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## A Brief History of African Americans in Washington, DC

**African Americans in Washington, DC: 1800-1975**  
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African Americans have been a significant part of Washington, DC's civic life and identity since the city was first declared the new national capital in 1791. African Americans were 25 percent of the population in 1800, and the majority of them were enslaved. By 1830, however, most were free people. Yet slavery remained. African Americans, of course, resisted slavery and injustice by organizing churches, private schools, aid societies, and businesses; by amassing wealth and property; by leaving the city; and by demanding abolition. In 1848, 77 free and enslaved adults and children unsuccessfully attempted the nation's largest single escape aboard the schooner Pearl. On April 16, 1862, Congress passed the District of Columbia Emancipation Act, making Washingtonians the first freed in the nation, nine months before President Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation in January 1863. Congress had the authority to pass the DC Emancipation Act because it was granted the power to "exercise exclusive legislation" over the federal district by the U.S. Constitution. This federal oversight has been a source of conflict throughout Washington's history.

During the Civil War (1861-1865) and Reconstruction (1865-1877), more than 25,000 African Americans moved to Washington. The fact that it was mostly pro-Union and the nation's capital made it a popular destination. Through the passage of Congress's Reconstruction Act of 1867, the city's African American men gained the right to vote three years before the passage of the 15th amendment gave all men the right to vote. (Women gained the right to vote in 1920.) The first black municipal office holder was elected in 1868. When Washington briefly became a federal territory in 1871, African American men continued to make important decisions for the city. Lewis H. Douglass introduced the 1872 law making segregation in public accommodations illegal. But in 1874, in part because of growing black political power, the territorial government was replaced by three presidentially appointed commissioners. This system survived until the civil rights movement of the 1960s brought a measure of self-government.

By 1900 Washington had the largest percentage of African Americans of any city in the nation. Many came because of opportunities for federal jobs. Others were attracted to the myriad educational institutions. Howard University, founded in 1867, was a magnet for professors and students and would become the "capstone of Negro education" by 1930. The Preparatory School for Colored Youth, the city's first public high school, attracted college-bound students and teachers, many with advanced degrees. (Founded in 1870, the school became renowned as M Street High School, and later, Dunbar High School.) As far back as 1814, churches had operated and supported schools and housed literary and historical societies that promoted critical thinking, reading, lecturing, and social justice. African Americans also created hundreds of black-owned businesses and numerous business districts. At the dawn of the 20th century, African Americans had created a cultural and intellectual capital.

Washington had relatively few "Jim Crow" laws. However, segregation and racism were endemic. The few existing laws mandated segregation in the public schools and recreation facilities but not in the streetcars and public libraries. African Americans, therefore, reacted strongly to President Wilson's (1913-1921) institution of segregation in all of the federal government agencies. Clashes between African Americans and European Americans reached a fever pitch during the July 1919 race riot, when women and men fought back against violent whites, giving another meaning to the term "New Negro," a term usually associated with the cultural renaissance of the 1920s and 1930s. During the Great Depression (1929-1939) and World War II (1939-1945), the early civil rights movement gained ground. In 1933, the same year that President Franklin Roosevelt (1933-1945) began to end segregation in the federal government, the young black men of the New Negro Alliance instituted "Don't Buy Where You Can't Work" campaigns against racist hiring practices in white-owned stores in predominantly black neighborhoods. The Washington chapter of the National Negro Congress also organized against police brutality and segregation in recreation beginning in 1936.

The "Double V" effort — Victory Abroad, Victory at Home — increased civil rights activity. In 1943 Howard University law student Pauli Murray led coeds in a sit-in at the Little Palace cafeteria, a white-trade-only business near 14th and U streets, NW, an area that was largely African American. In 1948 the Supreme Court declared racially restrictive housing covenants were unconstitutional in the local *Hurd v. Hodge* case. Beginning in 1949 Mary Church Terrell led a multiracial effort to end segregation in public accommodations through pickets, boycotts, and legal action. Four years later, in *District of Columbia v. John R. Thompson Co.*, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that segregation in Washington was unconstitutional based on the 1872 law passed during Reconstruction but long forgotten. In 1954 a local case, *Bolling v. Sharpe*, was part of the landmark *Brown v. Board of Education* Supreme Court decision, which declared separate education was unconstitutional.

In 1957 Washington's African American population surpassed the 50 percent mark, making it the first predominantly black major city in the nation, and leading a nationwide trend. The 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom brought more than 250,000 people to the Lincoln Memorial. Its success was helped by the support and contributions of local churches and organizations. The assassination of Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., on April 4, 1968, triggered immediate and intense

reactions throughout the nation and the city. During the 1968 riots, when buildings were burned and destroyed, many African Americans rebelled against continued racism, injustice, and the federal government's abandonment of the city. Even before Dr. King's assassination, demands for justice undoubtedly helped push the federal government to take first steps towards "home rule" by appointing Walter Washington as mayor in 1967. In 1974 residents chose Washington as the city's first elected black mayor and the first mayor of the 20th century.

By 1975 African Americans were politically and culturally leading the city with more than 70 percent of the population. The Black Arts, Black Power, Women's, and Statehood movements flowered here. Indeed, Marion Barry, who succeeded Washington as mayor, began his public life here as a leader of local justice movements. There were independent think tanks, schools, bookstores, and repertory companies. Go-go (DC's home-grown version of funk) as well as jazz, blues, and salsa, resonated from clubs, parks, recreation centers, and car radios. With the uniting of political activism and creativity, African Americans were transforming the city once again.

\*Reprinted from Marya Annette McQuirter, *African American Heritage Trail, Washington, DC* (Washington: Cultural Tourism DC, 2003).

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