

This work is on a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0) license, [https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/deed.en\\_US](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/deed.en_US). Access to this work was provided by the University of Maryland, Baltimore County (UMBC) ScholarWorks@UMBC digital repository on the Maryland Shared Open Access (MD-SOAR) platform.

Please provide feedback

Please support the ScholarWorks@UMBC repository by emailing [scholarworks-group@umbc.edu](mailto:scholarworks-group@umbc.edu) and telling us what having access to this work means to you and why it's important to you. Thank you.

AHA ANNUAL MEETING

# BEYOND THE MONUMENTS: RACE AND AMERICAN DEMOCRACY IN THE NATION'S CAPITAL

*Chris Myers Asch and George Derek Musgrove | Oct 1, 2017*



The spirit of LeDroit Park, captured in a neighborhood mural. Carol M. Highsmith/Library of Congress

**F**rom schoolchildren to historians, visitors to Washington, DC, are drawn to the Capitol, the Lincoln Memorial, and other marble monuments to American freedom. These shining symbols of our democracy reflect our nation as we aspire for it to be. But they tell us little about who we are, to say nothing of the city in which they are located. Venturing beyond Washington's monumental core to explore DC and its neighborhoods, you'll see that

no city better captures the ongoing tensions between America's expansive democratic hopes and its enduring racial realities. We've arranged four "stops" in an imagined itinerary to tell the city's story through space and time. This is not a walking tour as such, but a visit to any of these areas will help you understand the city and its struggles for racial justice and democracy.

#### Stop 1: Old Town Alexandria (c. 1800–62)

Today, Alexandria is in Virginia, but in 1800 it was part of the original 10-mile square that became the seat of the federal government. In the 1820s and 30s, Alexandria was home to several slave-trading firms, including Franklin & Armfield, the nation's largest and most profitable. Its three-story office stood at 1315 Duke Street and served as the nerve center of a massive operation that sold more than 1,000 enslaved people annually.

Early Washington benefited immensely from slavery and the slave trade. Enslaved people worked on every major public construction project, they waited on the men who ran the nation, and they were bought and sold within sight of the Capitol. Even as slavery itself waned in Washington—by 1830 free black people were a majority of the city's black population—the nation's capital became America's largest slave-trading city.

Abolitionists made Washington their top priority. The nation's capital, they argued, should not be tainted by the sin of slavery, and they deluged congressional mailrooms with thousands of petitions calling for an end to the slave trade in DC—Congress, not the local government, retained ultimate control over the city. As abolitionists gained strength, white Alexandrians engineered an 1846 vote for retrocession, whereby the area west of the Potomac was ceded back to Virginia, taking nearly a third of the District's land mass. When abolitionists won a ban on the slave trade in DC as part of the Compromise of 1850, the city's slave dealers simply crossed the Potomac and continued their business in Alexandria. Slavery itself remained alive in the truncated District until April 16, 1862, when Washington's enslaved people became the first in the nation to be legally emancipated.

#### Stop 2: LeDroit Park (c. 1865–1941)

Across the Potomac, north from downtown Washington, and across Florida Avenue (formerly Boundary Street) is the neighborhood of LeDroit Park, with Gothic-inspired cottages and elegant Italianate villas sitting back from narrow roads.

Now enveloped by the city, LeDroit Park was Washington's first post-Civil War residential suburb. The segregated enclave was at the forefront of massive demographic and spatial changes that reordered DC's racial geography in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Because all city residents, black and white, had been disenfranchised in 1874, following a brief flowering of interracial democracy during Reconstruction, real estate developers, urban planners, and congressional leaders could act without local democratic accountability. The city became a "national show town" featuring a monumental core of federal buildings surrounded by neighborhoods increasingly segregated by race and class.

When abolitionists won a ban on the slave trade in DC as part of the Compromise of 1850, the city's slave dealers simply crossed the Potomac to Alexandria.

But the imposition of a new segregated order was never static or uncontested. By the mid-1890s, black residents began to trickle into LeDroit Park and white owners began to trickle out; by World War I, the neighborhood was almost exclusively black. LeDroit Park became home to the city's best-known black leaders, including educator Anna Julia Cooper, poet Paul Laurence Dunbar, and activist Mary Church Terrell, whose crumbling home at 326 T Street NW is a National Historic Landmark but cries out for restoration.

Washington at the turn of the 20th century remained a magnet for black migration from the rural South. The city boasted the nation's largest black community (nearly 87,000 people, almost a third of the city's population) and offered relatively more opportunities for education and economic advancement than the rest of the South. Home to a small but influential black elite, a thriving black middle class, and strong black public schools, DC embodied the hopes of black America. Local NAACP leader Neval Thomas wrote, "The white man keeps the full weight of his superior numbers, oppressive spirit, and unjust monopoly of political power, hard pressed against this suffering, yet beautiful little world of striving, but we grow to fuller stature in spite of it all."

### Stop 3: Southwest (c. 1874–1960)

Successful strivers have commanded historians' attention, but three-quarters of black Washingtonians were working people: domestics and hod carriers, janitors and nannies. Many lived in Southwest Washington. Dubbed "The Island" in the mid-19th century, Southwest historically has been isolated physically and culturally from the rest of the city, separated first by the infamous City Canal, then by a set of unsightly railroad tracks, and today by a confusing network of highways and exit ramps. Southwest was the home of Perry Carson, a hulking former saloon keeper whose black working-class coalition dominated local Republican patronage politics and infuriated DC elites, black and white, in the decades after disenfranchisement.

Home to 23,000 residents, Southwest remained a vibrant working-class community into the mid-20th century. Urban planners and city boosters, however, saw only "blight." Working directly with unelected city commissioners and local business leaders, they made Southwest ground zero in a national movement for "urban renewal."

Beginning in 1954, federal officials bulldozed all of Southwest between Interstate 395 and the waterfront, displacing essentially all the previous residents. Award-winning apartment complexes, such as Charles Goodman's futuristic River Park development along 4th between N and O Streets, rose atop the rubble of working-class row houses. The area's demographics flipped. In 1950, Southwest had been 70 percent black and predominantly poor; by 1970 it was nearly 70 percent white and mostly middle-class. Ezekiah Cunningham, the 84-year-old owner of a small grocery store in Southwest since 1907, summed up urban renewal's effects: "Well, it seems like they're handin' out a passel o' joy and a passel o' sorrow."

### Stop 4: 14th and U Streets NW (c. 1960–present)

Urban renewal helped catalyze an era of grassroots activism in the 1960s and 1970s. Much of this activism percolated around the intersection of 14th and U Streets NW, the bustling transit hub of a black commercial district that offered blocks of restaurants, theaters, and clubs that catered to black customers. In the 1960s, the area was home to organizations such as the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), and Pride, Inc.

Increasingly impatient with the slow pace of liberal reform, many black DC residents raged against local authorities and the segregationists who oversaw the city in Congress. *Washington Post* reporter Ben Gilbert recalled that in 1967, “street disorders requiring police action became regular, almost weekly, occurrences.” The most destructive of these conflicts erupted in April 1968, after the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. The riot, which began at this intersection, claimed 12 lives, reduced the city’s black commercial districts to rubble, and required more than 13,000 federal troops to restore order.

White business owners and some middle-class African Americans fled, but a rich assortment of civil rights and Black Power organizations remained, joined by predominantly white New Left activists. They waged pitched battles against exploitative landlords, brutal cops, freeways, rats, and racism. And in 1973, they helped secure for the city the local self-government it had lacked since the end of Reconstruction.

Today the corner of 14th and U Streets is nearly unrecognizable to those who knew it during the heady, hopeful days of a generation earlier, when funk impresario George Clinton dubbed Washington the country’s preeminent “Chocolate City.” After two decades of gentrification, the area boasts high-end condos, upscale businesses, and a robust “foodie” scene. The old SCLC office on the northeast corner of the popular intersection is now occupied by a “boutique steakhouse” offering a \$52 rib eye and \$13 signature cocktails.

Like the rest of DC, the neighborhood is becoming younger, whiter, and wealthier. More than 70 percent black in the 1970s, Washington no longer has a black majority, and it faces gargantuan and growing racial disparities in wealth and employment—an Urban Institute study found that in 2014 white wealth in DC was 81 times greater than black wealth. Astronomical real estate values make it increasingly difficult for low-income residents to remain in the city.

These changes have rekindled questions of race, power, and accountability that have marked Washington since its inception. As you make your plans for January, we hope you will find time to visit the city beyond the monuments to explore how Washingtonians have grappled with the dilemma that is American democracy.

Chris Myers Asch and George Derek Musgrove are the authors of *Chocolate City: A History of Race and Democracy in the Nation’s Capital*, due out from the University of North Carolina Press on November 6.

Editor’s note: The 132nd Annual Meeting of the AHA will take place in Washington, DC, on January 4–7, 2018. In the run-up months to every meeting, *Perspectives* highlights aspects of local history and points of interest in our host city. Because we will convene in our hometown this year, we’re delighted to be able to present deeper takes on the Capital City’s history and culture. Welcome to DC (as locals call it)!



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/). Attribution must provide author name, article title, *Perspectives on History*, date of publication, and a link to this page. This license applies only to the article, not to text or images used here by permission.

The American Historical Association welcomes comments in the discussion area below, at [AHA Communities](#), and in [letters to the editor](#). Please read our [commenting and letters policy](#) before submitting.