>

In addition, the story of U Street’s African American past has proven a marketable one. Contributors to the revitalization of U Street, from *Washington Post* writers to realtors to city officials, realized that U Street’s story—both its revitalization and its history—could capture the public’s interest. D.C. residents of all ethnicities and backgrounds have been attracted to U Street because of its African American past, whether or not they are intending to live, work, or just visit the area. In other words, U Street’s past became a marketable commodity to potential residents, visitors, and entrepreneurs. Whether or not U Street patrons are jazz aficionados making a pilgrimage to U Street’s jazz clubs, young working

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<sup>204</sup> See note 170.

professionals looking to live somewhere besides a cookie-cutter suburban subdevelopment, or African Americans seeking to experience a place they identify with their history, U Street's history has become a draw.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, U Street has been constructed in this particular way because it adheres to the image of D.C. as embodying a national narrative. This last point deserves more extensive commentary, and will be explored in further detail in the Conclusion.

## Conclusion

This thesis has examined how two Washington, D.C. neighborhoods came to be known as historic areas. In the case of both U Street and Georgetown, there was more to making these places historic than the official recognition of them as such by the city and federal government. As I have discussed, to achieve this distinction involved the work of a variety of forces: popular press coverage, historic preservation, cultural tourism, and other commemorative activities. In the case of both of these neighborhoods, how these areas were defined as historic varied according to the social, economic, and cultural conditions of the time period. This is particularly obvious in the relationship between these historic districts and their African American populations. As I have demonstrated, the twentieth century has seen both the erasure and embrace of African American history as part of Washington, D.C.'s historic landscape. Whereas the definition of Georgetown as historic hinged on the removal of African Americans, this was the opposite case along U Street, which became historic because it was deemed an important African American community.

The question remains, then, why? I argue for the primacy of timing in explaining the commemoration of Georgetown and U Street in this particular way. In the 1930s, when "Historic Georgetown" was beginning to develop, the category of race was not a factor of historical analysis or commemoration. Virtually categorically, American history was understood in solely white terms. However, by the late 1980s, in understanding the history of a place, it was no longer socially,

culturally, or politically acceptable to ignore the issue of race or the achievements of African Americans. Consequently, historic sites throughout the country began to incorporate African American history into their interpretative framework: sites as traditional in their approach and interpretation as Colonial Williamsburg started to note the presence and history of African Americans. These interpretations were not without weaknesses—indeed, some would argue that they were deeply flawed. On the whole, though, their presence at all is indicative of change; as Jeffrey C. Stewart and Fath Davis Ruffins explain, “By 1980, for the first time in American history, a positive image of the black past had become a fixture in public expressions of American culture.”<sup>205</sup>

This was particularly the case in Washington, D.C., because (as I explored in Chapter One), D.C. was—and continues to be—envisioned as representative of the nation. D.C.’s local history was constructed in accordance with the idea of Washington as the national city. The stakeholders who participated in the reimagining of Georgetown did not consider the presence and achievements of African Americans to be a serious part of the neighborhood’s, or the nation’s, historical narrative. Though ostensibly Georgetown was positioned in opposition to Washington, its sense of history was drawn from its connections to the history of the District; it was still seen as very much a part of D.C. In the 1930s, for a neighborhood defined as part of the national city, African Americans did not and could not enter the picture.

However, in the post-Civil Rights era, in the age of the multicultural nation, it was no longer possible for the “national” city to ignore its African American residents

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<sup>205</sup> Stewart and Ruffins, 333.

or its African American history. By the 1980s, African Americans had achieved full status as citizens; African American contributions to American culture, society, and history were widely recognized. As I discussed in Chapter One, Washington, D.C. has had to contain certain things in order to satisfy the vision of it as the capital city, as representative of the country. In the early twentieth century, this meant awe-inspiring architecture and monuments and memorials to (white) citizens and accomplishments. In today's American society, in addition to these traditional facets of the capital, this has meant a more inclusive commemorative enterprise. In other words, this has meant celebrating the achievements and historical narrative of a range of particular groups, namely African Americans. Stewart and Ruffins argue, "Black people were once thought to be marginal to the main story of the American past, but now we know that they are central to it."<sup>206</sup> This centrality has been recognized to such an extent that in today's world, in an age when Martin Luther King's birthday is a national holiday, to ignore the African American past of the national city would be a grave sin indeed. Thus, U Street's history was commemorated with an eye to its African American past—or, arguably, as singularly African American.

Two new structures—planned but not yet built—to be located on the National Mall are indicative of this incorporation of African Americans into Washington's "commemorative capital," to use Rudy Koshar's phrase. Just as African Americans are now recognized in D.C.'s local history, so too are they commemorated on the National Mall. November 14, 2006 marked the groundbreaking ceremony of the National Martin Luther King, Jr. Memorial, to be located along the edge of the Tidal Basin, near the Franklin Delano Roosevelt Memorial and facing the Jefferson

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<sup>206</sup> Stewart and Ruffins, 506.

Memorial. King will be the first African American, as well as the first private citizen (besides the figurative representation of American soldiers) to be commemorated on the Mall.<sup>207</sup> As well, the newest Smithsonian Museum, the National Museum of African American Culture and History, is to be located on the Mall adjacent to the Washington Monument and is slated to open in 2016. The interpretations that these memory sites will convey remains to be seen; however, the decision to locate them within such a symbolic space is indicative of change along the National Mall.

In a sense, however, the commemoration of Georgetown and U Street in this way—in the image of the Washington as the capital city—effectively extends the metaphorical, symbolic space of the Mall to include the entire city of Washington. The boundaries of the space defined as the Mall have always been malleable; they were first pushed outwards to include first the Lincoln Memorial, and then newer memorials such as the Jefferson and FDR Memorials (and now the King Memorial). Based on my analysis of the commemoration of Washington’s local history (in the form of the Georgetown and U Street neighborhoods), I argue that the entire city of D.C. acts as a memory site. Thus, we see the achievement of the McMillan Commission’s vision of the city, as a place where Americans go to remember the past and honor their country.

### **The Presence of the Past**

What have been the effects of the reimagining of these areas? To begin, as Georgetown and U Street came to be known as historic, they became increasingly

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<sup>207</sup> Petula Dvorak and Robert E. Pierre, “In King’s Honor, A Dream Achieved,” *Washington Post*, 14 November 2006, A01.

desirable places to live and work. This increased desirability led to the displacement of long-time residents and businesses. In the case of Georgetown, this segment of the population was largely African American; in the case of U Street, this process is still evolving, but evidence seems to point to a similar outcome. Thus, the reimagining of these areas had concrete repercussions for real people: a concept that seems quite academic meant that people could no longer afford to live in a certain area. The past played an obvious and concrete role in defining the conditions of the present. In short, these case studies demonstrate the power of historical narratives to shape the trajectory of communities and of residents' lives.

What lessons can be learned through this examination of the creation of these historic areas? The displacement of Georgetown's African American population offers a clear-cut example of the consequences of neighborhood revitalization without reflection. In the years since the revitalization of Georgetown, certain measures have been put into place in hopes of preventing the whole-scale elimination of a community in the name of progress: for example, laws that require the convening of a public hearing before a neighborhood can be declared a historic district.<sup>208</sup> However, as the example of U Street's gentrification demonstrates, these provisions do not always prevent urban revitalization from affecting an area's long-standing population. In the case of U Street, while the District of Columbia city government may have celebrated the history of the area, this was done as a means of encouraging real estate development and public investment in the area. The city's main emphasis has been on establishing U Street as a safe, crime-free place to live, work, and visit. This

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<sup>208</sup> The 1960s "urban renewal" of the Southwest quadrant of the city, which resulted in the near-total destruction of the community there, served as an additional spur to more responsible urban planning and revitalization. See Gillette, Jr., *Between Justice and Beauty*.

bottom line has meant privileging real estate development—which has been a main deterrent of crime—over the maintenance of U Street’s core community. While the city has indicated an investment in preserving the historic structures located on U Street, that is, in its physical fabric, this commitment to protection has not been extended to include the actual residents of these buildings.

There is no easy solution to the problem of protecting neighborhoods that have been established as “historic” from gentrification. However, gentrification is not the inevitable outcome of this process. To begin, though, city officials must take the displacement of long-time residents seriously, without shrugging away the problem as “just the way things are.”<sup>209</sup>

One hundred years ago, few people could have imagined Georgetown as the home of the rich, the famous, and the politically powerful—and almost entirely white. Similarly, residents of “Black Broadway” during the 1920s surely would gasp at the idea of their neighborhood as the site of million-dollar condominiums. These changes illustrate the inherent dynamism of Washington, D.C.’s sense of place. However, it remains unclear as to whether or not this dynamic nature will eventually lead to shifts in the current understanding of Georgetown and U Street. Will Georgetown’s African American past truly be popularly understood and recognized? Will U Street’s multiethnic past, or its possible status as a vice district, come to light? Adding new dimensions to the historic narratives that have become embedded in

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<sup>209</sup> In a 2001 *Washington Post* article, Milton Bailey, director of the D.C. Department of Housing and Community Development, affirmed the city’s commitment to affordable housing in the U Street area but allowed, “The unfortunate reality is that some residents will be displaced.” Deane, “Going Upscale on U Street,” H01.

these neighborhoods will take concerted, self-conscious efforts on the part of public and academic historians, the popular press, and residents of the areas themselves.

This much is certain: as the twenty-first century progresses, other neighborhoods in Washington will be subject to a similar set of pressures as U Street and Georgetown. How the histories of these places will be defined, and whether or not this process of definition will lead to the displacement of long-time residents, remains to be seen. However, the first step toward reversing the precedent established by Georgetown and U Street is the recognition of the process and consequences of how these areas were made “historic.”

### **Concluding Remarks**

In his exploration of the European collective memory of World War I, Jay Winter remarks, “Remembrance is part of the landscape,” referring specifically to the landscape of postwar France.<sup>210</sup> I would edit Winter’s sentence to make a more general statement: “Remembrance is part of landscape.” Collective memory, solidified in physical form, is all around us, even if we are far removed from the war memorials and cemeteries of northern France. Washington, D.C. offers a remarkable example of this. As an urban landscape, it contains layer upon layer of the physical remnants of the past; as the capital city, these layers are configured in particular ways. What I see in my walks around the city—not to mention the fact of my decision to explore or venture into particular parts of the city over others—is informed by the

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<sup>210</sup> Jay Winter, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: The Great War in European Cultural History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 1.

public interpretation of Washington's history. In Washington, D.C., the twentieth century has seen a proliferation of "capital constructions," the creation of historic areas that are necessarily the products of both greater societal conditions as well as the understanding of D.C. as representative of the nation. Awareness of the process through which these constructions were created reveals a greater understanding of Washington. The project of this thesis has been to unravel the process of these constructions, in order to better understand this symbolic city, and the social, cultural, and political conditions that have made it the way it is today.

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