

R E P O R T E R

SPRING 1999

The mission of the D.C. Preservation League is to preserve, protect, and enhance the historic and built environment of Washington, D.C., through advocacy and education.

Anacostia Historic District Nominated to the National Trust for Historic Preservation's 11 Most Endangered Historic Places

by Renée Ingram

Last January, the African American Heritage Preservation Foundation, Inc., nominated the Anacostia Historic District and its surrounding community to the National Trust to be considered as one of the 11 Most Endangered Historic Places in the country. The district—located in the southeast quadrant of the nation's capital—encompasses roughly 20 city squares, contains approximately 550 buildings dating from circa 1854–1930, and displays the city's richest collection of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century, small-scale, frame and brick, working-class housing. Incorporated in 1854 as Uniontown, the district has since expanded to include the Griswold subdivision and its immediately adjacent residential and commercial areas. The Anacostia Historic District is bounded roughly by Martin Luther King, Jr., Avenue on the west, Good Hope Road on the north, Fendall Street on the east, and Bangor Street and Morris Road on the south. The Anacostia Historic District also contains within its boundaries Cedar Hill, the home of Frederick Douglass, a nineteenth-century statesman, orator, and abolitionist.

The Anacostia Historic District was designated as a local historic district in 1973 and expanded in 1978. The expanded district was listed in the National Register of Historic Places in 1978. It has been on DCPL's Most Endangered Places List in Washington, D.C., since 1996.

The Anacostia Historic District is one of Washington's earliest suburbs. The unique character of the Anacostia Historic District is dominated by three major architectural styles: the "Cottage," the "Italianate," and the Washington "Row House" styles. In addition, representative examples of the charming Queen Anne style are also featured throughout the historic district. Though defined primarily by its residential properties, a core commercial strip along Good Hope Road and Martin Luther King, Jr., Avenue functions as the area's primary thoroughfare and serves to physically and visually bind the district to the heart of downtown Washington, D.C. The buildings along these two streets include early



Renée Ingram on Cedar Hill, Home of Frederick Douglass

Credit: Jerry Maronek

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DCPL Receives Notification of New Grants-in-Aid

by Mark Edwards

In late January, DCPL received notification of award from the District of Columbia Department of Consumer and Regulatory Affairs of two matching federal grants-in-aid for historic preservation identification, registration, and education projects in the city. Both projects were reviewed and approved by the D.C. State Historic Preservation Officer.

The first project, with an overall budget of \$22,643, is to prepare written and photographic documentation for a National Register nomination of the Lower Sixteenth Street Historic District. This project will evaluate the results of a windshield survey of the target district, develop an annotated bibliography for

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residential properties that have since been converted to commercial use; buildings constructed for combined commercial/residential purposes, with stores on the first floor and apartments above; and twentieth-century commercial structures. A small number of intrusions exist within the historic district; vacant lots and used car dealerships are more of a problem currently than large-scale buildings. The deterioration and neglect of properties throughout the district's residential and commercial sections constitutes Anacostia's greatest disadvantage and threat to its architectural and historic integrity.

The history of the Anacostia Historic District begins in the early part of the seventeenth century. In 1608, Captain John Smith recorded in his journals that he "sailed up the eastern branch" in search of the main branch of the Potomac River. Smith landed on the river's south bank—where the present day Anacostia is located—and noted that he was well received by the Nacochtank Indians. The 1632 journals of another explorer, Henry Fleet, give the first indication that the name "Anacostia" was derived from the Nacochtank tribe. Fleet noted that at the time of his arrival, the same land traversed by Smith more than 20 years earlier was now referred to as the "Nacostine." Later, the Jesuit missionaries would Latinize the name of the tribe to the "Anacostines," with the area eventually becoming known and referred to by the Nacochtanks as "Anacostia." Until its early development in the 1850s for residential purposes, the land constituting the Anacostia area was primarily agricultural.

The Anacostia Historic District is significant for both its historical and architectural contributions to Washington, D.C. The district includes Uniontown, one of Washington's earliest suburbs, which was incorporated in 1854. Uniontown was designed to be financially accessible to Washington's working class, most of whom were employed at the Washington Naval Yard. Unlike many neighborhoods across the river, land in Anacostia was less

expensive, and homeowners could frequently afford to buy two lots and build detached or semidetached houses. Most existing buildings date from the 1870s through 1930 and include freestanding and semidetached frame structures with front porches and Italianate detailing, as well as brick row houses and one-, two-, and three-story commercial buildings on the area's commercial streets. Despite the presence of many successful small businesses and an active citizenry, a number of buildings are now vacant and slowly deteriorating, and the historic character and prosperity of the neighborhood are endangered.

Historic Significance

The Anacostia Historic District is significant for its historical, cultural, and architectural contributions to the city of Washington, D.C. Its preservation is vital to retaining a comprehensive sense of the development of the nation's capital, particularly as it relates to the expansion of the city beyond the boundaries of the L'Enfant Plan and into its associated communities. The district's surviving physical fabric is key to defining its sense of scale and the quality of life intended within this former agricultural area. The rapid deterioration and neglect of this fabric threatens to erase this unique character and remove those physical, visual, and cultural resources that together define its perception and experience as a unified community. The continued lack of awareness, education, and adaptive re-use of the Anacostia Historic District must be addressed and resolved at both a local and national level. Developing viable solutions and funding mechanisms to support these efforts are critical to the ongoing redevelopment and revitalization of our nation's capital as a whole. Continued neglect and deterioration of this community will serve only to tarnish the outstanding historic preservation initiatives undertaken throughout other areas and serve as a poor reflection of the limitations of preservation outreach in the District of Columbia.

While blight is likely the area's greatest deterrent, it also suffers from insufficient public relations and lack of inclusion in

promotional materials and brochures aimed at tourists and visitors to the nation's capital. (This is a problem for many of Washington's historic neighborhoods, as much of the attention remains focused on the downtown Mall area and federal properties, and visitors are not yet fully encouraged to explore the city's distinct surrounding communities.)

What Is Needed?

Greater attention and support must be given to local efforts to strengthen preservation enforcement in the District of Columbia, imparting fines and restrictions on property owners who allow their historic properties to deteriorate. City officials must respond to the demands to improve their inspection and enforcement obligations—not only to protect and preserve the city's architectural history, but also to avoid the repeated instances of safety hazards created by such neglect and irresponsibility. The local government must work with national representatives to support DCPL's efforts to pass tax legislation (already introduced to the Washington, D.C., City Council) that would provide economic incentives to owners of properties 50 years and older for rehabilitation and historic preservation purposes.

Unplanned development and economic development pressures, coupled with ongoing neglect and lack of preservation enforcement regulations, place the Anacostia Historic District in dire straits. The lack of financial support (both local and national) and the risks currently facing this community pose a tremendous threat to the district. The erosion of the district's physical fabric has resulted in the disappearance of services vital to the survival and sustenance of the community. The area is an excellent candidate for reinvestment, and yet such reinvestment threatens to introduce large-scale development inappropriate with the district's distinct and contributing features.

As members of the D.C. Preservation League, let us work together to support this effort—volunteer with the DCPL's Anacostia Task Force and write letters of support to the National Trust for Historic Preservation. Time is of the essence.