



G R E A T E R

U S T R E E T

H I S T O R I C

D I S T R I C T



Prior to the Civil War, the area to become the Greater U Street Historic District was sparsely developed, as illustrated on this 1857 Map of Washington City, by A. Boschke.

Library of Congress, Geography/Map Division.

G R E A T E R U S T R E E T H I S T O R I C D I S T R I C T

Once described as a “city within a city” for its early-to-mid-20th-century days as Washington’s preeminent African-American community, the Greater U Street Historic District is currently a thriving residential and commercial neighborhood of northwest Washington. The district’s main artery, U Street, flows through the center of the neighborhood, offering a variety of stores, restaurants, small businesses, night clubs and other entertainment venues in renovated 19th and early 20th-century buildings. Some of these buildings, which today cater to a diverse crowd of residents and tourists, were built by and for the African-American community as fraternal organizations, theaters, and jazz clubs, earning U Street its national designation as “Black Broadway” and a reputation as a center of African-American life. Leaders in the civil rights movement, law, education, music, the arts, and humanities were residents, founders, and frequent patrons of U Street and its establishments.

On all sides of U Street, the surrounding grid of streets is defined by cohesive collections of 19th-century residential row houses punctuated by individual churches, corner stores and schools. These buildings, the majority of which were built between 1870 and 1905, are typical of the city’s post-Civil War speculative development and preceded the area’s rise as the center of Washington’s African-American community. U Street, itself, is noted for its many commercial and institutional buildings, many of which were constructed after 1900 by and for African Americans. The buildings of U Street, as well as several other African-American landmarks in the area, represent the continuing legacy of the history and culture of Washington’s African-American population.

The Greater U Street Historic District, listed in the National Register of Historic Places in 1998, extends roughly from 16th Street on the west to 7th Street on the east and from S Street on the south to Florida Avenue on the north, and includes over 1500 historic buildings.

RURAL BEGINNINGS

Like much of Washington, the area that would become the Greater U Street Historic District began as heavily wooded, rugged terrain, which was later cleared for orchards and farmland. In 1760, Robert Peter, a Georgetown tobacco merchant, purchased a large tract of the land upon which he established a small plantation. After Peter's death and for the first half of the 19th century, his undeveloped tract of land became home to two separate nurseries, several burial grounds, and a scattering of frame buildings.



1942 aerial view of Howard University shows a much-expanded campus from the original four buildings constructed 1867-69. *Library of Congress, Prints/Photographs Division*

CIVIL WAR & STREETCARS

While the rural nature of the area persisted until after the Civil War, the onset of the war provided a major impetus for development in this northernmost section of the city and established the foundation upon which the African-American community—for which U Street is known—ultimately arose.





Twelve “practice school teachers” pose for their photograph circa 1900 in front of Andrew Rankin Memorial Chapel at Howard University. *Library of Congress, Prints/Photographs Division*

During the War, the city’s population almost doubled as vast numbers of free African Americans and war refugees fleeing the worsening conditions of the South sought refuge in the nation’s capital. This dramatic increase in population strained the city’s available housing stock and infrastructure. As the city’s already developed residential areas were being filled to capacity, the still undeveloped northern borders of Washington provided the ideal site for the establishment of numerous Civil War camps. Three such camps and hospitals were located in the general vicinity of U Street: the Wisewell Barracks at 7th and P Streets, Campbell Hospital at Florida Avenue and 6th Street, and Camp Barker at 13th Street between R and S Streets.

While some of the city’s Civil War camps were broken up following the war, others survived as more permanent facilities and communities. In 1865, the Bureau of Freedmen, Refugees and Abandoned Lands was created to “provide food, clothing, fuel and temporary shelter for black and white war refugees.” Fifty-six hospitals and forty-eight dispensaries were created. One of these, the Freedman’s Hospital, started in 1862 and originally located at Vermont Avenue and 14th Streets, built a new building in 1868-69 on the site of the newly established Howard University. Originally intended to accommodate freedmen and refugees following the war, the hospital eventually became affiliated with Howard University Medical School.

Background: A horse-drawn Freedman’s Hospital ambulance, circa 1900. *Moorland-Springarn Center, Howard University*



The Washington City Orphan Asylum, built 1865-66, stood at the southeast corner of 14th and S Streets until it was demolished in 1963.

Library of Congress, Prints/Photographs Division

The establishment of Freedman's Hospital and Howard University above Florida Avenue at Seventh Street, proved a natural magnet for African-American settlement in the area. Created in 1867 by a special Act of Congress, Howard University was conceived as an "institution for the training of preachers (colored) with a view to service among freedmen." The Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen and Abandoned Lands, headed by General Oliver Otis Howard, a Civil War general and staunch supporter of the school, provided the necessary funds for the university. The same year as work began on the erection of the University's first campus buildings, General Howard began construction of his own residence facing 7th Street, immediately adjacent to the campus. General Howard, the principal founder and the school's namesake, served as the University's third president from 1869 to 1873. After his death in 1909, the University purchased his house and surrounding acres. Known today as Howard Hall, it is the only surviving building on campus dating to the university's original period of construction.





The influx of residents and the need for housing during and after the Civil War were coupled with the need for better transportation. In a two-pronged effort to transport freight for use during the War and to provide citizens efficient transportation, Congress, in 1862, granted the Washington and Georgetown Railroad Company the exclusive rights to construct horse-drawn streetcar lines along 7th and 14th Streets. The construction of the 7th Street line from Florida Avenue to the wharves of the



In this 1905 photograph, a horse-drawn moving truck awaits business outside the Smith Storage Company building, at 1420 U Street, NW. The building still operates as a storage company today.

Library of Congress, Prints/Photographs Division

Potomac River, and the 14th Street line from Florida Avenue to downtown, provided the fundamental infrastructure necessary for the development of this segment of the city.

Not surprisingly, the first significant building to occur in the area clustered along these new transportation routes. In 1865-66, shortly after the opening of the 14th Street streetcar line, the

Washington City Orphan Asylum built one of the area's first substantial buildings. For almost 100 years, this grand Italianate Villa style building stood at the southeast corner of 14th and S Streets, as an important area landmark before being demolished in 1963.



Several groupings of intact Civil War-era dwellings line the residential streets in the Greater U Street Historic District, including this long, uninterrupted row on the 1200 block of T Street, shown in a 1950 photograph. *Historical Society of Washington.*



The 1400 block of S Street, 1950,
with its many Italianate residences.

Historical Society of Washington

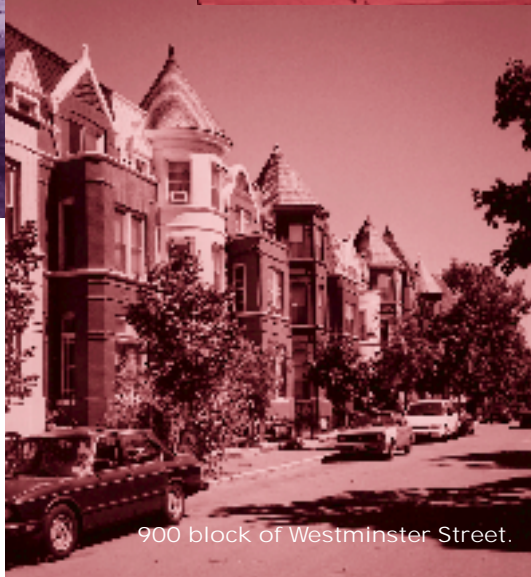
In the 1400 block of S Street, a group of Italianate-style dwellings built as early as 1864, extends along the north side of the street. This unified row of ten buildings arranged with a central pavilion and end wings remains one of the neighborhood's outstanding architectural ensembles. Other intact rows of Civil War-era buildings in the area and constructed by 1870 still line the 1400 block of Swann Street (from 1413-1439), the 1200 block of T Street (1211-1233 T Street), and the 1800 block of 12th Street.

In the 1870s, the short-lived administration of the Territorial Government implemented a massive, city-wide public improvement project. Under Commissioner Alexander "Boss" Shepherd, the Board expended \$20,000,000 towards the paving and grading of streets, the laying of sewer, water, and gas lines and the planting of thousands of trees. Speculative developers and architects followed suit by progressively building row upon row of dwellings. As additional streetcar lines were laid on 9th and 11th Streets, and as the need for housing continued, residential development in the area intensified. By 1890, Henry A. Willard subdivided the sole-surviving undeveloped square in the area—Square 362, bounded by 9th, 10th, S and T Streets. The square, known as "the old circus ground" or "Athletic Park," contained a 70-foot long grandstand built in 1878 for spectators. In developing the square, Willard hired three established designers, each of whom was responsible for the long rows of dwellings around the square: Architect Thomas Franklin Schneider designed 902-946 T Street, NW and 1820-1836 9th Street, NW (built 1890); the Hough Brothers designed the entire row of houses along Westminister Street, from 938 to 952 (built 1892); and Thomas Haislip designed all of those from 902 to 936 Westminister Street, NW (built 1891 and 1902).

As development of the residential square between 7th and 14th Street intensified during the 1880s and 1890s, so too did that of the commercial corridors. As two of the city's principal streetcar



In the 1920s, this corner building at 7th and T Streets housed "Scott's Lunchroom."



900 block of Westminster Street.

lines, these transportation routes were developed with small neighborhood-based commercial establishments that included hardware stores, drug stores, grocery stores,

and real estate offices. Most other goods and services, including clothing, fabric and shoes, were still only available downtown.

With the public streetcars running up and down 7th and 14th Streets, newly paved city streets, and new housing stock available for purchase, newcomers flocked to the area. Because of its distance from the central city and federal Washington, the area appealed primarily to the working and middle-classes—both African American and white—who could not afford the housing costs of the center city.

As could be expected, the residents living along 7th and 14th streets tended to be the merchants who lived and worked along these corridors. The residents of the streets located just beyond these principal avenues were filled with a combination of craftsmen and white-collar workers alike. Though the area was racially mixed, the white residents tended to dominate the streets closest to the streetcar lines, while African Americans were often clustered along the streets at the center of the neighborhood, further away from trolley lines. As the 19th century advanced, however, several forces combined to alter the racial nature of this far northern section of the city. By 1920, the once mixed-race neighborhood had profoundly changed to a predominantly African-American one, replete with schools, churches, businesses, fraternal organizations, and a multitude of entertainment venues.



RISE OF A CITY WITHIN THE CITY

Beginning in the 1890s, Washington experienced an increased sense of racial hostility. Many of the city's laws, passed during Reconstruction and aimed at the civil rights of African Americans, were ignored during the 1880s and 1890s, and then in 1901, were officially dropped from the city's legal code. Imposed segregation followed, and out of necessity, the city's African-American population of all socio-economic levels coalesced into those areas of the city open to them, including, most notably, Greater U Street and the adjoining Strivers' Section. The influx of African Americans into these neighborhoods hastened the



Owner Alexander Hamilton Underdown and his wife, Margaret Clark Underdown (on the right) pose with employees in front of their store, the Alexander Underdown delicatessen at 1742 U Street, NW. *Scurlock Studios*

Inset: Pressroom of the Murray Brothers Printing Co, 922 U Street, NW. Founded in 1908 by three brothers, Murray Brothers eventually became the city's largest African-American printing business. *Scurlock Studios*

Left: After moving from Washington to New York in the 1920s, Edward Kennedy “Duke” Ellington remained a strong presence in the city, often returning to U Street to play in the clubs and to visit his extended family.

Library of Congress, Prints/Photographs Division

exodus of many whites. Between 1900 and 1920 the racially mixed neighborhood progressively changed to a more homogenous African-American one.

While the Greater U Street area represented all socio-economic levels within the African-American community, the presence of Howard University continued to attract students and educators that contributed to the area’s cultural and literary life. To name a few, Greater U Street area was home to Francis Cardozo, the first principal of M Street High School; Francis Grimke, a writer and orator who championed constitutional rights for African Americans; Robert and Mary Church Terrell, lawyer, and civil rights activist, respectively; William L. Houston, dean of the law school at Howard University; Georgia Douglas





When it opened in 1915 at 1832 14th Street, NW, Ware's Department Store was the city's first African-American owned and run department store. Originally founded as a shoe store by Richard Ware, the specialty store was transformed into a department store as Ware recognized the community's need for such an establishment. *Historical Society of Washington*

Below: 1910 Vermont Avenue, NW home of Lillian Evans Tibbs, or "Madame Evanti," the first internationally recognized African-American opera singer. Madame Evanti was one of many prominent African Americans who lived in the Greater U Street area.

Johnson, poet and host of an influential weekly literary salon at her house on S Street; John Lankford, architect; Edward "Duke" Ellington, jazz musician; and Lillian Evans Tibbs (Madame Evanti), opera singer.



The overall racial climate in Washington inspired a new ideology among African Americans that transformed U Street into a self-sufficient community and the center of African-American life. A group of rising middle-class black entrepreneurs rejected the traditional approach of gaining racial equality through civil rights advocacy, and proposed instead the idea of racial solidarity and self-sufficiency.

Influential leaders such as Calvin Chase, editor of the *Washington Bee*, Washington's preeminent African-American newspaper; John Cromwell of the *People's Advocate*; Andrew Hilyer, founder of the Union League of the District of Columbia; and organizations such as the NAACP, led by W.E.B. DuBois, preached the benefits of racial unity and working together to achieve advancement. Most importantly, though, these men pushed for self-sufficiency through economic development. To spread the word, these leaders spoke out at churches and schools, through newspapers and on the



street. In 1892, 1894, and 1895, the Union League of the District of Columbia published business directories that urged the African-American community to patronize only their own businesses, and in particular those listed in the directories.

The Greater U Street neighborhood heeded the call of its leaders. Between 1886 and 1920, the number of African-American owned businesses in the area rose from fifteen to 300, with the bulk



Traditional African-American businesses, such as this “Negro” barbershop, thrived alongside the new and emerging businesses of U Street.

Library of Congress, Prints/Photographs Division

of new businesses coming between 1910 and 1920.

Entrepreneurs, like John Lewis; local businesses, such as the Murray Brothers Printing Company which published Washington’s most influential African-American newspaper, the *Washington Afro-American and Tribune*; and national benevolent organizations, such as the United Order of True Reformers, together built the infrastructure necessary to help the African-American community gain its independence from white Washington.

While the rows of Victorian-era dwellings behind the major corridors of Greater U Street remained intact, U Street itself gained new and varied businesses in existing buildings and on its remaining vacant lots. Churches, hotels, restaurants, banks, fraternal organizations and self-help groups, theaters, jazz clubs and other entertainment and commercial facilities that catered to the African-American community joined already existing commercial enterprises. New businesses such as printers, druggists, undertakers and more emerged in the area and fulfilled the community’s need for services. As the variety of businesses increased

in the U Street area, African Americans became even less dependent upon white Washington for services and became increasingly self-sufficient. At the same time, African Americans broke away from traditional employment roles and moved into fields that required higher levels of education, and thereby gained affluence and prestige.

A F R I C A N A M E R I C A N B U I L D E R S & A R C H I T E C T S

Many of the commercial and institutional buildings that helped U Street achieve its success were designed, constructed, and financed by African Americans. John Whitelaw Lewis, an African-American entrepreneur and financial pioneer, devoted to the growth of an independent black Washington,



Upon its completion, the Whitelaw Hotel, designed by African-American architect Isaiah T. Hatton, was described as "the only lodging facility in the city designed especially for African-American patronage, worthy of the name, 'hotel.'" The Whitelaw was an important social center for black Washington, and hosted many celebrities, including Joe Lewis, Cab Calloway and George Washington Carver. This photograph, taken in 1927, captures the dinner guests of Perry W. Howard. *Library of Congress, Prints/Photographs Division*



DINNER GUESTS OF PERRY W. HOWARD
WHITELAW HOTEL, WASHINGTON, D.C.
DEC. 6 '27 SCARLOCK, PHOTO.

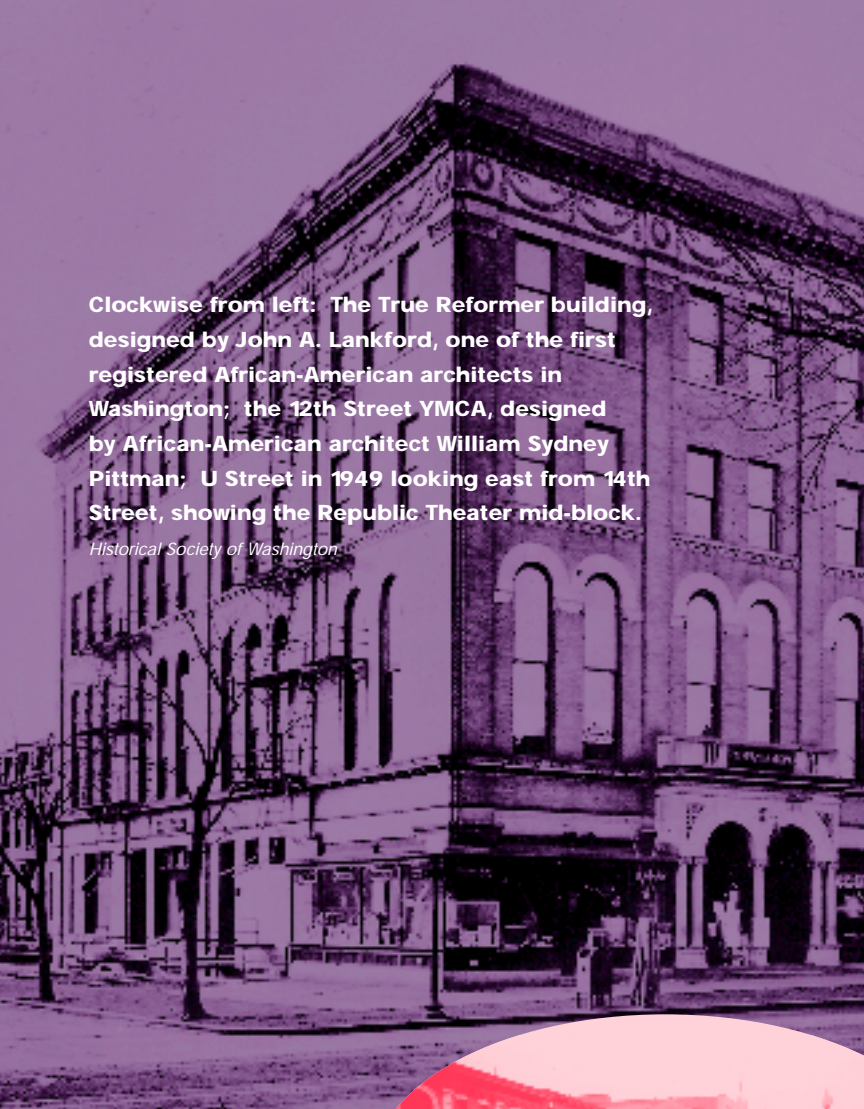
Left: John Whitelaw Lewis, founder of the Industrial Savings Bank (below left) and the Whitelaw Hotel, (background image) was indispensable in building the Greater U Street area into a self-sufficient African-American community.

Historical Society of Washington

constructed two major institutions in the area—the Industrial Savings Bank at 11th and U Streets (1917)—the only African-American bank in the city, and the eponymous Whitelaw Hotel at 1839 13th Street, NW (1919)—the only lodging facility in the city dedicated to African-American patronage. A former hod carrier, Lewis saw the need to provide financial opportunities to his own people, and formed the Laborers Building and Loan Association. The association helped the working class “save a part of their small earnings” by providing homes for them, and assisted them in purchasing their own houses. The group’s first purchase was the row of nine newly completed row houses on 13th Street between U and V Streets.

The Industrial Savings Bank, designed by African-American architect Isaiah T. Hatton offered banking services to African-Americans for the first time. At first a small enterprise, the bank benefited from a devoted clientele, and continued to grow until it failed during the national banking crisis in 1932. Two years later, it was reorganized and is still doing business at 11th and U Streets.





Clockwise from left: The True Reformer building, designed by John A. Lankford, one of the first registered African-American architects in Washington; the 12th Street YMCA, designed by African-American architect William Sydney Pittman; U Street in 1949 looking east from 14th Street, showing the Republic Theater mid-block.

Historical Society of Washington

The institutions established by John Lewis were later followed by others along U Street, including the 1902 True

Reformer Building; the 1908-1912

12th Street YMCA (now the Thurgood Marshall Center for Service and Heritage); the 1919-1920 Southern Aid Society building; and the 1922-1930 Prince Hall Masonic Temple.

The True Reformer Building at 12th and U Streets was one of the first institutional buildings erected by and for the African-American community along U Street. The United Order of True Reformers, based in Richmond, Virginia, was founded as a fraternal and benevolent organization that served the economic and social needs of African Americans.

The Prince Hall Masonic Temple at 1000 U Street, designed by prominent black architect Albert I. Cassell and constructed between 1922 and 1930, was built to house a chapter of the first African-American Masonic order. The temple has been continuously associated with the lodge, and continues to provide services for African Americans, such as social gatherings and commercial office space.



The 12th Street YMCA was constructed between 1908 and 1912 to designs prepared by African-American architect William Sydney Pittman. Housed in an impressive Italian Renaissance-style building at 1816 12th Street, NW, it is the first purpose-built African-American YMCA in the United States, a movement founded in 1853 by former slave and abolitionist Anthony Bowen. The building's construction attracted financial support from Julius Rosenwald, president of Sears, Roebuck and Company, who also contributed one-third of the costs for the construction of over 5,000 African-American schools throughout the South. The 12th Street YMCA provided the locale for social and civic activities, as well as dormitories for extended stays. Poet Langston Hughes lived here in the early 1920s, and Dr. Charles Drew, who pioneered the preservation of blood plasma, was an active member. Thurgood Marshall, the first African-American Supreme Court

Justice, held early meetings for civil rights legislation in the building.

The Southern Aid Society Building, located at 7th and T Streets, was constructed in 1919-1920 by the Society as a mixed-use building with commercial space, hotel rooms, and a first-run movie theater, the Dunbar Theater. The Society, founded in 1893 in Richmond, Virginia,

was one of the first African-American owned and operated insurance companies in the country. Designed by African American architect Isaiah T. Hatton, the Southern Aid Society building is currently under renovation.

The development of these major institutions along U Street, and the growth of African-American businesses provided the community economic security and stability that ultimately inspired the corridor's growth as an unrivaled entertainment center. By 1930, U Street had become the community's main boulevard, known nationally as "Black Broadway." Several first-run movie theaters, a multitude of nightclubs and ballrooms, pool halls and stores operated alongside the offices of African-American doctors, dentists, and lawyers.

During its heyday, U Street was home to a rich variety of theaters that extended from 7th to 14th Street. The Minnehaha Theater (Ben's Chili Bowl) opened as a nickelodeon theater in 1909 at 1213 U Street, NW. This was followed by the Hiawatha Theater at



HOWARD THEATRE

1 Week Beginning Friday, May 1

On Stage---IN PERSON

Cab Calloway

Background: 1935 advertisement for the Howard Theater, from the *Washington Tribune*.

11th and U Streets and the Howard Theater at 620 T Street NW, both in 1910; the Dunbar Theater in the Southern Aid Society Building in 1919-1920; the Lincoln Theater at 1215 U Street, in 1921-23, and the Republic and Booker T. theaters, mid-1920s, in the 1300 and 1400 blocks of U Street, (both demolished).

The Howard was the first theater building in the nation erected specifically for African Americans. The Lincoln Theater, built as a first-run movie house, was praised as “the largest and finest theater for colored people exclusively anywhere in the U.S.”

Other entertainment facilities, such as restaurants, nightclubs, dance halls, and billiard halls grew up along U Street, extending the same length of the corridor. When it opened in 1926 in the basement of the drugstore at 2001 11th Street, NW, Bohemian Caverns was considered the “doyenne” of U Street. The club, which catered to Washington’s African-American elite featured cave-like interior finishes (now recreated in the original basement space). Other popular clubs included the Republic Gardens in the 1400 block of U Street; the Bali at the northeast corner of 14th and T Streets; the Lincoln Colonnade behind the Lincoln Theater; the Turf Club at 1228 U Street, NW; Club Louisiana in the 2000 block of 14th Street; the Casbah at 1211 U Street, NW; and the Brass Rail at 14th and





An early promotional photograph for The Howard Theater, built 1910, including Andrew J. Thomas, the first manager.

Library of Congress, Prints/Photographs Division



Clockwise from above: The Minnehaha Theater, now Ben's Chili Bowl, built 1909; The Lincoln Theater, built 1921-23; The Booker T. Theater, built mid-1920s and now the site of the Reeves Municipal Building. *Historical Society of Washington*

T Streets. During its heyday, U Street literally reverberated with the sounds of Nat “King” Cole, Cab Calloway, Pearl Bailey, Sarah Vaughn, “Jelly Roll” Morton, Louis Armstrong, Edward “Duke” Ellington, and Ray Charles.

This soaring Gothic Revival-style church at 15th and V, was built in 1893 as Saint Paul’s Catholic Church. In 1961, it became home to St. Augustine’s Church, founded in 1858 by a group of emancipated slaves. *Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Collection*



CHURCHES & SCHOOLS

Prior to the Civil War, African Americans and whites, although segregated during the services, attended the same churches. After the war, and as an expression of their freedom, many African Americans established their own churches.

In Washington, at least four such black churches began in the U Street area: Berean Baptist Church; Saint Augustine’s Catholic

Church; Freedom Baptist Church; and the Lincoln Congregational Temple United Church of Christ.



Like churches, schools provided an important foundation for African-American society. Originally racially mixed, segregated schools were imposed after Reconstruction. The first African-American school in the U Street area was erected in 1880 at 10th and U Streets. The school was named the Garnet School in honor of prominent abolitionist Henry Highland Garnet.

In 1893, Patterson School was built adjacent to Garnet School, and in 1929, a larger school, Garnet-Patterson Junior High School, was built to replace the earlier two. Although originally built in the 1880s and 1890s as white schools, Phelps School (renamed Grimke School in 1934) and Harrison School were transferred into the black school system.



T H E “ N E W U ”



When the Supreme Court overturned restrictive covenants in 1948, and African Americans were legally free to move anywhere they desired, D.C. began to desegregate. Many of the African Americans who chose to leave the U Street area were the most affluent and were drawn to,

and could afford, newer houses in the expanding suburbs. The departure of the professional class from the U Street area altered its socio-economic make-up. The formerly owner-occupied, single-family dwellings were converted into multi-family rental units and rooming houses that catered to a more transient population. Increased density, overcrowding, and poverty began to plague the once middle-class area.

Above: Harrison School at 13th and V Streets was originally built in 1890 as a “white” school, but was transferred into the “black” school system in 1928, before racial integration was mandated by law.

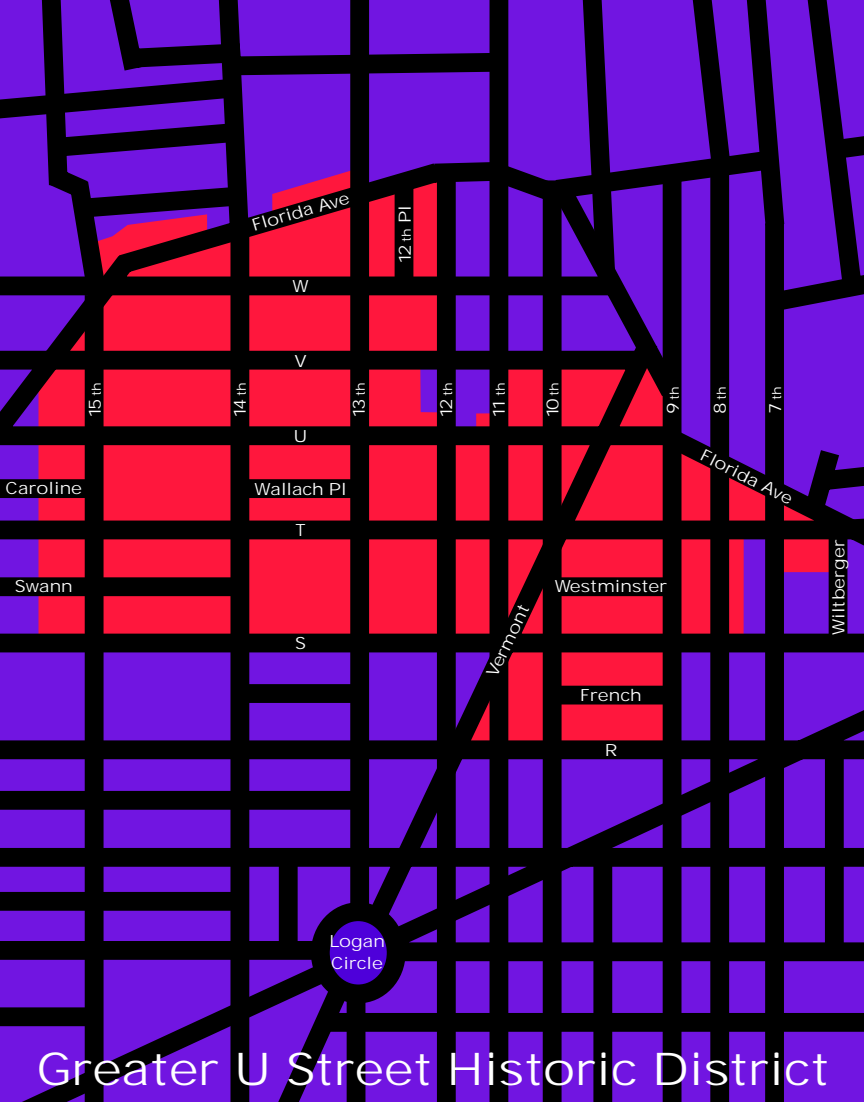
Left: Garnet-Patterson Junior High School, 10th and U Streets, built 1929.

Throughout the 1950s, other Supreme Court decisions continued the desegregation of Washington, and ironically further contributed to the economic decline of the neighborhood. In 1953, the Supreme Court ruled that the “lost laws” of Reconstruction guaranteeing equal access were valid. Stores, restaurants and other establishments that served only whites were now prohibited from doing so. *The Washington Post* described the Supreme Court decision as a victory that would destroy “all enforced segregation and discrimination.” The unintended result of the desegregation of public facilities was that businesses in the U Street area had now to compete with those downtown. With the dissemination of the African-American population across the metropolitan area, the shops and businesses along U Street became less convenient. Following their customers, many existing and new businesses went elsewhere and the number of commercial enterprises that once thrived along U Street began to decline.

In April 1968, the riots that followed the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. devastated much of the social and economic infrastructure of the neighborhood, with the area around 14th and U Streets particularly hard hit by the looting and burning of buildings. Federally funded urban renewal efforts in the late 1960s and 1970s began to rebuild the neighborhood, with new housing units and social service initiatives. In more recent years, the opening of Metro’s Green Line, the distinctive building stock, and the pedestrian-oriented commercial development have encouraged economic growth and vitality of the area. The erection of new buildings on vacant lots and the restorations of historic buildings such as the Lincoln Theater, the Whitelaw Hotel, the 12th Street YMCA, and the True Reformer Building, have contributed to the rejuvenation of the Greater U Street neighborhood. Community efforts, such as the recognition of the area as a National Register Historic District, spearheaded by the Cardozo Shaw Neighborhood Association, further promote the revitalization of the neighborhood and help maintain the area’s rich cultural and architectural heritage.



Top: 900 block S Street; Bottom: 1300 block of U Street, with the renovated Lincoln Theater mid-block.



Greater U Street Historic District

Greater U Street Historic District

KIMBERLY PROTHRO WILLIAMS/EHT TRACERIES

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Dakota Restaurant, 1810 14th Street, NW, circa 1920.

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