Remembering U Street

by Kathryn S. Smith

In 1920, Washington, D.C., had the largest urban African-American community in the nation, and its social, cultural, and economic heart was an area centered on U Street, N.W.—known to many today as Shaw. The community's roots were deep in the city, since the capital had been between one-quarter to one-third black since its creation in 1791, and a free black pre-Civil War community had established churches and schools long before the Emancipation Proclamation. After the Civil War, the black intelligentsia of the nation congregated in Washington, and aspiring black Americans came from everywhere to send their children to its fine schools and to seek jobs in a city more racially open than elsewhere.

Many settled in Shaw, adjacent to the African-American academic polestar, Howard University. In the decades between 1920 and 1960, the neighborhood became home to black leaders in law, science, medicine, education, religion, the arts and humanities, and the military. By 1960, nearly 50 percent of African-American physicians, dentists, architects and engineers had been trained at Howard University, along with 96 percent of all black lawyers, who in turn provided many of the leaders and the strategies for the modern civil rights movement.[1]

Despite the major role this place has played in the city and the nation, its history is not well documented, living largely in the memories of current and former residents. A new project, "Remembering U Street," has begun to retrieve these memories as it involves the community in the creation of an outdoor exhibit about the history of the neighborhood. The exhibit is mounted on a Metro construction fence at 13th and U streets. It is a piece of public history, inspired and guided by those who lived the story; it is a piece of public art, designed and fabricated by artists with ties to the community. Many of the images come from personal collections.

"Remembering U Street" is a collaborative project of The Historical Society of Washington, D.C., and two neighborhood organizations (the U Street Festival Foundation and the Thurgood Marshall Center for Service and Heritage), in partnership with the Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority. The exhibit has been funded by local businesses, the Eugene and Agnes E. Meyer Foundation, the D.C. Humanities Council, and the D.C. Commission on the Arts and Humanities.

The exhibit is an outgrowth of the efforts of the Thurgood Marshall Center to restore

Notes begin on page 93.

The lights of Griffith Stadium loom over this 1930s U Street scene, photographed by Robert H. McNeill from his studio window near the corner of 13th and U. Courtesy, Robert H. McNeill.

the oldest black YMCA building in the nation—the Twelfth Street (later Anthony Bowen) YMCA at 1816 12th Street—and use part of it as a community heritage center. In preparation, the center brought together more than 75 current and former residents of the neighborhood to talk about the stories that should be told. The exhibit reflects their responses.[2]

Mounted on the street—instead of behind museum doors—"Remembering U Street" is intended to prick the public's consciousness, raise awareness of what was once Washington's Harlem, and invite public participation in the preservation of its legacy. I have come to think of it as free-range history—unfenced and free of conventional historical boundaries. The photographs and documents exhibited merely sample the rich vein yet to be mined.

"Remembering U Street" is in the vanguard of a new movement by museums and historians to involve the public in the preservation and presentation of its own history. While all acknowledge that memories are selective, subjective, and sometimes inaccurate in specifics, the past that individuals and groups choose to remember in fact shapes our individual and communal future.[3]

The exhibit comes at a moment of rapid change in Shaw. In the 1950s, as legal segregation ended, members of the black middle class moved to less crowded neighborhoods recently opened to them, and the Shaw area lost the mix of people that had been one of its great strengths. After the April 1968 riots that occurred in the wake of Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s assassination, more left, and buildings fell into disuse and disrepair; many remaining residents struggled with the problems associated with poverty and joblessness. The neighborhood is now being rediscovered as a convenient and attractive place in which to live and do business, spurred in great part by the building of the Frank D. Reeves Municipal Center at 14th and U (1986) and the opening of the U Street Metro station (1991). As newcomers snap up its late-nineteenth-century rowhouses, its African-American history is also being rediscovered. The Whitelaw Hotel, the only first-class hotel for blacks during segregation, and the Lincoln Theatre have been restored, and others are slated for renewal.

When current and former residents were asked what was most important to remember about this place, two threads ran through their answers. First was the record of individual and group achievement in the face of great odds. "We need to tell our kids who we were and what we did, because our contributions were outstanding, and will be for all eternity—who we were and what we did, under very difficult conditions," said Russell B. Lyles, Jr., who grew up in the Bloomingdale neighborhood just northeast of Shaw and attended Shaw schools.

Lyles's "difficult conditions" were segregation, which made jobs equal to one's abilities difficult to come by. For years the only place an African American could sit down to eat downtown was Union Station, clothes in major department stores could be purchased but not tried on, Ralph Bunche could not buy a ticket in a downtown movie theater, and Marian Anderson could not sing at Constitution Hall.

In this context, individual and group achievement often came at great personal cost; hence there is tremendous pride in those who reached not only local but national fame, such as jazz musician Duke Ellington; Carter G. Woodson, the father of black history; General Benjamin O. Davis, America's first black general; Lillian Evans Tibbs, the first internationally known African-American opera singer; Alain Locke, who named and blessed the New Negro Renaissance with his 1925 book, *The New Negro*; poets Sterling Brown, Langston Hughes, and Paul Laurence Dunbar; Dr. Charles Drew, who pioneered the preservation of blood plasma; and presidential advisor, educator, and equal rights campaigner Mary McLeod Bethune.

All have associations with Shaw and adjacent LeDroit Park and Howard University.

A second message came across just as strongly, however. Here was a community that, despite acknowledged divisions based on color and class, functioned well for its members. Shaw was a dense weave of personal acquaintances and lifelong friendships based in strong families, churches, schools, fraternal and social clubs, black-owned businesses, and other local institutions. These provided the support, training, and opportunities for important individual and group achievements. In this setting, described by many as a village or small town, people felt valued, comfortable, and safe. Further, as Pauline Jones, long-time resident and historian of St. Augustine Catholic Church, reminded one group, "We also had a lot of fun here, don't forget."[4]

It must be acknowledged that the participants in "Remembering U Street"—most of whom are age 50 and older—have themselves enjoyed a measure of personal success, and they look back on the past with some satisfaction. The exhibit also reflects the past as they have consciously or unconsciously chosen to remember it. As the last generation to grow up under legal segregation, there are many other stories they could have recounted—stories of hardship and racial discrimination; however, when asked what they wanted those who had not shared their experiences to know, it was a story of a successful community that, despite divisions, supported and encouraged its members.

At a time when social and political commentary increasingly speaks of the perceived loss of community in America, these recollections are of more than passing interest. John McKnight, an urban affairs professor at Northwestern University and the author of two popular books on rebuilding healthy, functioning communities in urban America, has described the need to build "social, political, and economic structures at the local level that re-create a space for . . . people to act and decide." What the residents of Shaw created under segregation—faced with a larger society that refused them dignity and opportunity—was a place to act and decide. It was a place where they could shape their own lives. Racial segregation was the outside agent forcing these residents to build a separate community. It can be argued that there are similarities with the powerlessness felt today by those Americans who believe that big business and government deny any local arena in which to act and control their own daily lives, aspirations, and opportunities.[5]

Johnarthur Lightfoot, who grew up in Shaw and worked for a while as a night clerk at the Whitelaw Hotel, can still see his great-grandmother Moriah George at rest in the backyard of his boyhood home at 1624 10th Street. Born in Virginia of a free black family in 1834, George came here to live with her granddaughter in this four-generation household, where she passed her 100th year. Courtesy, Johnarthur Lightfoot.

"Remembering U Street" focuses on the period between 1910 and 1960, when there was no single name for today's Shaw. Residents referred to small places within it, such as Logan Circle, Hell's Bottom (whose core was 12th Street),14th and U, or Seventh and T. In 1966 the name "Shaw" was imposed on the area bounded by North Capitol and 15th streets, N.W., on the east and west and Florida Avenue and M Street, N.W., on the north and south. That year federal redevelopment authorities designated it as the Shaw Urban Renewal Area, named for Shaw Junior High School, a black junior high school housed in a physically rundown building at Seventh and Rhode Island Avenue, N.W., which had been inherited in 1928 from the white school divisions.

Today, Shaw's original urban renewal boundaries have no political or social meaning. The area is divided by school boundaries, advisory neighborhood commissions, wards, and zip codes. Its social history is in fact intricately entwined with that of LeDroit Park, between 2nd and 7th streets just north of Florida Avenue; Bloomingdale between North Capitol and Second streets; Howard University, just north of Florida on Georgia Avenue; the area now designated as "Strivers Section" to the west; and with some of Columbia Heights to the north. Many older residents have never liked or used the name Shaw because it was imposed by planners.[6]

Nevertheless, the name Shaw has attained common parlance. Its boundaries, however, are fluid. Where they are depends upon whom you ask, and most profess not to know. Since the words "U Street" seem to symbolize the African-American experience in this neighborhood, they have become the flag of choice for this exhibit.

Originally, this area was the northernmost part of the new federal city designed by Pierre L'Enfant in 1791. A dirt road to Bladensburg, called Boundary Street (today's Florida Avenue), was its northern boundary. Only a few farm

Scenes such as this horse-chestnut-tree-lined block of 13th Street were woven into New Negro Renaissance literature by resident Jean Toomer, author of Cane *(1923):"Dan Moore walks southward on Thirteenth Street. The low limbs of budding chestnut trees recede above his head. Chestnut buds and blossoms are wool he walks upon. The eyes of houses faintly touch him as he passes them. Soft girl-eyes, they set him singing." Photograph early 1900s, courtesy, National Geographic Society.*

buildings were scattered among the woods and fields, however, until the Civil War, when the Union Army set up military camps and a hospital. All were safe havens for African Americans fleeing slavery. Thus from the beginning, this neighborhood has been home to both black and white Americans.

After the war, public streetcars began to run out Seventh and 14th streets, making Shaw a convenient place to live. Then, in the early 1870s, a massive city-wide public improvement project led by Alexander "Boss" Shepherd paved the streets, planted trees, and laid water and sewer lines. Working people, craftsmen, and professionals—black and white—flocked to the area to build or buy homes. Most of the brick rowhouses that line the streets of Shaw today were constructed between 1875 and 1900.[7]

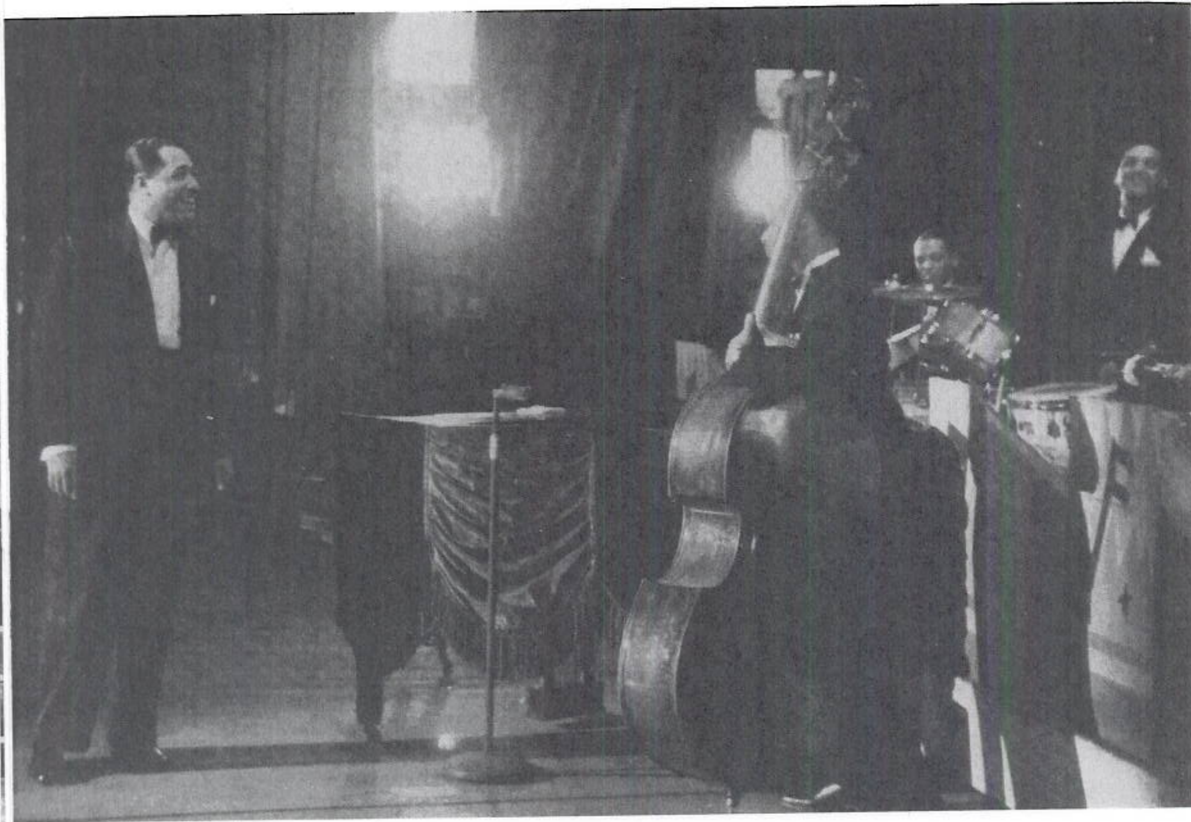
Around 1900, many white residents chose to move to new suburbs to the north, which were closed to African Americans. Black Washingtonians, being forced out of downtown by increasing racial discrimination, took their places. While some areas of the city were privately developed for white occupancy only, such as LeDroit Park, the area that became Shaw was part of the original city of Washington, and land was sold in small increments, available to everyone. Shaw had a significant racial mix until the early twentieth century. Recent research by the public history firm Traceries shows that working-class people of more modest means, particularly African Americans, tended to live at the center of the neighborhood, farthest from the main transportation routes of 7th and 14th streets.[8]

Between 1890 and 1910, African Americans were attracted to Shaw in large numbers; some came from elsewhere in the nation, drawn by the educational opportunities of Washington's excellent black public schools and modest but secure and prestigious job opportunities in the federal government.

Black businesses, churches, schools, fraternal organizations, and places of entertainment soon sprang up in the vicinity of U Street, especially between 7th and 14th. The buildings that would house the central institutions in the community—such as the Twelfth Street YMCA, True Reformers Hall, Whitelaw Hotel, and Industrial Savings Bank—were financed, designed, and built by African Americans, unlike structures in most black urban neighborhoods today that have been inherited from other groups. Between 1895 and 1920 the number of black-owned businesses in Shaw grew from 15 to 300, and the area boasted all of the city's "colored" high schools. Pockets of white residents remained (Cleveland, Harrison, and Morse elementary schools served white students into the 1930s) but the section was now dominated by African-American communities.[9]

By 1920, U Street had become Washington's black boulevard. *Newspic*, a magazine for African Americans published in Birmingham, Alabama, featured Washington's "You" street in its April 1946 issue, describing it as the "Broadway of Washington's colored business district" where there was a "perpetual parade of sepia Washington enroute to everywhere and nowhere. . . . For a bustling, teeming mile from Scurlock's Photo Studio at 9th St., to Schlossberg's Hardware Store at 18th, the main stem of technicolor Washington is crowded with the business enterprises of whites and blacks, Jews, Italians, Greeks, and all possible polyglot combinations."[10]

U Street boasted three first-run movie theaters. Its night clubs featured hometown stars such as Duke Ellington, Pearl Bailey, and Billy Eckstine and other name entertainers of the day. Ballrooms accommodated



large gatherings in style at the Lincoln Colonnade, True Reformers Hall, Prince Hall Lodge, Murray Casino, and Odd Fellows Hall. Restaurants and after-hours clubs all contributed to the vibrant nighttime street scene. Henry Whitehead, who came to Washington from the Midwest in the 1950s and has become a collector of neighborhood history and memorabilia, remembers that all of the movie theaters let out at the same time, pouring hundreds of people into the streets, eager to continue the good times at restaurants or clubs. "Harlem was spread out, but in Washington all the attractions were together," Whitehead recalled. "It was magical."[11]

It was a magnet for the young as well. Paul Phillips Cooke, former president of D.C. Teachers College who has never lived more than eight blocks from U Street, remembers that as a child he and his friends would go to the Lincoln Theatre on Saturdays. "You paid 50 cents at the beginning of the year (in September) and then every Saturday you could go for a nickel."[12]

The Howard Theatre, at the end of the strip at Seventh and T, was the jewel, attracting crowds that lined up around the block. Built in 1910, it was the oldest legitimate theater for black audiences and entertainers in the nation, predating the Apollo in New York by more than 20 years. In its first two decades, the Howard presented vaudeville and plays; from the 1930s through the 1950s it offered jazz, rhythm and blues, and comedy, and in the 1960s it added Motown and Soul.[13]

U Street was also where African Americans visited the doctor, dentist, barber, or beauty shop, where they played pool and hung out with friends. It was the setting for Elks parades, Easter Sunday promenades, and Halloween revelry. "U Street—for black people, that is where you came. You didn't

e year (in Sep-
day you could

the end of the
jewel, attract-
und the block.
legitimate the-
entertainers in
lo in New York
s first two de-
vaudeville and
gh the 1950s it
es, and comedy,
own and Soul.[13]
African Ameri-
tist, barber, or
layed pool and
s the setting for
y promenades,
treet—for black
ime. You didn't

Duke Ellington, left, presides over the Howard Theatre stage, early 1940s. The Shaw native made his professional debut in 1917 at True Reformers Hall (then Pythian Temple), 11th and U. The Howard, the nation's first legitimate theater built for black performers, opened in 1910. Photograph by Robert H. McNeill.

have to live in this area to be part of U Street. We all converged on this place regularly," remembered Charles Cassell, a Washington architect and jazz aficionado. Well into the 1950s, it was considered such a grand place that many dressed up to just appear there. "You had to wear a tie to walk down U Street" is how many old-timers phrased it.[14]

Meanwhile social clubs, fraternal organizations, churches, and schools sponsored parties, dramatic and musical productions, sporting events, and countless other activities that knit the neighborhood together. Friends and neighbors met at basketball games and boxing matches at Turner's Arena, at high school cadet drill competitions, at the Capital Classic football and Homestead Grays baseball games at Griffith Stadium, at the Phillis Wheatley YWCA and the Twelfth Street YMCA, at dances at the Lincoln Colonnade, at Cecilia's restaurant, and at Club Caverns, to mention only a few. Long-time residents share many of the same memories. Stories about Sportin' Daniel, for example, abound. Always dressed impeccably in fine suits and spats and swinging a cane, he is remembered not only for his spectacular attire, but for standing up to slights toward his race on city streetcars.[15]

A key to the success of the neighborhood, according to participants in "Remembering U Street," was the mixture of classes and occupations. Successful role models for youth lived next door or down the block. "We were forced to deal with one another on every economic level," said the late Thurlow Tibbs, Jr., grandson of Madame Evanti. "In my block we had school teachers, a mail man, a retired garbage man, and a registrar of Howard University. There was every kind of worker . . . , and that was typical of most blocks."[16]

"If you went to the Lincoln Theatre, you wouldn't know if you were sitting next to the bootblack or the president of Howard University," recalled John Beckley, who grew up in the neighborhood and later earned a degree in pharmacy from Howard University. "So you would conduct yourself accordingly. You would think, this is a human being, so I'm going to treat him as if he was the president of the university, because he might be."[17]

Strong families took communal care of their children. "There was no family my family didn't know, or that didn't know me," remembered Edna Jones, whose family had a long association with the area. "I couldn't go three blocks without people knowing exactly where I had been and everything I did on the way. It wasn't just the schools. We learned from everyone. We learned as much from Aunt-so-and-so down the street, who wasn't even related to us."[18]

"Shaw *was* a family," said W. Norman Wood, a recently retired ANC commissioner,

An advertising flyer touts Cab Calloway's appearance at the Lincoln Colonnade. Located behind the Lincoln Theater on U Street, the Colonnade hosted social events and served as the theater's second stage. Courtesy Henry P. Whitehead.

whose family has lived in the neighborhood for four generations. "Everybody looked out for everybody." That included reprimanding any child you saw getting into trouble. They not only told your mama, "they went with you. They *took you* to your mama," said Clyde Howard, who grew up in Shaw.[19]

The networks of family and neighborhood were reinforced in the schools. Friendships forged at Garnet-Patterson (10th and U) and Shaw junior high schools and the elementary schools often continued at Dunbar, the nationally renowned college preparatory high school (1st and N); Armstrong Technical High School (1st and O); Cardozo High School with its business curriculum (9th and Rhode Island); or Margaret Murray Washington Vocational School (North Capitol and O).

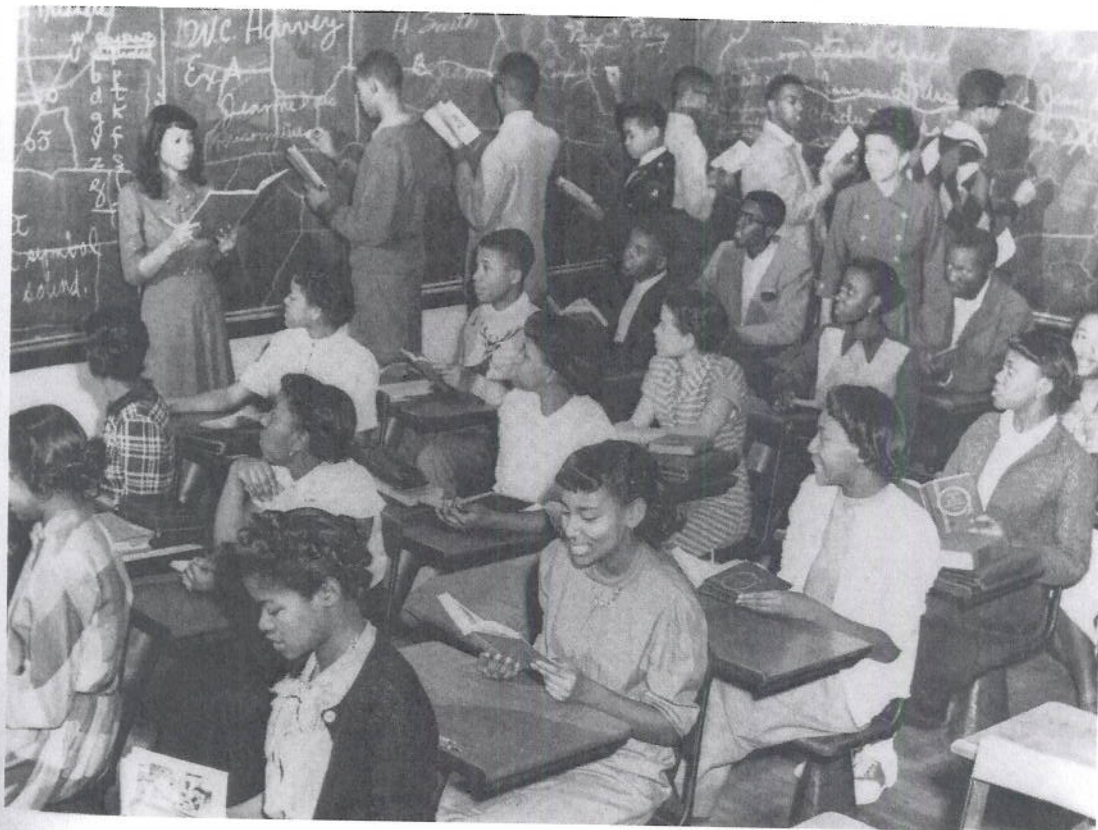
Before school desegregation was ordered in 1954, Divisions 10 through 13 of the D.C. Public Schools were known as the "colored" divisions. According to noted sociologist and Howard University Dean Kelly Miller, these schools were considered the best in the nation for African Americans, and in the 1920s represented the only school system almost entirely under the control of its black community. Its highly trained teachers came from Miner Teachers College, Howard University, and Ivy League colleges; many held advanced degrees and all found stiff competition for

Members of Mary Hundley's French class at Dunbar High School work at the board in 1949. Foreign languages were a staple of Dunbar's college prep curriculum. Many Dunbar teachers held doctorates from prestigious universities yet taught high school because of restricted opportunities for their race. Courtesy, Library of Congress.

these jobs. Ind
a means of pe
the core of th
People who we
the 1920s thro
identify thems
of where they

Students
one another th
competitions,
remembered
Charles Cass

Photographer R
this moment at
on U Street, on
could test their
hustlers, play t
time of day. On
participant, wh
on his skills at
through Howa
Robert H. Mc

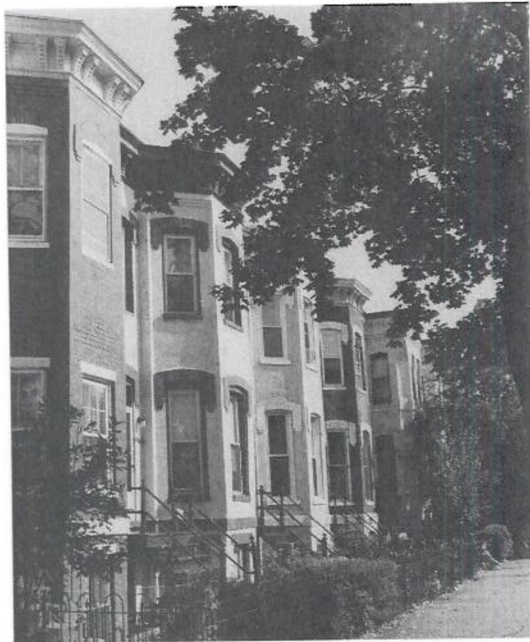


these jobs. Indeed, a respect for education as a means of personal and racial uplift was at the core of the community's value system. People who were part of this community from the 1920s through the 1950s are still likely to identify themselves in introductions in terms of where they went to school.[20]

Students at all the schools came to know one another through social events, cadet drill competitions, and sports. Former students remembered that teachers were mentors. Charles Cassell, who studied at Dunbar but also took drafting classes at Armstrong in preparation for his career as an architect, recalled that "a teacher was kind of a second parent. They would watch over you and they cared about you."[21]

Photographer Robert H. McNeill captured this moment at the Idle Hour Billiard Parlor on U Street, one of the many where locals could test their skills against traveling hustlers, play the numbers, or just pass the time of day. One "Remembering U Street" participant, who asks for anonymity, relied on his skills at the pool table to pay his way through Howard University. Photograph by Robert H. McNeill.

The area's churches were at the heart of spiritual, civic, social, and political life for young and old. Many of the churches date from the early and mid-nineteenth century when they sustained a strong, self-reliant free black community. These churches established schools long before Congress authorized public education for black children in 1862. Later churches served their communities by sponsoring sports teams, producing theatrical and musical productions, and organizing parties, picnics, and field trips. It was not unusual to hear Leontyne Price, Paul Robeson, or Madame Evanti in concert at a local church. In a city with no locally elected government, spiritual leaders became political leaders and community organizers as well, and church



Late-nineteenth-century brick rowhouses, such as these in the 1000 block of S Street, line most of Shaw's residential streets. They boast an assortment of turrets, bays, decorated cornices, and fancy brickwork that lend character to the neighborhood. Photograph by Kathryn S. Smith.

The marching band of Shaw Junior High School—namesake of the Shaw neighborhood—carries its school banner down Pennsylvania during the 1996 Presidential Inaugural Parade. The area was named for the school in 1966 by urban planners. Photograph by Ron St. Clair.

auditoriums were home base for the early civil rights activities of the neighborhood in the 1930s and 1940s.

A church survey in 1957 counted 108 religious institutions in the neighborhood—grand edifices with spires as well as modest store fronts—as dense a cluster as one will find in any section of the city. "Back in the '20s and the '30s, everybody belonged to a church," said Grace Drew, raised on S Street as one of seven daughters of highly regarded physician and soldier Albert Ridgeley. "Sunday was a day you didn't do anything but church. There were no stores open—no department stores, no grocery stores, no movies."[22]

The overlapping of associations created a small town atmosphere. As one woman recalled, "The same people you went to school with went to the churches. When you went to high school, many of the same teachers had taught your mother and father."[23]

While it is popular to argue that recollections of such a positive nature merely represent nostalgia, what participants in "Remembering U Street" recalled was a very specific quality of daily life that, in retrospect, they miss. None deny there were social and class divisions, but those exist in every community. "We shouldn't pretend that everybody lived next door to everybody and loved everybody, because of course that didn't happen," said James O. Horton, a historian who has specialized in the history of black communities and served as an advisor to this project. "You may not love people—but you *knew* people," he added, pointing out the importance of being able to mix with people of all social and economic levels.[24]

It was this sense of a known community, sustained over generations, combined with the experience of common struggle that forged the lives these people remember as positive and fulfilling. "I think of the struggles that our forefathers went through. It gave us a strength and a kind of bonding that I don't think we have today," said Virginia Ali, who worked at the Industrial Bank on U Street and then opened Ben's Chili Bowl nearby with her husband in 1958. "Maybe we don't think we need it. But I think it is something that our children and our children's children ought to know about."[25]

The images that follow reflect the spirit of U Street as seen in its family life, its churches, schools, businesses, and associations, and along its lively city streets. They are representative of the approximately 250 images collected for exhibit on the U Street fence.

"Remembering U Street" mixes memorabilia, professional photographs, and snap-

f Shaw Junior High
mesake of the Shaw
ies its school banner
nia during the 1996
Parade. The area was
ol in 1966 by urban
ph by Ron St. Clair.

ther."[23]
argue that recol-
ature merely rep-
ticipants in "Re-
alled was a very
that, in retrospect,
e were social and
xist in every com-
etend that every-
erybody and loved
se that didn't hap-
n, a historian who
tory of black com-
an advisor to this
e people—but you
ointing out the im-
mix with people of
vels.[24]
known community,
, combined with the
iggle that forged the
ber as positive and
uggles that our fore-
ve us a strength and
don't think we have
who worked at the
eet and then opened
with her husband in
ink we need it. But I
our children and our
t to know about."[25]

: follow reflect the
reet as seen in its
churches, schools,
ations, and along its
are representative of
images collected for
fence.
Street" mixes memo-
otographs, and snap-

shots. Some come from public library and archival collections, especially the Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, but because images of daily life are seldom donated to public repositories, many others have been borrowed from individuals and organizations. In searching for images of family and daily life, the researchers found that most people do not realize the important public and historic significance in photographs of their families, businesses, churches, schools, or other institutions. Sometimes pictures are considered too precious and personal to share by those who own them or, more often, photographs are kept in scrapbooks or unsorted in boxes and file cabinets if they are kept at all. Another purpose of "Remembering U Street is to raise public awareness of the importance of such collections and the need for their preservation.

"Remembering U Street" is particularly indebted to Robert H. McNeill, who covered this neighborhood as a news photographer in the 1930s and 1940s and who has lent many images from his personal collection, and to Henry P. Whitehead, an avid collector of U Street history and memorabilia, which he has shared. The rich collection of the Scurlock Studio, which photographed the neighborhood for almost 90 years, was unfortunately unavailable to researchers at the time this exhibit was being assembled.[26]

Kathryn S. Smith, founding editor of Washington History *and past president of The Historical Society, is a community-based public historian and author of numerous books on Washington's social history. With Marya McQuirter, she is co-curator of this exhibit.*