

THE NEGRO IN WASHINGTON

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EDITOR'S NOTE:

This chapter is reprinted in its entirety from the original Federal Writers' Project Guide to Washington, D.C., published in 1937. In the 1942 edition, this material was substantially cut, and much of what was most interesting about it was lost. We include it here to show the full breadth of the original.

THE history of Washington so far sketched has been a chronicle of events from the city's distant beginnings to its indelible present, concerning itself mainly with the white population. But the story would remain incomplete without a discussion of the Negro in Washington who, from the start, exerted a profound influence upon the city's destiny. Aside from the fact that at the present day the Negro population constitutes more than one-fourth of the city's total, the Negro's subtler influences are by far greater than might be apparent on the surface.

Chronologically this subject lends itself to treatment in three distinct periods.

I. FROM THE BEGINNINGS TO THE CIVIL WAR

Benjamin Banneker, a Negro mathematician, was appointed by George Washington to serve on Major L'Enfant's commission for the surveying and laying out of the city. Though this might be considered symbolic of the Negro's later participation in Washington life, the lot of Banneker's fellows, even in our times, has hardly been so auspicious. Viewing Washington in its early years Thomas Moore found

Even here beside the proud Potomac's streams . . .
The medley mass of pride and misery
Of whips and charters, manacles and rights
Of slaving blacks and democratic whites . . .

Though spoken by a pro-British son of Erin, his indictment is substantiated by other sources.

It was not alone the shabby contrast between the profession of democracy and the practice of slavery that struck the observer, nor was it chiefly the brutality of the working and living conditions of

In no part of the earth—not even excepting the rivers on the Coast of Africa, was there so great, so infamous a slave market, as in the metropolis, in the seat of government of this nation which prides itself on freedom.

A chorus of voices rose in harmony with Randolph's. The sight recorded by Torrey, and engraved as the frontispiece of his *Portraiture of Domestic Slavery*, of a coffee of manacled slaves, like a butcher's drove of hobbled cattle, passing along the east front of the ruined Capitol, became a familiar figure in the many orations attacking the traffic. The struggle for abolition in the District recruited such men as Benjamin Lundy, Salmon P. Chase, Charles Miner, Charles Sumner, William Lloyd Garrison, Henry Wilson, William H. Seward, and Abraham Lincoln when serving as Congress-man. John Quincy Adams' famous fight for free speech and against the "gag rule" in Congress was prompted by the refusal of the two Houses to hear petitions for the abolition of slavery in the District of Columbia. But the forces commanded by men like Calhoun were too great, and while solicitude was expressed by Northerners and Southerners, Congress, which had the power to abolish, refused to act. The District, wedged in between two slave States, was kept slave territory, and the slave trade prospered until the Compromise of 1850. The black code of the District was even more severe than the codes of Maryland and Virginia of which it was the reenactment, and the "stealing" of free Negroes was shamefully widespread. William Wells Brown, in *Clotel*, the first novel by a Negro, has one of his heroines jump into the Potomac to escape slave catchers.

The Negroes of Washington, both free and slave, at times took matters into their own hands against these flagrant abuses. The Underground Railroad had important stopping places in Washington; ex-slaves today remember churches whose basements served as layovers, and out-of-the-way Georgetown homes that were specially marked for the fugitives. One of the famous trails started at a cemetery skirting the stage road leading north from the city. It is probable that Harriet Tubman, "the Moses of her people", the greatest underground agent, worked around Washington as well as on the Eastern Shore. Legend has it that she was discovered by her friends asleep in a local park beneath a sign advertising a reward for her capture, which meant nothing to her, as she could not read.

In 1848, 77 Negroes under slave and free Negro leadership, took advantage of the relaxed patrolling of Washington while it was celebrating the liberty of the new French Republic, and escaped on board Captain Drayton's *Pearl*. But at Cornfield Harbor, 140 miles from Washington, contrary winds forced the schooner into

slaves in the District of Columbia. Although conditions hardly deserved to be called ideal, still the cook, coachman, and artisan, in Alexandria, Georgetown, or Washington, or the truck-farmer in the rural areas surrounding these towns was generally better off than the field hand in the deep South and Southwest. What brought ill-fame to the District was the extensive slave trading conducted here. Because of its location, the District served as a natural outlet for both the coastwise slave ships and the overland coffees and was rightly called the very seat and center of the domestic slave traffic.

The District of Columbia, too small for slave rearing itself, served as depot for the purchases of interstate traders, who combed Maryland and northern Virginia for slaves. Since the slave jails, colloquially known as "Georgia pens", and described by an ex-slave as worse than hog holes, were inadequate for the great demand, the public jails were made use of, accommodations for criminals having to wait upon the more pressing and lucrative traffic in slaves. There were pens in what is now Potomac Park; and one in the Decatur House, fronting on what is now Lafayette Square. More notorious were McCandless' Tavern in Georgetown; in Washington, Robey's Tavern at Seventh and Maryland Avenue, and Williams' "Yellow House" at Eighth and B Streets SW. In Alexandria, the pretentious establishment of Armfield and Franklin, who by 1834 were sending more than a thousand slaves a year to the Southwest, was succeeded and surpassed by the shambles of the much-feared Kephart.

In 1819, when Miller's Tavern at Thirtieth and I Streets NW. was on fire, a bystander, William Gardiner, refused to leave the customary bucket brigade and loudly denounced the slave trade. The resulting controversy conducted in newspaper columns revealed the tragic past of the tavern. A Negro woman, about to be sold South apart from her husband, had leapt in frenzy from an attic window, breaking both arms and injuring her back, but surviving. This focused attention upon the local slave trade. Humanitarian Jesse Torrey came to Washington shortly after the attempted suicide, visited the injured woman, and discovered two kidnapped Negroes in the attic. He began suit in the circuit court for their freedom, the expenses being defrayed by a group of persons headed by Francis Scott Key, who gave his legal services gratis. It is highly probable that the stir attendant upon this celebrated case urged the slave owner John Randolph to that bitter invective in which he said:

"You call this the land of liberty, and every day that passes things are done in it at which the despotisms of Europe would be horror-struck and disgusted."

Nat Turner's insurrection in Virginia in 1831, colored preachers were banned. Curfew rang at 10 o'clock for all Negroes, free or slave.

In spite of all this the class of free Negroes increased and, in the main, advanced. Though forbidden by law to do so many succeeded, through the connivance of friendly whites, in opening and running such businesses as hotels, taverns, saloons, and restaurants. In the District, as in so many southern cities, they had a monopoly of barbering and free colored boys were porters and bootblacks. Waiters were numerous and, in the gay hospitality of a southern city, were comparatively well paid. There were many skilled carpenters, bricklayers, shoemakers, stonemasons, wheelwrights, blacksmiths, plasterers, printers, cabinetmakers, cab drivers, and draymen. For free colored women the opportunities were limited to dressmaking, laundry work, nursing, and general housework.

With chances for a livelihood scanty, many Negroes were driven to petty larceny. The newspapers, as is their custom, interpreted this frequently as grand larceny. The Old Center Market was the resort of plundering marauders. Many Negroes ignored or violated the laws, particularly the curfew. Race riots developed in spite of the fact that the penalty for striking a white man was the cropping of the ears (exacted in the District until 1862). Mulattoes sometimes set up invidious self-defeating distinctions against their darker brothers. Frequently the blacks retaliated. There were unfortunate examples of Negroes serving as informers, as catchers of runaway slaves, as hat-in-hand seekers of personal favors, and ex-slaves still speak with hatred of one Stonestreet, a Negro slave-kidnaper. But more often there was co-operation, the Resolute Beneficial Society being founded for concerted action toward the betterment of conditions. Occasionally free Negroes owned slaves. However, they were usually wealthier Negroes buying kinsfolk for liberation.

The free Negro was avid for education. In 1807, shortly after the first two white schoolhouses had been built, three recently freed Negroes who could not read or write hired a white teacher and set up the first school for Negroes. More successful were the ventures of such pioneers as Louisa Parke Costin, Mary Wornley, Arabella Jones, Father Vanlonen, and Maria Beecraft. John F. Cook, a shoemaker, set up a school in 1834, 8 years after his aunt, Aletha Tanner, had purchased his freedom. The Snow Riot gave a set of hoodlums the excuse for attacking his school. Cook fled to Pennsylvania, but returned a year later, doggedly intent upon his mission. Myrtilla

shelter and an armed steamer captured the runaways and the crew. The manner of flight had been betrayed by a Negro hackman. Captain Drayton was mobbed (an Irishman cutting off a piece of his ear), sentenced to a fine of \$10,000, and imprisoned until Summer Negroes there was only occasional intercession. Emily and Mary Edmondson, long covered by the trader Brinn, were sold South, but later were redeemed through Henry Ward Beecher and other sympathizers. Another Emily, who had hoped to reach her mother in New York, met with a different fate. Said to be the "finest looking woman in this county", and destined as a "fancy article" for New Orleans, she died from exposure on the overland trek. Her mother, who had bought herself free by labors over the washtub, thanked God.

In 1830 there were 6,152 free Negroes in the District of Columbia compared with 6,119 slaves; in 1840, 8,367 compared with 4,694 slaves; and in 1860, 11,131 compared with only 3,185 slaves. Thus, in 30 years, the free colored population was nearly doubled, while the slave population was halved. It would be inaccurate to infer from this that there was any wholesale manumission or that the District was a haven for free Negroes. The free Negroes were of several classes: Those whose antecedents had never been slaves, such as descendants of indentured servants; those born of free parents, or of free mothers; those manumitted; those who had won their own freedom, or whose kinsmen had bought it for them; and those who were successful runaways. These free Negroes were ever present "bad example" to the slaves of the District and of the surrounding slave States, and the more they prospered, the "worse example" they became.

Especially stringent regulations affecting free Negroes were added by the District Common Council to the slave codes. Every free Negro was required: (1) to give the mayor "satisfactory evidence of freedom", plus \$50 for himself, and \$50 for each member of his family; (2) to post a bond for \$1,000 and to secure five white guarantors of good behavior. It was necessary to show manumission papers in order to remain free; even so, gangs bent on kidnapping could and frequently did seize and destroy them. No Negro, slave or free, could testify against whites. The jails were crowded with captured free Negroes and suspected runaways; there were 290 of these in the city jail at one time. Many were sold for prison fees, ostensibly for a fixed period, but really for life. Meetings for any other than fraternal and religious purposes were forbidden. After

Miner, a white woman from New York, driven from place to place in the city in her attempt to establish a Negro school, finally purchased the entire square between what are now Nineteenth and Twentieth and M and O Streets. Harriet Beecher Stowe's donation of \$1,000 helped her greatly in this purchase, and Johns Hopkins was one of the trustees. Her students were insulted and attacked by white men along the streets. The buildings were stoned and set afire. But Miss Miner stood her ground. Using some of their leisure time, she and Emily Edmondson (of the famous case of the *Pearl*) warned hoodlums of their mettle by firing pistols at a target in the yard.

The education of Negroes was frowned upon by the majority of whites in the District, especially after Nat Turner's famous uprising. Negroes paid taxes for the support of white schools, but received no consideration themselves. Private Negro schools continued to spring up and no school closed its doors for lack of "scholars." In 1860 there were more than 1,200 free colored children in school.

Church was the solace of the free Negroes. Negro Methodism in the District started in 1820 when a group of free Negroes withdrew from Ebenezer Church and formed a separate congregation. After 1831 when obvious discrimination started in most of the white churches, other Negro groups withdrew from congregations. At St. Johns Church an outside stairway leading to the gallery was called the "niggers' backstairs to heaven." But the Negro members decided that there must be other ways to get there and left the church. In 1833 the First Baptist Church, moving from Nineteenth and I Streets NW, to a new edifice which later became the Metropolitan Theater, instituted segregation. Negro members stayed in their own homes. One feature of the churches was the popularity of Sabbath schools among adults as well as among children because they furnished instruction in the three R's. Taking advantage of every chance, the free Negro frequently left Jonah waiting and the Walls of Jericho standing while he fathomed the mysteries of the alphabet.

The houses in which free Negroes lived ran the gamut from hovels to commodious homes. The first were remote from slave quarters, and crouched behind the imposing dwellings of employers, or were grouped in hidden alleyways. The homes of the well-to-do, scattered here and there, were purchased before the law forbidding free Negroes to own property was passed, or later in defiance of it. There were some separate communities, especially in Southwest Washington, "on the island" (so-called because the Tiber and the old canal cut it off from the city). Many free Negroes were poverty stricken,

and gave point to the proslavery argument of the wretched freedman, but with the odds against them, it is surprising that this impoverished class was not larger. Many, comparatively wealthy, owned property in such a valuable section as Fifteenth and New York Avenue; many had homes on Sixteenth Street; and a feed dealer, Alfred Lee, purchased the mansion on H Street which had been the British Embassy. In 1865, when scoffers charged that Negroes did not own \$40,000 worth of property in the whole city, it was proved that in one square their holdings aggregated \$45,592. At the time of the Emancipation Act, Negroes in the District of Columbia were paying taxes on \$650,000 worth of real estate.

II. FROM THE CIVIL WAR TO THE TURN OF THE CENTURY

In 1862, the year in which slavery was abolished in the District, President Lincoln authorized the enlisting of Negroes as part of the Army. Two regiments were soon mustered in from the District and vicinity, the First organized at Washington in May 1863, and the Second at Arlington a month later. These regiments served with honor at Fair Oaks, Petersburg, Fort Taylor, and in other battles. It is estimated that the District supplied over 3,000 colored troops of the 200,000 in the Union Army. Negro contrabands, male and female, had earlier crowded to the camps, eager to serve as teamsters and road builders, laundresses, and cooks for "Marse Lincoln's boys."

As early as 1862 more than 13,000 refugees had collected in Washington, Alexandria, Hampton, and Norfolk. The Emancipation Proclamation in 1863 was an added stimulus to Negroes to flee to the Union lines. Washington, strategically located for slave trading, now became the favorite place toward which contrabands headed. The mustering out of Negro regiments in Washington at the close of the war further increased their number in the District. Washington became a Mecca for Negroes in the next two decades, and in 1880 there were 59,696 in the city and its immediate environs. The proportion to the city's population (about one-third) remained fairly constant.

The picture therefore is greatly changed from what it had been in 1867, when one-fifth of all owners of real estate had been Negroes. In the main the refugees were illiterate and penniless. At their best, these people were intelligent and eager to help themselves; at their worst they showed, in the words of a Federal chaplain, "cringing deceit, theft, licentiousness, all the vices which slavery inevitably fosters." They constituted a grave problem for the District. One

proposed way out was colonization. President Lincoln favored this, and Congress appropriated funds for transportation to Liberia or Haiti. Several hundred former slaves were shipped to the Island of Vache, Haiti. But when their plight became desperate, a war-ship was sent after them. They were settled in Arlington in a place known as "Freedmen's Village", very near a tract left by George Washington Parke Custis to his colored daughter, Maria Syphax. Appeals were made to encourage Negroes to migrate en masse to sections farther north, or to return to the plantations in the South. But the majority chose to remain in Washington.

The first contrabands during the war were housed in the old "Brick Capitol", on the site of the present Supreme Court Building. They were then moved to what was Duff Green's Row, east of the Capitol. As the flood swept in, McClellan's Barracks housed them, and then numerous barracks were built in Washington and Alexandria. Two hundred tenements were fitted up at Campbell Hospital. Many Negroes settled in the neighborhoods of the old forts. The Fort Reno settlement in Tenleytown is one of the last of these to succumb to fine suburban developments. In the main, however, philanthropic efforts did not prove equal to the housing shortage. Real-estate agents floated a project that resulted in Washington's notorious "alley system." The deep back yards, and even the front yards provided by L'Enfant's plan, were found to promise more alluring rewards than lovely gardens. Lots were divided and the rear portions sold separately. The first of the ill-fated alleys, as the present day Washington knows them, were laid out in 1867. In 1897 there were 333 alleys, inhabited by approximately 19,000 people, more than three-fourths of them Negroes. Shacks costing as little as \$10 proved highly profitable investments. Here, in these disease-infested sites, ex-slaves got their first taste of freedom. And it is here that, in too large numbers, their children's children still drag out their lives.

Negro communities had such suggestive names as Goose Level, Vinegar Hill, Froggy Bottom, Hell's Bottom, Swampoodle, and Bloodfield. Cowtown, so-called because, outside of the city proper, cows and hogs and chickens ranged at will on sidewalks and streets, was the present Barry Place. Of a somewhat higher level were the communities across the Anacostia: The Flats, Hillsdale, Barry Farms (an earlier settlement of race-conscious slaves), Stantonstown, Garfield; those in the northeast at Benning, and Burville; and Brightwood, in the vicinity of Fort Stevens and Fort Slocum. Georgetown had its goodly share of oldest inhabitants,

who sat aloof, gazing with well-bred disdain at the ignorant trespassers. Other prosperous Negroes were scattered in almost all of the quiet residential sections.

For new arrivals, accustomed chiefly to manual labor in the fields, there was little employment to be found in a city predominantly governmental and residential. Pauperism forced many to eke out a living by pickings on the dumps. Many took to pilfering. It is hardly a matter of wonder that the rate of crime was high. The paths of many Negroes led straight from the alley to the workhouse. Crimes of violence were numerous. In 1891 the superintendent of police attributed much of the crime to the neglected state of the Negro child. Illegitimacy was frequent. Health conditions were wretched. The death rate in 1891 for Negroes was nearly double that for whites, and both were far too high. The death rate was largely increased by infant mortality. In spite of all this, Negroes were unwilling to go to the poorhouse. Perhaps they saw no reason merely to change addresses.

And yet the grimness of the picture is not without some relief. The Freedmen's Bureau, missionary organizations, and Negroes themselves with their lodges, churches, and schools, waged a determined though hard-pressed battle against prejudice, poverty, and ignorance. The Freedmen's Bureau was created by act of Congress in 1865, for "relief work, education, regulation of labor, and administration of justice", among the freedmen. Major General Oliver Otis Howard, who had lost an arm at Fair Oaks but had returned to serve under Sherman and as commander of the Army of Tennessee, was named commissioner. Unable to cope successfully, for all its gallant efforts, with the problems of destitution and housing, the Freedmen's Bureau exerted its greatest influence in the establishing of Freedmen's Hospital, Howard University, and a number of schools for Negroes that eventually became a part of the city school system. Some of the officials of the Bureau were connected with the Freedmen's Savings and Trust Company which, contrary to the opinions of some, was never controlled by Negroes. This company did not withstand the contagion of the Gilded Age. With its central bank in Washington and 34 branches in the South, it "received in the aggregate deposits amounting to \$37,000,000 from more than 70,000 depositors, chiefly Negroes." It taught valuable lessons in thrift, but when, following the panic of 1873, the imprudence of its investments and the dishonesty of certain directors forced it to close its doors, it taught the freedmen an embittering lesson.

Although an act of Congress ruled that Washington and Georgetown should allocate to the trustees of colored schools a proportionate part of all moneys received, the corporation of Washington refused to do this as late as November 1867. After this Negro schools fared well. The northern missionary associations which had conducted schools in temporary barracks and basements of churches joined forces. A high school was organized in 1870. One of its frequent removals found it in Myrtilla Miner's famous building. Then in 1891, M Street High School was erected. Night schools, privately maintained for day-time workers, became part of the public-school system in 1886. George F. T. Cook, son of the militant educator John F. Cook, was appointed superintendent of schools in 1868. A heated contest was waged in 1871 under the leadership of William H. A. Wormley and William Syphax to remove all restrictions of color from the public schools, but those opposing segregation were defeated by whites and some Negroes who feared that mixed schools would return the issue to local politics, and the death of the progressing schools.

The old Negro preacher in Georgetown was one of the freed Negro: "Fifteen years after he came out of slavery, what did he do? Sat down by the River of Babylon and sang, 'Peace at home and pleasure abroad', and went to sleep down by the weeping willows for 25 years", was overstating the case. There was domesticity, if gradual economic advance. Many made their living as domestics, barbers, cobblers, grocers, dry-goods merchants, artisans, contractors, real-estate operators, hucksters, market vendors, saloonkeepers, and hotel-keepers. Others inherited property, made prudent investments, and became prosperous. Colored firemen were appointed on a full-time basis in 1870; colored policemen have been on the force since the Metropolitan Police was organized in the sixties. A colored police-man arrested General Grant for speeding; whether the culprit had set his people free or not, the law was the law.

At Fifteenth and H Streets stood one of Washington's most exclusive hotels, catering to family patronage and the congressional and diplomatic sets. This was owned and managed by a Negro, William Wormley, close friend of Charles Sumner. Many Negroes found employment in the Government service, most of them as laborers, messengers, a few as clerks. Certain political plums fell to Negroes such as the positions of the fourth Auditor, the Register of the Treasury, and the Recorder of Deeds. There was an increasing professional class of doctors, lawyers, preachers, and teachers. Professors were ubiquitous, professors of music, of the dance, of the cakewalk,

of algebra, and of penmanship. The title is not so comic when one recalls how rarely a Negro is granted the title "Minister."

Though politically well informed and articulate, the Negro of Washington in this period exerted little force. His newly acquired suffrage was swept away by the disfranchisement of the District in 1874, an act which was definitely influenced by the fact that Negroes comprised one-fourth of the population. Political figures among them, however, were numerous. There were over a score of Congressmen, many intelligent and able. Those whose imprint was most lasting upon Negro history were Robert Brown Elliott, John M. Langston, and John R. Lynch, who later corrected many of Rhodes' inaccuracies in reconstruction history. Representative Ransier caused a commotion during one session while John T. Harris of Virginia was declaiming: "And I say that there is not one gentleman upon this floor who can honestly say that he really believes that the colored man is created his equal." Ransier interrupted with a casual "I can." Later, Ransier, listening to a Negro-baiter who insisted that the Civil Rights Bill meant that Negroes would absorb the whites, stated with suavity that "If we are powerful, we know how to be merciful." Negro Senators were Hiram R. Revels and Blanche Kelso Bruce, both of Mississippi. P. B. S. Pinchback, after a picaresque career culminating in the lieutenant governorship of Louisiana, and Francis Pickens, State treasurer of South Carolina, were prominent newcomers. Finally there was Frederick Douglass, justly famed for the District, and antislavery orator, later Marshal and Recorder of Deeds of the District, and Minister to Haiti, who spent his last years in the old Van Hook Mansion on Cedar Hill.

The Republican Party was favored in these years. Frederick Douglass' statement: "The Republican Party is the ship, all else the sea", was held axiomatic to such a degree, that when at the Second Baptist Lyceum (a free forum) a paper endorsing the Democrats followed one endorsing the Republicans, the audience hissed; newspapers called it "double play", and the chairman was accused of traitorous intentions against the entire Negro race. The most exciting political campaigns were contests for delegates to the Republican National Convention. The Blaine Invincible Republican Club and the W. Calvin Chase Republican Club were elaborately organized. The Cleveland administration, however, left not a few Negro Democrats in its wake.

For many years after the Civil War, Washington was said, with some justice, to have "the most distinguished and brilliant assemblage of Negroes in the world." The reputation was sustained by cultural

societies such as the Second Baptist Lyceum, the Congressional Lyceum, and the Bethel Literary Society. The National Negro Academy had upon its rosters such scholars as W. E. B. DuBois, of Atlanta, the Grimke brothers, W. S. Scarborough, J. W. Cromwell, and Kelly Miller. At the close of the century Paul Laurence Dunbar, best-known Negro writer, lived here. From 1897 to 1898 he was assistant to another Negro, Daniel Murray, who held a high place in the Congressional Library. Dunbar wrote and gave readings of his poetry, reciting with gusto of the Negro peasant. Will Marion Cook, similarly distinguished in music collaboration with Dunbar in such musical shows as *Clorindy* and *The Hot Chocolates*, was for a number of years a resident of Washington. The two leading Negro newspapers of the period, W. Calvin Cass' *Washington Bee* ("Watch the Sting") and E. E. Cooper's *Morred American*, are not only valuable as indices to social life, but also refreshing because of the occasional highly personal combats between the editors.

Despite the destitution and the earnest fight to keep the grudging gains, there was still a gay social life for some Washington Negroes. Negro lodges were convivial as well as "mutually benevolent." Conventions of elders and bishops made Washington their Mecca. G. A. R. encampments in Washington gave excuses for lavish hospitality. The Emancipation Day ceremonies were for a long time popular turnouts, until rivalries terminated them. Two rival factions, urged by President Cleveland to reconcile their grievances, persisted in holding parades with brass bands and "queens of love and beauty" for each. The celebration did not survive this controversy. Inaugural balls for Negroes, held on March 5 after the official ball, were likewise causes for dissension between groups claiming to represent Negro Washington. Other balls and banquets were numerous and prodigal in the dozens of hotels, buffet-cafes, and saloons. Churches and clubs had frequent excursions down the river to Marshall Hall, Nottley Hall, and Chapel Point. There was a flamboyant sporting life; political dignitaries at times had to yield to a visitor like Peter Jackson, heavyweight champion of Australia, against whom John L. Sullivan drew the color line, or Isaac Murphy, noted Negro jockey of the eighties. Major Taylor, "the champion colored bicycle racer of the world", defended his title and, in spite of foul play, defeated all comers at the old Washington Coliseum. Before the Civil War the elder Joseph Jefferson, lessee of the Washington Theater, had petitioned the city fathers to change the curfew law, as it affected "a great proportion of our audience of this [Negro] caste" and lessened his box-office receipts. This interest in

drama persisted into the period under consideration. Musicals were very popular. A Negro opera company founded in 1872 gave several performances at Ford's Theater. Williams and Walker and Cole and Johnson, "in the brightest chony offering, *A Trip to Coneytown*", were viewed by Washington Negroes with only occasional disputes with the theater management over the sale of orchestra tickets. Sissieretta Jones, "Black Patti", sang in 1892 for President Harrison's White House reception; she returned in 1900 with her troubadours in *The Essence of Ole Virginny*. The biggest musical event in years was the first all-colored oratorio, *Emmanuel*, directed by Prof. J. Henry Lewis. He was versatile enough to train a chorus of 70 for "A Mammoth Cake Walk and Jubilee Entertainment in Convention Hall." The Fisk Jubilee Singers and other school choruses sang in Washington to raise funds for their institutions. Some musical organizations were the Dyork Musical Association, the Amphipol Glee Club, the Washington Permanent Chorus, and the Georgetown Musical Association.

III. THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

The first decade of the twentieth century was marked by a consolidation of some of the gains and a loss of others. Negro leaders, attracted by the period's visions of reform, turned more hopefully to the "race problem." In 1903 at Lincoln Temple Congregational Church there was a conference on "How to Solve the Race Problem." Suggested solutions were the setting up of a forty-ninth state, the compulsory gradualism of Booker T. Washington, and the demanding of full citizenship rights. It was urged that a "Commission to Consider Every Phase of the American Race Problem" be appointed by Congress, and a "Permanent Commission on the American Race Problem" was set up. Many of the militant members of the conference, hardly to be satisfied with commissions and committees, later joined forces with liberal movements which in 1910 culminated in the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People.

With America's entry into the World War, advice came from Negro leadership to forget grievances and close ranks for the sake of democracy. In Washington this was enthusiastically heeded. The First Separate Battalion, the Negro National Guard unit, which had previously served on the Mexican border, was called upon to guard Washington. This battalion was the first in the District to be mustered to war strength. Its commanding officer, Maj. James Walker, was the first District officer to die in the line of duty. When

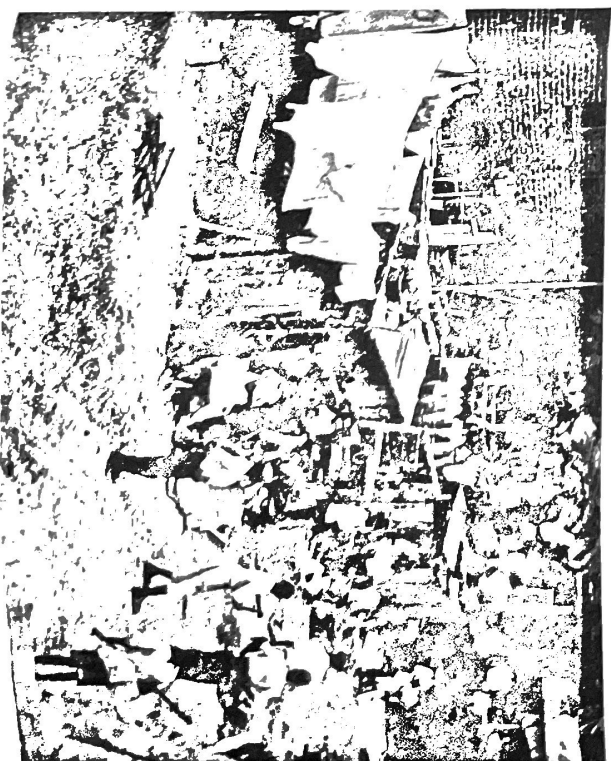
the Three Hundred and Seventy-second Regiment was formed, the First Separate Battalion was included. Overseas this regiment was brigaded with the "Red Hand" Division of the French Army. Of nearly 600 Washington Negroes in the outfit, more than 200 were wounded and 33 killed. One of the first to fall fatally wounded was Private Kenneth Lewis, a mere youngster, just out of the high school cadet corps. He was awarded the *Croix de Guerre*, and the score of Washingtonians received the *Croix de Guerre*, and the Three Hundred and Seventy-second Regiment had its colors decorated with the *Croix de Guerre* and palm leaves distinguished service.

In October 1917 Emmett J. Scott was appointed by Newton Baker as Special Assistant to the Secretary of War, in order to promote "a healthy morale among Negro soldiers and civilians." Attempts were made in his office to iron out cases of discrimination and injustice. A campaign was zealously initiated to obtain a separate training camp for Negro officers, since no Negro, regardless of qualifications, was permitted to enter the other camps. The spearhead of this movement was found in the newly established office and at Howard University. After much hesitation, authorization of a camp at Des Moines, Iowa, came on May 19, 1917. It is perhaps more than a coincidence that four days earlier, Henry Johnson and Needham Roberts, enlisted Negroes of the Fifteenth New York, had performed feats of valor for which they were later cited by General Pershing. From Des Moines 700 commissioned officers were sent out, the majority to serve in the Ninety-second Combat Division. Many were Washingtonians and of these several were cited for bravery, especially in the Argonne offensive. Over 5,000 Negroes from the District came into service through the operation of the selective draft law. World War veterans were organized in the James Reese Europe Post No. 5, and the James E. Walker Post No. 26 of the American Legion.

The hopes expressed "that the American people will be disposed more and more to remove such handicaps and to right such injustices as we now struggle against after the settlement of this great emergency which now faces our common country" turned barren in the post-war years. A bloody riot had taken place in East St. Louis during the war; on July 19, 1919, the Washington riot started. Inflammatory headlines announced a wave of assaults on white women by Negroes; several of these earlier publicized attacks were shown to be false, and later ones were definitely invented as whips for the mob. A number of white soldiers, sailors, and marines proceeded to southwest Washington and beat up several innocent Negroes.

Negroes retaliated and beat up several innocent whites. Street fighting was fierce, if sporadic. On July 21 a newspaper announced a "mobilization of every available service man stationed in or near Washington or on leave . . . the purpose is a clean-up." Negroes mobilized likewise, alley dwellers and most respectable burghers, side by side, and there was no clean-up. The bitter resistance of Negroes, the calling out of regular troops (officially this time), and a rain-storm helped the authorities to disperse the mobs. A year later, a Negro charged with murder confessed to the attacks for which two Negroes (positively identified by the women in the cases) were serving undeserved long-term sentences in penitentiaries.

The great forces opposed to the Negro, however, were not mobs that could be stopped at a brick barricade at Seventh and M Streets. These were, as they have always been, poverty, ignorance, disease, and crime. The extensive migration from the South, accelerated in the years of the war because of the cutting off of European immigration, the demand for industrial labor in the North and Midwest, and a growing resentment at conditions in the South, stranded many Negroes in Washington. Other cities were prepared for the mass invasion of industry, but Washington, even though it was growing



ALLEY DWELLERS IN WASHINGTON

by leaps and bounds, had little work for the newcomers to do. There was an aggravation of the post-Civil War problems of housing, health, and employment. At the collapse of the boom period, Negroes preferred the word "panic", depression being what they had experienced in the days of "prosperity."

Negroes of Washington total 27 percent of the population. At one time as many as 4 out of 10 were unemployed. Over 70 percent of the relief cases in 1935 were Negro, almost in inverse ratio to the racial distribution of the population. Many of these unemployed live in the 200 alleys which remain in the slum sections of Washington. An Alley Dwelling Elimination Act was enacted June 12, 1934, contemplating the riddance of inhabited alleys before July 1, 1944. Until then it is likely that these alley dwellings, for which exorbitant rents are charged, will continue to breed vice, crime, and disease.

Negroes who are able to make a living do so generally in domestic and personal service, and in manufacturing and mechanical pursuits (generally unskilled labor). A large number are in various departments under Civil Service; only a few of them, in spite of their capabilities, ranking as clerks or foremen. About 4,000 are listed in trade, and about 3,500 in the professions. The New Negro Alliance was founded in 1933 to demand equal work opportunity for Negroes in Negro areas. One of its slogans is "Buy Where You Can't Work." But in spite of its picketing and boycotting, there has been no large gain in jobs. The struggling Negro business concerns cannot furnish much employment. Regardless of qualification, the Negro worker meets with definite discrimination. Many American Federation of Labor unions exclude him; even more than the white worker, he remains poorly led and unorganized. The Joint Committee on National Recovery, with headquarters in Washington, was active in focussing attention upon and fighting Nation-wide discrimination against, and exploitation of, Negroes.

Many of the slum streets are close seconds to the alleys in squalor, and a mushroom shanty-town at Marshall Heights on the outskirts of the city is much like the camp of the bonus-marchers, with "shelters" made out of pieces of tin, cast-off lumber and beaverboard. Prosperous Negroes live in all sections of the city and Negro expansion into areas of better homes has been bitterly, and at times unscrupulously, contested. "Covenants" to bar Negroes from certain sections were upheld by the Supreme Court in the Curtis case. But the "covenant", while a powerful weapon, frequently cuts both ways. During this century the fastnesses of Le Droit Park were penetrated

and transformed to a Negro section. Newer additions to Deanwood and Burrville in the northeast are Kingman Park, Capitol View, and De Priest Village, pleasing, well designed communities for the Negro middle class. Langston Terrace was sponsored by the Public Works Administration to afford better housing for Negro families of low income. The bulk of the Negro population, however, is still in the northwest, where the Negro business area is located.

The health situation resulting from the crowded slums is a grave menace. Only one city in the United States has a higher death rate from tuberculosis than Washington; over half of the tubercular cases in 1935 were Negroes. Other forces playing havoc are infant mortality, social diseases, accidents in the home, and disintegrated home life. Negro patients are received in segregated wards at most of the hospitals, while some of the hospitals afford clinic service only. Freedmen's Hospital, founded by the Freedmen's Bureau and supported by the Department of the Interior, is the Negro general hospital. Its facilities are utilized by the Howard University Medical School. There are also private hospitals conducted by leading surgeons of the race. Although in comparison with the rest of the country Washington has a heavy concentration of medical practitioners, the number is still not large enough to cope with the health problem. Recognition of the socio-economic causes of the high mortality rate is becoming more apparent in recent surveys and their resultant recommendations.

Crime is correspondingly high; areas found to be dense in disease are classed in police reports as dense in crime. Some alleys are "no man's land" for any stranger, Negro or white. Knives flash and pistols bark to terminate crap games and domestic brawls. Rasped nerves and short ugly tempers are not soothed by the heavy drinking of liquor which is as likely to be "canned heat" as corn whisky. Efforts of the police to ferret out crime are not helped by the furtiveness of the alley dwellers, who consider "John Law" to be their natural enemy—with good reason, at times, in light of police brutality. The "numbers" game, an American form of gambling, is popular in the alleys as it is on the avenues. The money that dribbles away to the number "baron" and "runner" could well be used for bread, milk, and shoes, but these poor people look upon the number slip as a magic sesame to momentary affluence.

Agencies struggling to improve these conditions are few in number and lack money. The Twelfth Street Branch Y. M. C. A., erected in 1912 in Hell's Bottom, has its boys' clubs and summer camp, Camp Lightman; fosters dramatics, athletics, and forums; and attempts

to aid employment. The Phyllis Wheatley Y. W. C. A., founded in 1905, aims at similar community service for women and girls, with Camp Clarissa Scott operating in the summer months. The Department of Playgrounds is coming to recognize the needs of this fourth of the city's population. Important playgrounds are the one at the historic Barry Farms, the Howard Playground, the Cardoza Playground, the Willow Tree Playground, Lincoln Playground, and the new Banneker Center. The 30 others are as crowded and active, and all are important. Community centers and settlement houses have programs of wide variety. In all of these, the paid Negro personnel is too small, and still underpaid.

Some other agencies in social welfare are the Washington Corps No. 2 of the Salvation Army and the fraternal organizations which launch occasional programs for civic betterment. Although the Police Boys' Clubs date back to 1933, plans for the inclusion of Negro boys in the surmised benefits are still in the making. The first lesson in civics for these boys seems to be their segregated status.

Athletics are, of course, popular. In the earlier years there was a strong governmental baseball league as well as many sand-lot teams. The present Washington Elite Giants are indistinguishable from the old popular Le Droit Tigers, are successful in the National Negro League and therefore in good favor. Against such teams as the Pittsburgh Crawfords, the New York Black Yankees, the Homestead Grays, they put on colorful shows in the Griffith Stadium. Local basketball teams have become nationally known. Howard University and Miner Teachers College have heavy schedules in football and basketball against many of the best Negro collegiate teams, and the high schools are bitter athletic rivals. There are frequent track meets. Jesse Owens gave exhibitions at one of these. This was his only possible performance in Washington, as white colleges in the District do not allow Negroes to participate in their open meets. Tennis enthusiasts in Washington had a great deal to do with the founding of the American Tennis Association. Washington has had many Negro tennis champions, but with the paucity of the courts, public and private, tennis for a time declined. Negroes box in the District on "all-Negro cards." Negro golfers have only one inadequate golf course in the city. In spite of this, golf is increasing in popularity.

Baptists are the most numerous of the churchgoers in Washington; second to them are the Methodists, divided into several branches. There are churches of other denominations together with many independent store-front churches. The churches frequently have dupli-

cated names, because of "splitting," or because of the shifting of population. Famous preachers of the early century were the Reverend George Lee, whose pulpit power was commensurate with his vast bulk, and the scholarly Reverend Walter Brooks and Reverend Francis Grimké. "Black Billy Sunday," the Reverend Alexander Wilbanks, combined the resources of southern camp meetings with the tricks of his model. But even more spectacular have been the careers of Elder Solomon Lightfoot Michaux and Bishop "Daddy" Grace. The first of these, whose "Happy Am I" chorus and sermons are broadcast over Station WJIS, preaches to crowds in his Georgia Avenue tabernacle, with seats reserved for delegations of whites. Elder Michaux has experimented with communal ventures in lodging, and at present runs a One-Cent Cafe founded for him by Bernard Macfadden. "Daddy" Grace, whose churches have swept from New Bedford to Augusta, Ga., has set up a House of Prayer at Sixth and M Streets NW. Store-front churches attract attention with crudely lettered signs; their unconscious humor checked by their patent sincerity. In one backward section a little church given over to noisy rouslements and sing-song "grave-digging" sermons is neighbor to a chapel of quiet, dignified services, pastored by a devoted and scholarly man who, without reaching a wide audience, has left a deep impress upon the community. That is a familiar contrast in the church life of Washington, and the less spectacular preachers who speak with quiet authority are not to be underestimated. Andrew Rankin Memorial Chapel at Howard University attracts some of the best known liberal preachers of both races, and the Howard University School of Religion aims to train a graduate ministry and to advance the admittedly backward condition of Negro preachers.

Out of more than \$11,000,000 appropriated in 1936 to the public schools of the District of Columbia, approximately one-third was devoted to the colored schools. Education for Negroes in the District has come a long way from the first school founded by illiterate ex-slaves to the teachers' college, 3 senior high schools, 2 vocational schools, 6 junior high schools, and 40 elementary schools, with 1,004 teachers and 35,739 students. These schools are under the direction of Garnet C. Wilkinson, First Assistant Superintendent, divisions 10 to 13. Two other Negroes serve as second assistant superintendents, there is a Negro examining board and there is proportional membership on the Board of Education. The teaching force is unusually well prepared and the salaries are on the same scale as the salaries of the white teachers. The fact of segregation, however, must still be reckoned with. The theory of equal, though separate,

accommodations breaks down into the fact of unequal facilities and equipment. Negro high schools are badly overcrowded and too often, instead of new structures, school buildings abandoned by whites are used for Negroes.

Howard University, called by some the "capstone of Negro education", is for the first time headed by a Negro, Dr. Mordecai W. Johnson. Under President Eugene Clark, Miner Teachers College, in spite of its youth, has received high rank from accrediting agencies. Frelinghuysen University, with Mrs. Anna J. Cooper as president, gives college instruction to students who must attend night classes. Miss Nannie Barrroughs is the founder of the National Training School for Women and Girls, the school of the "Bible, the Bath, and the Broom, called the "nickel and dime school" because it depended for support almost wholly on contributions from Negroes who could not afford to give more.

Because of these universities there are many Negroes of ability in the humanities, and the social and natural sciences. Frequently their influence is greater than academic. At Howard University the *Journal of Negro Education* is ably edited. Carter G. Woodson edits the pioneering *Journal of Negro History* and directs the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History in this city. The weekly *Afro-American*, with a Washington edition, and the semi-weekly *Washington Tribune* are the city's Negro newspapers, both tending to develop race consciousness.

These give some point to the boast of Washington's "cultural supremacy" among Negroes, but the boast is not too well founded. There is little literature even attempting to do justice to the facets of Negro life in Washington. There have been literary circles with a few poets, dramatists, and writers of fiction. The Little Theatre movement, initiated among Negroes by Alain Locke, editor of the *New Negro*, and Montgomery Gregory at Howard University, has only partially succeeded.

In 1903 the British Negro composer, Samuel Coleridge-Taylor, sponsored by a society named in his honor, conducted in Washington the first American performance of his *Hiawatha* trilogy. Other musical organizations of the century were the Glee Club and the Amphion Glee Club. The Washington Folk-Song Singers, directed by Will Marion Cook, presented as soloists Abbie Mitchell, Lottie Wallace, and Harry T. Burleigh, all later to become widely famed. The Washington Conservatory, under Mrs. Harriet Gibbs Marshall, was an important factor in musical education. Roland Hayes sang in Washington churches on his long, uphill road. Lillian Evans Tibbs,

later known in opera as Madame Evanti, was one of Washington's well-known soloists. Of national popularity is the Howard University Glee Club under the direction of Roy W. Tibbs and Todd Duncan. The latter carried the role of "Porgy" in Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess*. Among jazz composers and orchestra leaders there are many Washingtonians; chief among these are Claude Hopkins and Duke Ellington, who has as one of his "hot" numbers, *The Washington Wabble*.

Although politically volatile, Negroes in Washington are still politically ineffectual. The hey-day of important political figures has passed. Oscar De Priest, Republican Congressman from Illinois, was followed by Arthur Mitchell, Democratic Congressman from the same State. There are still staunch Republicans and a Young Republican Club, and some of the old school have espoused the Liberty League; but there are many Democrats as well. The number of Negro appointees to administrative posts in the New Deal, while by no means adequate, is greater than in previous administrations. Many of these appointees are Washingtonians. Although political disquisitions may still stir the somnolence of barber shops, or break up friendships quadrennially, and although job-seekers abound, disenfranchisement makes most of the Negroes politically apathetic. There is likewise a civic apathy. Civic organizations bringing grievances are often treated with scant courtesy by municipal authorities; without the vote they have little redress. There is a growing liberalism among Negroes who understand their plight, but the urging of such groups as the National Negro Congress and the N. A. A. C. P. too often meets with inertia and confusion. Segregation in Washington seems an accepted fact. Public buildings and public conveyances are not segregated, although on every southbound train Negro passengers are "jim-crowed." Negroes are not served in restaurants, saloons, hotels, movie-houses, and theaters, except those definitely set aside for them. Some stores will not accept their trade. Some governmental departments have separate accommodations, and some discriminate in the type of work offered to Negroes.

One boast, perhaps better founded than those of culture or civic status, is that Washington Negroes have a good time. Dances range in full plenty from the "house shouts" to the "bals masqués" of Washington's mythical Negro "400." Social scribbles flatteringly speak of Negro "Mayfair" with no sense of incongruity. Social clubs are legion; the What-Good-Are-We Club (composed of ex-Howard students), is widely known for intensive hilarity. Though college sororities and fraternities seem to be awakening to social realities,

their lavish "formals" are still the most important events on their schedules. Washington Negroes are great "joiners"; the largest orders are the Elks, Odd Fellows, Knights of Pythias, and the Masons, but some with an ancient history like "Love and Charity" linger on. The Muscote Club and the Capital City Pleasure Club have large memberships.

The movie-houses attract great crowds of Negroes. Of the chain theaters owned by the Lichtmans, three are located on U Street, the thoroughfare of Negro businesses and pleasure-seekers. The Howard Theater, something of a theatrical institution, affording both movies and fast-stepping, high-hearted shows, attracts an audience of both races. Poolrooms, short-lived cabarets, beer gardens, and eating places, from fried-fish "joints", barbecue, and hamburger stands to better-class restaurants, do an apparently thriving business. And yet, when the outsider stands upon U Street in the early hours of the evening and watches the crowds go by, and out in finery, with jests upon their lips—this one rushing to a poolroom, this one seeking escape with Hoot Gibson, another to a dance hall—Hollywood glamor, another in one of the many dance halls—he is likely to be unaware, as these people momentarily are, of aspects of life in Washington of graver import to the darker one-fourth. This vivacity, this gaiety, may mask for a while, but the more drastic realities are omnipresent. Around the corner there may be a squalid slum with people jobless and desperate; the alert youngster, capable and well trained, may find on the morrow all employment closed to him. The Negro of Washington has no voice in government, is economically proscribed, and segregated nearly as rigidly as in the southern cities he contemns. He may blind himself with pleasure seeking, with a specious self-sufficiency, he may point with pride to the record of achievement over grave odds. But just as the past was not without its honor, so the present is not without bitterness.

In spite of the widespread segregation of the Negro in the District of Columbia, his story as told here has not concerned him solely. From the outset, white humanitarians have protested his enslavement and abuse, and farsighted statesmen have worked toward his integration in the total pattern. His schooling resulted from cooperation between Negroes and whites. Interracial organizations have worked toward an abolition of the injustices he faces. Governmental and municipal agencies have attempted to deal out to him a measure of what is his due. Today he is no longer asking, if he ever asked, to be considered as a ward. He asks to be considered as a citizen. But fulfillment of this hope seems still desperately remote.

The Negro has been donor as well as recipient. His contributions cannot be limited to those of mental or entertainer, as those who stereotype his character would insist. Many of the oldest inhabitants of the city who happen to be Negroes, and many newcomers, can boast of a record of citizenship as honorable as any. Culturally, the Negro has much to give, and, in spite of its being grudgingly received, has given much. No city can afford to disdain the creative potentialities of the Negro in music, drama, literature, and the arts. The scholars concentrated in Washington have a function greater than that of Negro scholars. They are American scholars who happen to be Negroes, and Washington and America have need of them. The Negro professional class of Washington, limited to service among Negroes, could contribute greatly to the advance of the entire city. The Negro has contributed. What could be a greater contribution is held in check by segregation.

From the preservation of the color-line in the District grave consequences arise. Educationally, segregation means the maintenance of a dual system—expensive not only in dollars and cents but also in its indoctrination of white children with a belief in their superiority and of Negro children with a belief in their inferiority, both equally false. Politically, it is believed by many that the determination to keep the Negro "in his place" has lessened the agitation for suffrage in the District. Economically, the presence of a large number of unemployed constitutes a critical relief problem; the low rate of pay received by Negro workers lowers the standard of living and threatens the trade-union movement. Socially, the effects of Negro ghettos are far-reaching. One cannot segregate disease and crime. In this border city, southern in so many respects, there is a denial of democracy, at times hypocritical and at times flagrant. Social compulsion forces many who would naturally be on the side of civic fairness into hopelessness and indifference. Washington has made steps in the direction of justice, but many steps remain to be taken for the sake of the underprivileged and for the sake of a greater Washington.

THE WPA GUIDE TO WASHINGTON, D.C.



THE FEDERAL WRITERS' PROJECT
GUIDE TO 1930S WASHINGTON

WITH A NEW INTRODUCTION
BY ROGER G. KENNEDY



*Written and compiled
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