

14th

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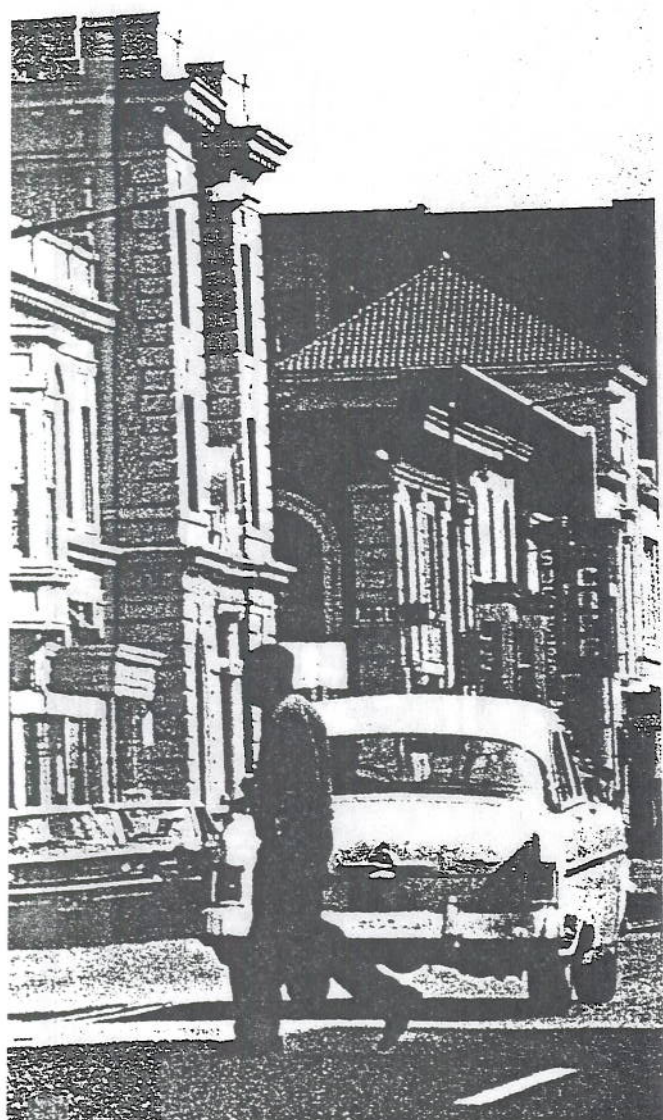
When being there
meant being somebody

BY JUAN WILLIAMS

There was a time

when the intersection at 14th and U streets was the gateway to the best of Washington's black community. There was a time when just being there meant being somebody in black Washington, a time when U Street itself was known as "the colored man's Connecticut Avenue." There was a time when gangsters and president's wives and soul singers could be seen in the same nightclub at the same time. There was a time . . .

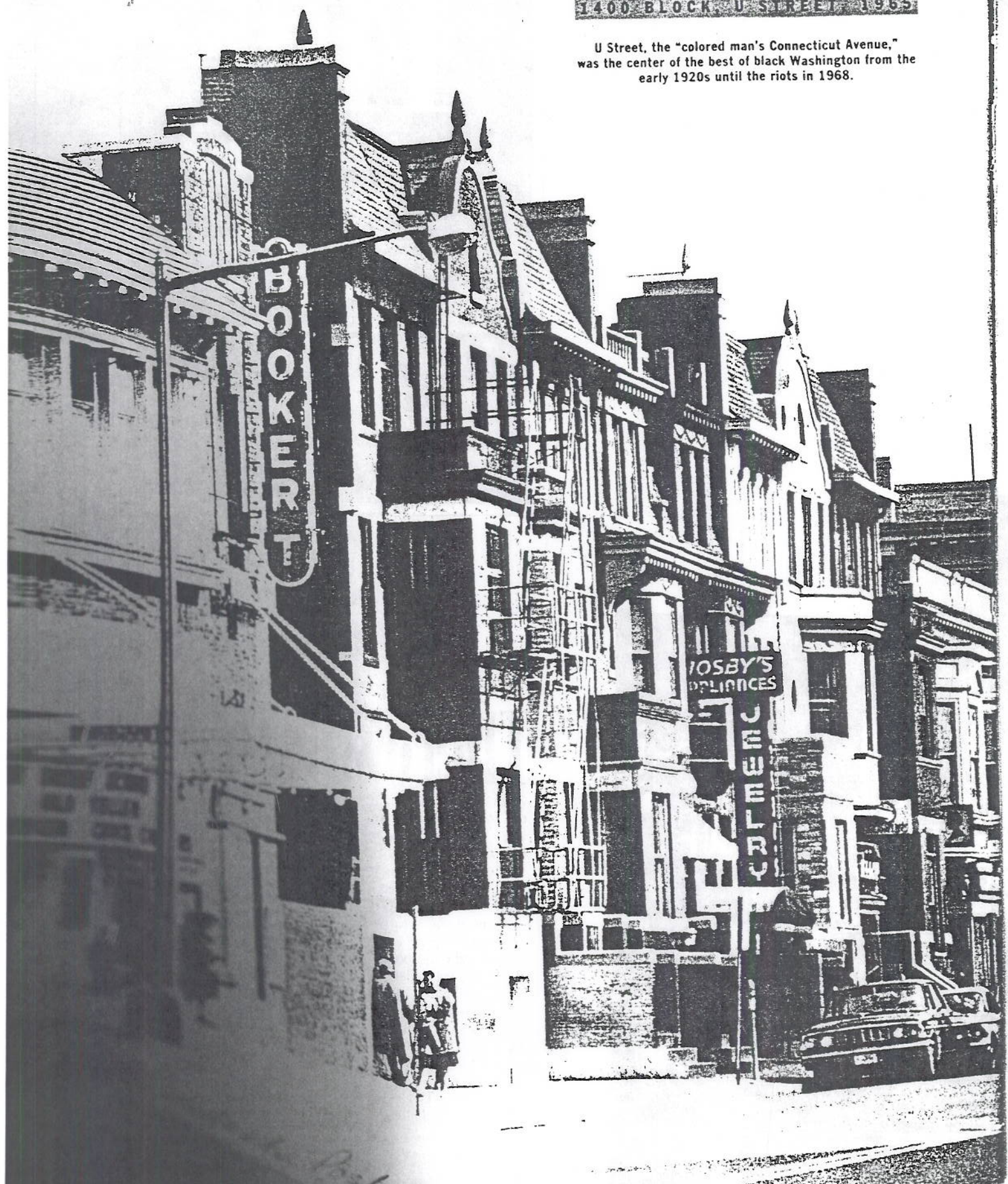
• There was a time, from the 1920s to the 1960s, when U Street was a place of parades, both small and large. Easter Sunday brought the biggest parade, with black people flocking to the boulevard to flaunt their finery in a fabulous outdoor fashion show highlighted by women's extravagant hats and men's spit-shined shoes. The Elks paraded there, too, and conventions brought a circus-like display of clowns, cars and mystic might. In the smaller parades of life on U Street there was Father Divine, the black religious leader, showing off his foot-long fingernails, evidence that he never did any manual labor. As he walked along U Street, he was fanned by his female followers, whom he called angels.



'U' Street

1400 BLOCK, U STREET 1965

U Street, the "colored man's Connecticut Avenue," was the center of the best of black Washington from the early 1920s until the riots in 1968.



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• There was a time, from the '30s through the '50s, when lines of black people waited at 7 a.m. outside candy stores, barber shops and flower shops to play a number with black bookmakers. Afterwards, they hung around until 10 a.m., when the number—the previous day's total of bank transactions—would be announced by the Treasury Department. In those days, the numbers business in Washington was unique: It was run by blacks, not whites.

• There was a time, from the '30s to the '60s, when a Cafe Society of young gangsters, entertainers and pretty women who liked men with cars and money made their home in the nightclubs on U Street, particularly the Key Clubs, which gave each member his own key to the door, but also at haunts like the Caverns, a nightclub designed to mimic the inside of Luray Caverns. At the Caverns, and at other nearby clubs, one could get a table almost touching distance from great black entertainers like Billie Holiday, Sarah Vaughan, Pearl Bailey and Nat King Cole.

• There was a time in the '40s and '50s when any black person who was anybody had to have a ticket to the annual President's Birthday Ball at the Lincoln Colonnade. The event even attracted a few wealthy and powerful whites. Both Eleanor Roosevelt and Bess Truman made the motorcade trip uptown from the White House, parked in the alley and went in through the back door. The underground dance hall was also home to the fabulous Huntsman Club Dance, attended by the cream of black society.

• There was a time, after World War II and until the riots of 1968, when 14th and U was at the heart of the black business world in Washington. The Industrial Bank of Washington was there. And farther down U Street you could find the city's largest black-owned pharmacy, black newspapers, offices of black lawyers, a black business school and Robert Scurlock, the foremost black photographer in the city. He offered a photo gallery of who's who in black Washington in his front window.

• There was a time, until Griffith Stadium was closed in 1961, when thousands of area residents walked over to the stadium on hot summer afternoons to see the Homestead Grays, Washington's black baseball team, led by home-run king Josh Gibson, challenge the Kansas City Monarchs and their Hall of Fame pitcher Satchel Paige.

• There was a time, in the late '50s and early '60s, when the legendary soul singer Sam Cooke would sit around at Cecelia's restaurant on U Street, after finishing his last set at the Howard Theatre. Cooke was always trying to buy drinks for the beau-

tiful young women in the restaurant.

• There was a time in the '50s when a well-known madam operating in a luxury town house near 14th and U streets made a deal with Garfinkels department store—then off limits to blacks—to buy their finest lingerie for her women, who drew men from all over the city.

• There was a time in the '50s when Arthur Ashe was a teenager who came to Washington from his home in Richmond to play in tennis tournaments. He practiced at Banneker Junior High School, and on his way to and from the courts he pressed his face against the car window, trying to see 14th and U.

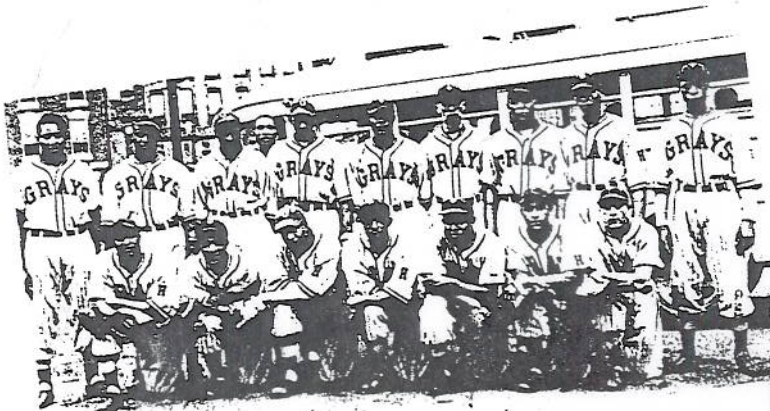
"As I got older and traveled the country, I realized there were corners like 14th and U in some other cities," Ashe says. "There was 125th Street and Eighth Avenue in New York; there was the Desire District in New Orleans. If you were black, those were the places where you went to find out what was happening. In Washington, the corner of 14th and U was the grapevine. The cream of black society and everybody else passed through there, so if you were at 14th 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."

"I envied the freedom other kids had to hang out at a corner like 14th and U. If you were at that corner, you always had the sense that something big was about to happen."

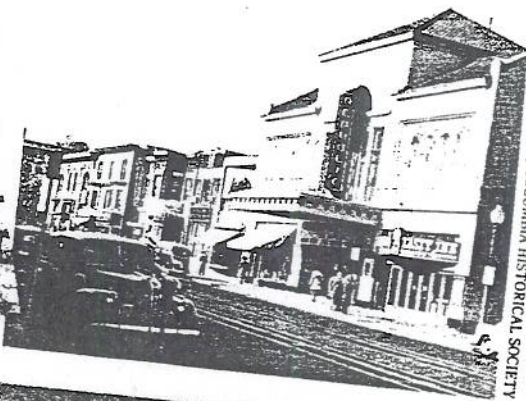
These days, U Street is a barren landscape. Reminders of a former vibrancy are all that remain: boarded-up theaters, flowery nightclub signs now covered with layers of greasy dirt and burned-out buildings. The finale for life along U Street began in 1954 when the Supreme Court outlawed segregation in public schools, signaling an end to segregation in Washington's previously all-white bars, hotels and restaurants.

Working-class blacks remained faithful to U Street for years afterwards, but lawyers, doctors, entertainers and athletes moved their offices downtown and their families to white neighborhoods. They returned to visit—even after integration, U Street remained a focal point for black food, black music and black gossip—but life on the street inevitably slowed throughout the '50s and into the '60s.

Then came a cold, shattering chill that cracked the street for good—the riots of 1968 in the wake of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassination. Afterward, U Street was little more than an avenue of angst for blacks. The final blow to the area came with construction of the Metro system's Green Line, which has torn up the street and made it all but impossible for customers to get to the few die-hard businesses trying to hold on.



The 1939 Homestead Grays were part of a popular Washington dynasty, winning nine straight Negro National League championships from 1937 to 1945.



The Republic Theater was one of the attractions that lured area residents from their former cultural center at Seventh and T streets to 14th and U.

problem for 14th and U has seemed for two decades, its future holds some hope. The District government has anointed 14th and U by placing a municipal office building there. The subway will make travel to U Street convenient. Developer Jeffrey Cohen has renovated the old Manhattan Laundry building and has plans for other monuments, including restoration of the Lincoln Theatre.

To a people long powerless—people who have loved U Street in her glory but could not save her from defeat—many questions remain about the next decade. Who will next parade along U Street? Will whites take over the area as they took over once-black Georgetown? Will whites ignore the area, depriving it of money and attention? Is a revived black presence on U Street an old man's dream left over from the days of segregation?

These days at 14th and U streets, the rumble of construction mixes with the pathetic mumble of junkies. But the people remember a time when 14th and U was a gateway to glory, and they wait, patiently, for a return of the black boulevard. Here, in the voices of those who actually lived the rich life of this special part of Washington, are the distillations of a lifetime.



RON GALELLA LTD

Pearl Bailey

BAILEY, 69, IS A 1985 GEORGETOWN UNIVERSITY GRADUATE AND A WORLD-FAMOUS SINGER.

MANY YEARS AGO, MY BROTHER, THE GREAT DANCER Bill Bailey, used to sell candy for Cordelia Lyles at the Dunbar Theater. One summer I got to know Mrs. Lyles. She had a club across from the Lincoln Theatre. This was in the mid-'30s. You know who was up there all the time was Jelly Roll Morton. He was Mrs. Lyles' friend. So, Mrs. Lyles gave me a chance to sing up there for \$12 a week. I was 15½. She called the place the Jungle Room or the Jungle Inn.

I had never sung before. That was my first job. The piano player there was a guy with a hunchback, Toby Winter, a great, great piano player.

By the time I was 17 or 18, I was working for Mr. Tindel at the Republic Gardens. By then I was making \$15 to \$20 a week, and you made tips in those days. The Republic Gardens, what a memory! The biggie there, the queen of the garden, was

Savannah Churchill, a gorgeous woman. If I was 17, Savannah was 20. She had real black beautiful hair, fair skin and a deep voice. She was something else.

Then I worked at some of those fancy-pants places. I worked for Mr. John Carter at the Capitol Pleasure Club for 25 whole dollars a week. Just to get in that place was something. The place was filled with doctors and lawyers, and it was a small place, intimate. The atmosphere was like a private club. Then there was the Crystal Caverns. I was working there, and I still wasn't 20. That was a swinging place.

The whole of U Street was something for an entertainer. I remember working at the Republic Gardens when Edgar Hayes—who did the greatest rendition of "Stardust," not vocally now, no one can touch Nat [King Cole]—asked me if I would like to go with his orchestra, and I left for the circuit: New York, Philadelphia, Baltimore and Washington. We'd come through playing like that. In New York it was the Apollo, in Philadelphia it was the Lincoln, in Baltimore it was the Royal, in Washington it was the Howard. We'd do a week in each city, then do an extra week in the last city, New York or Washington, and turn around and go back the other way.

I always came back to Washington. It was home. And I'd work at the Crystal Caverns. Monday night at that place was so exciting. Whoever was playing at the Howard, Duke Ellington or whoever it was, would come over to the Caverns after they finished playing on Monday night. Everybody wanted to be there. See, it was a chance to see everybody get loose after their stage performance, just play and have a good time. Duke, Lucky Millinder, Blanche Calloway, all of those people. I was so proud and scared to be performing in front of the biggies in the profession. So come Monday night I was ready to put on the dog.

I remember when Don Redman, the band leader, would come in there—the place would start jumping. Redman was the first to put five reeds in a band, and he was the one that started band singing—you know, where the band stands up in unison and starts singing songs.

I drive a lot with [my husband] Louie these days, and I'll just make a turn, down Florida Avenue or Rhode Island Avenue. At Sixth and M is the House of Prayer where my daddy used to preach. Then I drive down by U Street. It's really a heartbreaker.

I've told Mayor Barry that this area could be a great cultural avenue once again. But nothing has happened. If this street was put back together with lights, with some style, you could have better acts booked here than at the Kennedy Center.

They've tried to reopen the Howard Theatre, but you can't just reopen it and say this is the old Howard Theatre. You've got to get the right people, the people who are going to draw people back here. I'm not talking about these teen-age shows. There are plenty of good artists who would be delighted to play here. What's wrong with fixing this place up?

I was driving across 14th Street one day, going up toward the Howard Theatre. I started looking at the steps of the buildings and the old clubs and theaters, and I could not believe it. Seven steps spilling over with 500 people and every one of them scratching. I turned and there were more on the other side—a bunch of people just laying on the buildings like a mass of flies or something.

You know, I care about life. You won't see me in marches, that's not me. But don't tell me that someone in charge of this city can't look up and down 14th and U streets and see what's up.

How can you sit in the Capitol of the U.S. and let something like that go on? The people should say, "Let us do something about U Street." U Street used to be like Broadway was to New York. There's a saying: Poverty has nothing to do with dirt. It's the attitude that's gone bad on U Street. □



PHOTOGRAPH BY JOHN McDONNELL

Ike Kendrick

KENDRICK, 80, HAS OWNED THE CAPITAL SPOTLIGHT NEWSPAPER SINCE 1932.

I WAS BORN AND RAISED IN WASHINGTON, IN THE OLD LeDroit Park area, which was the first what you might call socialite area in Washington. My people moved in there—330 U Street—about 1902. My grandfather was a chef at Har-

vey's restaurant. My mother was a stage star, played with the Smarter Set at the Howard Theatre, played there and other black theaters from 1910 to 1917. LeDroit Park was for the blacks, teachers and people working at Howard University.

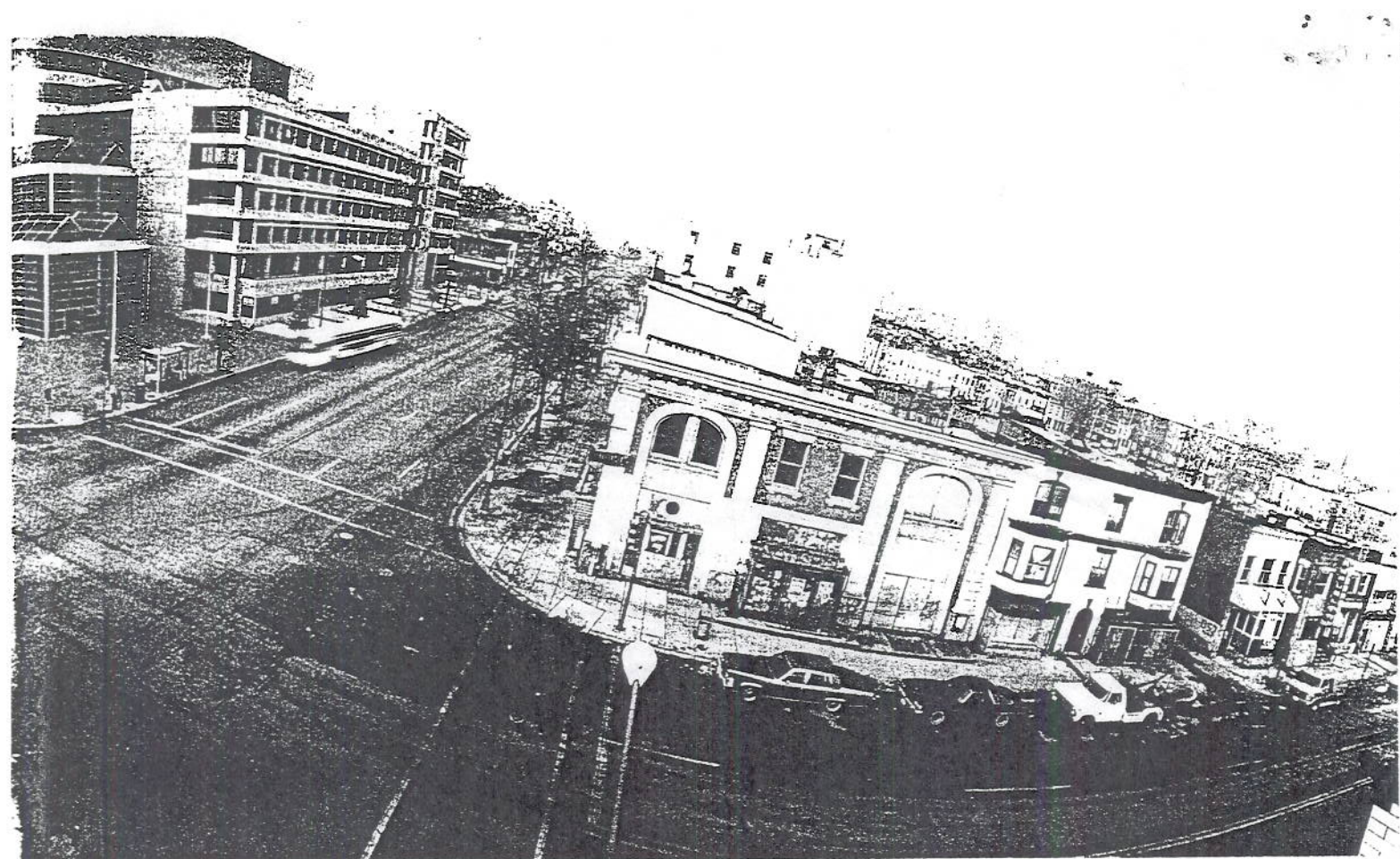
Social prestige wasn't claimed on the fact that people in LeDroit Park had so much money. Social prestige was claimed on the fact that these people aspired to go to school or their children went to school and they held as good a job as people could hold in those days. But the main thing that set those people apart was their social habits. They adjusted themselves to the social scheme better than whites did.

As you know, back then white people's society was based on wealth, tradition and leisure. Since blacks didn't have a whole lot of any one of those, and they certainly didn't have a whole lot of wealth, they did develop traditions, and sooner or later some of us had some leisure. Back then a black was rated first by his educational attainments. And if it wasn't education, then it was the kind of job he had. They were restricted as to what kind of job they could have in those days. So if you were chauffeur or maid to a white family, then you were measured by the way your white family was accepted in white society.

U Street was *the* street. It was the boulevard. It was the Fifth Avenue of Washington. Everybody who was anybody tried to make an appearance on U Street, especially on Sunday, but especially Easter Sunday. Holidays, you went up and down U Street to see and be seen and to show off your clothes.

U Street was the successor to Seventh and T. Washington's first famous corner of that type where people use to hang out socially was Seventh and T. The cause of that was the Howard Theatre. The Howard Theatre drew all those outstanding artists and entertainers, and the people flocked to it.

The theater is next to LeDroit Park, but strangely it wasn't the LeDroit Park people who hung out there. It was people from all over Washington who came there to hang out. When they put the Lincoln Theatre up on U Street, a white man,



WASHINGTON

This once-glorious gateway to the best of black Washington features a single hope of better times to come: a new municipal office center.

Crandell, was sold ideas of putting up a theater for Negroes, as they called them then, on U Street, that was about 1922-1923. Right after that the Republic Theater went up. It was an immediate success.

Those people who had been hanging out at Seventh and T flocked to the new attraction, moving pictures. The moving pictures became more popular than the stage shows because it was cheaper to go to the moving picture theater.

I got involved in the newspaper business in 1944 quite by accident. I had been a successful public relations man and promoter. When I was 26, I was manager of the Masonic temple building, a building put up by Masons at 10th and U streets. I became successful in promoting dances. One of the first things I paid attention to was after-school activities for teen-agers. I organized the federation of student clubs. We took small groups of teen-agers and organized them into social clubs and promoted their social affairs.

Nightclubs were the life of U Street. One of the oldest was Republic Gardens, at 1351 U. owned by W.G. Tindel, a black man. He turned a house into a restaurant and the backyard into a summer garden, taking after the things they had done in New York. He had the first garden restaurant. He kept the business for 40 years.

Then there was the Club Caverns, at 11th and U. Some doctors opened it up as the Rose Room or something. They couldn't make a go of it and sold it to Dan Garrett. And he got a guy from New York who was an expert designing nightclubs, St. Clair Barrington, white man, and he designed this cavern

idea. Many of the outstanding stars of the nation played down in the Club Caverns—Ruth Brown, Pearl Bailey, Willie Bryant, Blanche Calloway, Cab's sister.

The Caverns and the Republic couldn't handle over 100 people. There was nothing bigger until the Club Bali. It played every big name you could think of. The Club Bali was the first nightclub that started charging people admission to come in the door and did it successfully. Club Bali could accommodate 200-300 people.

I'll tell you who played the Club Bali—the greatest of all, the great Louis Armstrong and his quintet and the great Earl (Fatha) Hines and Ella Fitzgerald and Sarah Vaughan, Billy Eckstine, Woody Herman, sax player Arnett Cobb; the white boy sax, Stan Getz.

Then there was the Club Bengasi at 1453 U Street. Another club, the Capitol City Club, you had to have a key to go in there. It meant a lot of prestige to belong to it. It was across from the Lincoln Theatre.

Newspaper people called a lot of people around U Street Cafe Society. It was a mixture of gangsters, gamblers and young socialites. The young girls hung around with them because the gamblers had the money—gifts and cars to give them. There were the numbers people, too, like Whitetop Simpkins, Alvin Barnes and Killer Peyton Manning.

When I look back on my life, and on The Capital Spotlight, I'm very proud to say that for the last 50 to 60 years we were part of the entertainment and social life of Washington, D.C., part of the life on U Street. □



Isidore Egber

EGBER, 65, WAS ONE OF THE FEW WHITES WHO GREW UP ON U STREET. HIS FATHER, SAM, OWNED LARGE LOTS OF PROPERTY IN THE AREA THAT ARE STILL IN THE FAMILY.

MY FATHER CAME HERE IN 1930. HE USED TO BE A BIG meat buyer. He knew how to buy and could sell very low. You ever heard of veal or lamb, four pounds for a quarter?

This used to be a teeming neighborhood with families and people. Across the street there was nothing but houses and families. You had Thompson's Dairy here with 200-300 employees. This was a very viable neighborhood. I remember when Joe Louis became the heavyweight champion. We lived above the store then. And when I looked out the window, U Street was wall-to-wall people.

I used to be a marble champion in D.C. Outside the store we used to have a big marble ring. Huge crowds would gather around to watch us play in the dirt out there on 12th Street. This was a real neighborhood. The real McCoy.

I don't remember any other white families. I remember businesses owned by whites. Whites came into the neighborhood for the clubs and the girls, but I really don't remember too many living here. At Thompson's Dairy, most of the employees were white. And at Children's Hospital the employees were white.

I went to Polk Elementary School on Seventh Street. The schools were segregated. As a matter of fact, I went to the movie theater at Ninth and N and they had a wall, a partition, whites on one side and blacks on the other. If you wanted to go to the movie, you had to sit there.

I went to Griffith Stadium all the time. I used to sneak in. I remember one thing—I did have one problem in this neighborhood. A little gang. Whenever they saw me, they would chase me, and since I was Jewish, they would trap me and make me say a few words of Jewish. All those guys who were in that gang, we grew up together, and guess what? We're still friends.

A lot of your property is owned by whites. We own this whole block. When my father bought this stuff up, he bought it from a white guy. My father rented places out. He helped a lot of the black people here to go into business. His rents were very low.

He was interested in having people make money so they could stay in business. We had a shoeshine parlor, a restaurant, we had a poolroom. There was a restaurant around the corner. Blacks owned most of the businesses around here. Most liquor stores were white-owned prior to the riots, and then they started changing hands.

I never felt racial tension around U Street. You get to know good people and bad people. You get to know people on a personal basis. And when you saw a doctor or a lawyer, you gave them the respect you would give the best. They were people. The color kind of faded. But before '54, make no mistake, this was a southern town.

Marion Barry used to come in our store after he came to town and wanted us to donate to various organizations he had. You know, it's strange, the militants were not neighborhood people.

I love U Street. You wait, you won't recognize this area in 10 years.



Redd Foxx

FOXX, 65, STAR OF THE TV SERIES "SANFORD AND SON," IS A COMIC WHO SPENT MUCH OF HIS EARLY CAREER WORKING ON U STREET.

U STREET. ALL THE BLACK ENTERTAINERS WANTED TO BE there. See, the audiences in Washington were some of the best, maybe the best. Very intellectual, dressed sharp. You know what Washington was then to black people all over the country? It was the town with the black college graduates. Black folks in Washington were doing good or better than most—doctors and lawyers and people who had those good government jobs.

I always worked the black clubs. There was no such thing as integration in the clubs for me. There were a few black entertainers who were in the white clubs, but I wasn't going to put up with a whole lot, like dressing outside and not eating in the place. When I first came to Las Vegas, they had Nat King Cole dressing in a camper in the parking lot.

See, I had a reputation, too. I told it like it was—and this was back in the '40s. I'd talk about race, sex. There were no restric-

tions on me. I'd tell them, "I'm too old to start saying doo-doo." See, I'm the father of all that stuff. I was doing it before Lenny Bruce and George Carlin.

You know what I remember? Coming out backstage at night, I used to smell the bread baking at the bakery. Another smell I remember was Tim and Grace's hot dog stand at Seventh and T, right next to the pool hall. That pool hall was jumping. Cecelia's was a nightclub right around there. I spent a lot of time in there. Cecelia's had some great soul food.

I lived right behind the Howard, in a first-floor place. A friend of mine, the singer Jim Jam Smith, his mother lived in that house and she let me have a room. Washington was very hip, a very hip place. I hear some people say it was a southern town. But black folks were having a good time with each other.

Now, there was prejudice. One time I was living near the D.C. and Virginia border. I used to go over to Virginia to go to the drugstore. So I bought a ticket for the Christmas pudding drawing or something. And I won. The prize was \$300 in Christmas presents. When I walked in that drugstore with the winning ticket, they went silent. They gave me the presents, and then they said, "You better get on the other side, over in D.C." I didn't go back. But you see, it didn't bother me none. Black people paid me just as much or more to work in the black clubs, and I had peace of mind. I could tell black folks I had mixed parents, and they laughed when I said I didn't know who to hate.



Stanley Mayes

MAYES, 38, GREW UP NEAR 14TH AND U. TODAY HE IS AN EXECUTIVE WITH THE CONSTRUCTION FIRM BUILDING METRO'S GREEN LINE UNDER U STREET.

I IDENTIFIED MY NEIGHBORHOOD AS THE ONE I READ about in my schoolbook, an ideal neighborhood where everybody knew everybody and looked out for you. The ladies looked at you and screamed at you if you were across the street doing something. "Hey, boy, I going to come around there and tell Miss Mayes." We didn't have any rolling, green grass lawns, but otherwise I didn't see any difference between what was in my Dick and Jane schoolbook and what I experienced growing

up on U Street.

Crime was not a factor. Our parents maintained curfews. They had small youth gangs around here in 1959 or 1960. They had names like "The LeDroit Park," and "The Peaches and Honey," made up of teen-agers between 14 and 19. Police imposed a curfew, and then they disappeared.

There were drugs, but it was a situation like where Ray Charles, Al Hibler or Charlie Mingus, many of the jazz performers and intellectuals who came to the neighborhood, people would say, "You know, they have a drug problem." But there was nobody standing around hawking drugs on the sidewalk. The primary street hustlers were people writing numbers and the pool sharks.

When I was a kid we made money by carrying groceries at the Safeway. We took our wagons to the Safeway—14th Street between Wallach and U. Everything that went on at 14th and U streets was just a part of where I spent all my Friday evenings and Saturday mornings. That corner was the center of so much activity. It was the crossroads for all the city's buses. There was a People's drugstore there and the office of SNCC [Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee] was in the 1200 block of U Street and the office of CORE [Congress of Racial Equality] and the SCLC [Southern Christian Leadership Conference] was at 14th and U, above the People's drugstore. In 1964, I was 14, and Rev. Channing Phillips organized a march for home rule in the District and got Martin Luther King Jr. to lead it. It started out on U Street, and I was just standing around and somebody pushed me. I grabbed someone's hand and realized the march had started and I was in the front. One person away was Martin Luther King Jr.

Fourteenth and U was a great place to be a kid. The arcades with the pinball machines were located right there. After we carried our orders from the supermarkets, we would go in there and split up the money we made and spend it on the pinball machine. We'd get 25 cents for carrying groceries. We might make \$4 in a day, and if we made \$4 we would consider ourselves as having done very well. Pinball machines were a nickel, and if you perfected your skills, you could run up 10 or 15 games and not have to feed the machine.

Jewish merchants ran all the corner stores and the 5- and 10-cent stores. And they would all extend us credit. If we needed one thing or another, we could always ask Mr. Hill—he ran the combination liquor store-grocery—for credit. We had a relationship with local merchants where we didn't even have to go in the front door. We'd go in the alley, through the back door and come up from behind the counter and go around and get whatever we needed. And if mother didn't have the money right then, it was like: "My mother wants me to get the bottle." "All right." I'd write it in the book, and my mother would send me back later when we had the money.

On Sundays whites would invade the neighborhood. We would stand across the street and look in awe at all the whites coming to the neighborhood to go to church. We had a good relationship with the whites who lived around there. That played a role in the riots. There was a great deal of disappointment on the faces of white merchants because they felt a little betrayed, based on the relations they had maintained. It was like, "Why are you doing this to me?" If the white merchants were present, the local black residents did not allow people to vandalize their stores.

The white merchants had maintained good relations. They felt they were a part of the neighborhood. The Jewish merchants for the most part lived above their stores. Their kids played with us. When they went to school, they went to the yeshiva, but when they came home, they played outside with us. It is hard for people to believe it today, but this was a great neighborhood. My family was poor, but the neighborhood had so much life that I never knew we were poor. □