





“The most pleasant and healthful place in all the country”

The History of Settlement and Land Use along the Eastern Branch

The First Anacostians

The land along the eastern shore of the Anacostia River, earlier known as the Eastern Branch,¹ and specifically the area of Anacostia and Good Hope, had long been a population and trade center, and it was home to important settlements of people dating as early as 9500–1200 BCE. Several large villages and fortified towns or “forts” were established there, with the river providing a convenient means of food and transportation for goods and people.² By the early 1600s, at the time of the first encounters with Europeans, there were three major political confederations vying for power in the region: the Susquehannock, centered around Pennsylvania; the Piscataway in southern Maryland; and the Powhatan in Virginia and areas farther south. Individual city-states, like Nacotchtanke, were constantly shifting allegiances between these powerful groups. By the time that John Smith was exploring the area, armed conflicts were frequent, and the largest of the Native American towns were heavily fortified; many were surrounded by sturdy wooden palisades.

The Nacotchtank dominated the villages and towns stretched along the river from Giesboro Point (Congress Heights) almost to the town of Bladensburg at the mouth of the river.³ Their largest fortified town, Nacotchtanke, was located near the neighborhood of Good Hope.⁴ This fort was the site of an ossuary, food storage facility, and other important buildings.⁵ The Nacotchtank were expert traders and monopolized the area beaver trade, often trading from distant sites in New York and Canada.

The Nacotchtank raised crops on land surrounding their towns. Where warfare was intense, even the fields were enclosed in palisades. Fields were reclaimed from the forest by burning or cutting trees, and then intensively cultivated by hand using wooden and stone implements.

Top: Giesborough Cavalry Depot
 Bottom: John Smith's Map of Virginia, 1606 (detail)
 From John Smith, *The Generall Historie of Virginia, New-England, and the Summer Isles . . .* (1624)

Towns and villages controlled large areas of land, not only for cultivation, but also for forage and for hunting. Fish and seafood—especially clams—were found in great abundance in the creeks and rivers of the area. The Nacotchtank used bone hooks, nets, spears, arrows, and weirs. Fish were broiled over an open fire—either laid upon a wooden rack, or skewered and set before a fire to cook. The location was well suited for the development of a thriving community. Writing of the area, the adventurer Henry Fleet reported:

This place without all question is the most pleasant and healthful place in all this country, and most convenient for habitation, the air temperate in summer and not violent in winter. The Indians in one night commonly will catch thirty sturgeons in a place where the river is not above twelve fathom broad. And as for deer, buffaloes, bear, turkeys, the woods do swarm with them, and the soil is exceedingly fertile, but above this place the country is rocky and mountainous like Cannida.⁶

In some areas, Nacotchtank homes were clustered together in small groups spread among their agricultural fields. In more hostile areas, where warfare was frequent, homes were grouped behind palisades of thin saplings or logs placed six to twelve inches apart. Houses were built



Village of Pomeiooc, by John White, 1585–1593.
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upon a framework of saplings, bent and tied to support a covering of woven mats or thatch. The typical house was twenty to thirty feet long, twelve to fifteen feet wide, and ten feet high. Families slept on mats placed on wooden scaffolding one to two feet high.

By the 1620s, the more powerful Piscataway, based at the influential capital at Moyaone, in Prince George's County, dominated the Nacotchtank. Constantly shifting alliances and warfare already complicated the relations between various city-states. The arrival of the Susquehannock, a powerful population from the north, and the establishment of settlements and trading missions by the British added even more contenders for power and trade. With constant warfare and threat of violence, it would have been quite dangerous for the Nacotchtank to venture far beyond the fortified gates of the city.

A significant encounter with Europeans occurred in the early 1620s when Captain Raleigh Croshaw and other Englishmen visiting on a mission to the city of Potomac to trade for corn were persuaded by the werowance [chieftain] of the "Potowomekes" to ally with him ("to be his friend, his countenancer, his captaine [*sic*], and director against the Nacotchtanks and Moyaons his mortal enemies"). The Englishmen and the Potomac Indians (Potowomacks) joined in a raid on the city of Nacotchtanke, where their combined forces killed eighteen and drove the rest out of the city, which was then looted.⁷

In March 1622, distrust and hostilities between the British and the Powhatan in Virginia came to a head, and the werowance of the Powhatan, Openchacanough, led a massacre of the English settlement there. Later that year, a "Captain Madyson" retaliated by raiding the town of Potowomeke, where they "slew thirty or fourty [*sic*] men, women, and children."⁸

Sometime at the end of 1622 or the beginning of 1623, Henry Spelman,⁹ a trader and adventurer who had lived with the Potomac for a number of years when a youth, sailed up the Potomac River on the ship *Tiger* and disembarked near the fort of Nacotchtanke, seeking to trade goods for corn. Despite his fluency in Algonquian and his familiarity with the area, Spelman ("a warie man, well acquainted with their treacheries and the best linguist of the Indian tongue in the country")¹⁰ and fifteen other men were immediately killed or captured by the warriors of Nacotchtank ("... they heard a great noise among the savages on shore, and saw a man's head thrown down the bank, but how captain Spelman



Archeological artifact from the area of the Anacostia Metro Station on Howard Road. In 1981, the Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority authorized an archeological study on Howard Road before construction destroyed many historic buildings. Excavation uncovered hundreds of historic artifacts and materials, including Native American objects from the era of the forts of Nacotchtank. Anacostia Community Museum



The Navy Yard Bridge, 1860s. Immediately adjacent lies the farm of Maria Frederick. Anacostia Community Museum Archives

was surprised or slain they did not know.”¹¹ Henry Fleet was among those captured and allowed to live. He remained with the Nacotchtank for five years, becoming fluent in the local Algonquian language, until he was ransomed and allowed to return to England.¹²

In November 1623, still smarting from the successful attack by the Potomac in spring 1622, Governor Francis Wyatt of Virginia led a raid and massacre of the Piscataway town of Moyaone on the mouth of Piscataway Creek.¹³ Wyatt destroyed the great capital that had stood for several hundred years. Scholar James Merrill notes that “According to tribal tradition, long before 1600 the Piscataways had become the ruling tribe in a larger political unit when Uttapoingassenem, ‘emperor’ (tayac) of all the tribes in what is now Maryland, made Moyaone the center of his domain.”¹⁴ Surviving residents built a new capital, called Piscataway Fort, further down Piscataway Creek.

Once back home in England, Henry Fleet began entertaining British merchants with embellished tales of the riches of the region. Drawing on his experience and knowledge of the area and the people, Fleet had persuaded them to invest in a return trade mission to obtain beaver and other fine furs from the Piscataway and Nacotchtank.¹⁵ Fleet acquired a trading ship, *Paramour*, and crew with money invested by a merchant named William Clobbery. On July 4, 1631, Fleet set sail for Maryland on the ship *Warwick*. After stopping at various sites along the coast of

New England and the Chesapeake region, he arrived at Nacotchtanke (a reunion of sorts, since he had resided there for a number of years) in June 1632.¹⁶ By this time, the Nacotchtank had switched allegiance and were allied with Iroquoian tribes in competition against the Piscataway for the area's lucrative fur trade with the British.¹⁷ Realizing that Fleet intended to destroy their monopoly of the region's beaver trade, the Nacotchtank attempted to disrupt Fleet's efforts to develop a new trading network.

Fleet's initial trade mission to the Nacotchtank was unsuccessful apparently, for the investors complained that not only did he not return with the investor's ship laden with beaver and other furs, he never returned at all and had kept the ship besides.¹⁸ For several years, he sailed along the Potomac, trading English goods with the Indians for furs. In 1634, Fleet served as advisor to Lord Calvert in establishing the settlement in St. Mary's, Maryland, and became the primary promoter of trade with the Nacotchtank and Piscataway.¹⁹

Leonard Calvert, the first governor of the colony of Maryland, founded the settlement of St. Mary's in 1634 with fewer than 150 people; thirty years later, settlers spread across the Maryland colony, reaching the shores of the Eastern Branch. By the time that Prince George's County was chartered in 1696, there were almost 2,000 settlers residing in the county.²⁰

By the end of the seventeenth century, the Nacotchtank had lost most of their land. Warfare with settlers and with other Native Americans and diseases brought over from Europe eliminated Piscataway villages and forts from the area.²¹ The European system of private ownership of land was the final factor in separating the Piscataway and Nacotchtank from their traditional lands. Disease, alcohol, and fences soon doomed their way of life. With their lands sprouting crops of tobacco and corn, the land left to them continued to dwindle, forcing the Indians away from the shores of the Anacostia River.²²

Early Settlers

Many of the earliest Europeans who held title to land in the area owned large tracts that they held for investment purposes. After St. Mary's City was established, settlement in southern Maryland slowly developed along the river and major waterways. Population concentrated along the Potomac, Patuxent, Piscataway, and Eastern Branch rivers, but plantations

and homes were sparsely situated and located far distances apart. The Eastern Branch served as a kind of northern frontier, with few settlements north of the river. The first land patents for the land along the Eastern Branch area were issued in the early 1660s. Early landowners included George Thompson, the owner of Blue Plains; Thomas Dent, the owner of Giesborough (later Congress Heights); (the) John Addison (family), later owners of Colebrook; John Charman, early owner of the St. Elizabeths tract; Dr. John Meekes, owner of Chichester (later Uniontown and parts of Good Hope); Luke Green; James Pencott; William Middleton; and Thomas Wentworth.²³

When advantageous, these landowners bought adjoining or nearby land, sold their tracts off in their entirety, or divided them up and sold them as smaller parcels in an effort to maximize their profit. Not only were land parcels often resurveyed and sold, but also they were often handed from family to family as a result of inheritance. (Though marriage between first cousins was common among the elite in an effort to keep land and wealth within families, men and especially women married at a young age, mortality rates were high, and many had multiple marriages over a lifetime.)²⁴

Much of the population growth and development in the area was tied to the cultivation and export of tobacco. Plantations and even small farms in the area were initially devoted to raising tobacco; later the land was used to grow produce for local and regional markets. African slavery was introduced largely in an effort to provide cheap labor for tobacco plantations, and by 1700 African Americans composed 20 percent of the population in Maryland. By the mid-1800s, a significant population of free black families could also be found there.²⁵ Concentrated in Maryland and Virginia, the export of tobacco from the colonies grew until, by the mid-1600s, over 500,000 pounds were being exported. In the mid-1800s, more tobacco was grown in Prince George's County than in any other county in Maryland. But as the cultivation of tobacco depleted the soil of nutrients, more and more land was required to maintain the same amount of profit.

White settlers ranged from small farmers with few or no slaves to large plantation owners with a hundred or more slaves. Most came from Britain, but there was also a large population of German tenant farmers and smallholders. The early ownership pattern of the area was partly driven by land speculation. After the Residence Bill (which called for a national capital to be established in the region) was enacted in 1790,

many people expected that the southeastern quadrant of the city would quickly expand to take full advantage of its location on both the Potomac and the Eastern Branch. The construction of the Navy Yard in 1798 on the Eastern Branch and the need to house its growing numbers of workers also seemed to indicate that the city would quickly expand in that direction.²⁶ People eager to make a profitable investment in real estate bought land east of the river expecting it to quickly increase in value.

In 1798, President Adams approved the development of the Navy Yard on twelve acres of land along the Eastern Branch. It quickly became the Navy's most important shipbuilding operation, and one of the city's largest employers, utilizing both slave and free labor. Benjamin H. Latrobe provided the initial design for the Navy Yard, and the main gate that he designed and a few original buildings still survive. Along with the bridge across the Eastern Branch, the Navy Yard was set on fire by American forces during the War of 1812 in order to prevent its capture by the British. When the Navy Yard was rebuilt shortly after that, it began to focus on ordnance instead of shipbuilding; by World War II, it was considered the largest naval ordnance facility in the world. It continued producing ordnance up until the 1960s, when it became converted into naval office facilities.

Early investors in land included James Barry (for whom the Barry Farm neighborhood is now named) and William Marbury, who figured prominently in American judicial history.²⁷ In 1800, James Barry purchased the St. Elizabeths tract and developed a plantation there. William Marbury purchased Blue Plains and its neighboring tract, Addison's Good Will, for \$20,000 in 1802. In 1807 and 1808, he bought Chichester and Woodcot, near Broad Creek.²⁸

The Naylor family were another prominent plantation-era family who lived near the community of Good Hope. Colonel Henry Naylor established the Eastern Branch Ferry in the late 1700s.²⁹ The Naylor family built a grand manor house, Mount Henry, in 1853, after an earlier family homestead burned down.

Prospects for the Eastern Branch becoming a major artery for transport of goods and merchandise were also beginning to fade, as noted in a newspaper article as early as 1818. The river was silting up as a result of the clearance of the trees along the river, and by the first decade of the 1800s, large commercial or military vessels could no longer travel up the river to Bladensburg, Maryland, which had been planned as a major port.



James Barry, by Gilbert Stuart. Courtesy Princeton Art Gallery



William Marbury, attributed to Rembrandt Peale. Collection of the Supreme Court of the United States

The rate and extent of development east of the Eastern Branch did not meet the expectation of many investors, however. Instead of developing in the southeast area of the city, much of the early construction and activity in the District of Columbia was concentrated in the downtown area, especially along the corridor between the White House and the Capitol Building; in the southwest quadrant, especially along the Potomac; and in the Capitol Hill neighborhood. Despite the presence of the Navy Yard, little development occurred east of the Eastern Branch. Workers for the Navy Yard found housing largely on Capitol Hill and in Southwest D.C.³⁰

Settlement was slowly taking place on the other side of the river, however. By the early 1800s, enough families had settled in the area to enjoy an active social life. John Addison, later a colonel in the Maryland Volunteer Militia, became one of the biggest landowners across the Eastern Branch. He built his estate and great house, Colebrook, in 1688. Colebrook, originally part of the land tract purchased by Thomas Dent and William Hatton in 1671, was purchased from them by John Addison, a descendant of John Addison of Oxon Hill. Colebrook Manor, the family homestead of the Addisons, was built in 1808. It was located in the valley of Oxon Run, two-fifths of a mile southeast of the Washington district line.³¹

The Addisons participated in a full and lively neighborhood social life, as noted by Sarah Addison in an 1834 letter from Colebrook Manor (the document is among the collections of the Maryland Historical Society).

Your sister Harriet and Brothers have just returned from Dr [Bayne's] party—I have hitherto submitted to my children going to such places, but now feel that I have done wrong in not discountenancing them more than I have—I now hold up both my hands against dancing parties / particularly as they are conducted here, as ruinous to morals and health.... The parties in this neighborhood have been carried to excess, keeping it up all night.

S. A.

The Young family became one of the largest landowners in far southeast Washington and for a long period were the largest slaveholders in the District. George Washington Young inherited the "Nonesuch" mansion and estate in 1826; he also bought the Giesborough tract in 1833.³²

Little detailed information survives about African American families in the early history of the area along the Eastern Branch. Despite the continuing dominance of slavery, by the early 1800s a number of slaves had been freed or were allowed to purchase their own freedom due to the decline in tobacco production in the area.

Moses Goodwin's account of early African American life in Prince George's County and the District of Columbia is one of the few to survive: "The first school-house in this District [of Columbia], built expressly for the education of colored children, was erected by three men who had been born and reared as slaves in Maryland and Virginia. Their names were George Bell, Nicholas Franklin and Moses Liverpool...."³³ Goodwin's account continues:

George Bell was the leading spirit in this remarkable educational enterprise, and was conspicuous in all efforts for the benefit of his race in this community. He was the slave of Anthony Addison, who owned a large estate upon the borders of the District beyond the Eastern Branch, and his wife, Sophia Browning, belonged to the Bell family, on the Patuxent. When the commissioners were surveying the District in 1791, they received their meals from their cabin across the Eastern Branch, and the wife used often to describe the appearance of Benjamin Banneker, the celebrated mathematician and astronomer, who was one of the surveying party by invitation of the commissioner. She had a market garden and used to attend the Alexandria market every market day, though she had a family of three sons and a daughter. In this manner she saved four hundred dollars without the knowledge of her owner, who was Mrs. Rachel Pratt (Bell), the mother of Governor Pratt, of Maryland. This money was intrusted [sic] to a Methodist preacher, who bought the husband's freedom with it, and shortly afterwards, while the wife was dangerously sick, her freedom was bought for five pounds Maryland currency by the husband. These purchases were effected about six years before the building of the school-house.³⁴

Alethia Browning Tanner was also born into slavery on the plantation of Rachel (Beall) Pratt, right across the Eastern Branch. She purchased her own freedom for \$1,400 in 1810, and then purchased the freedom of many family members and friends held in slavery on plantations in Far Southeast. Moses Goodwin recalled that "[her] force of character and philanthropy gave her remarkable prominence here and elsewhere



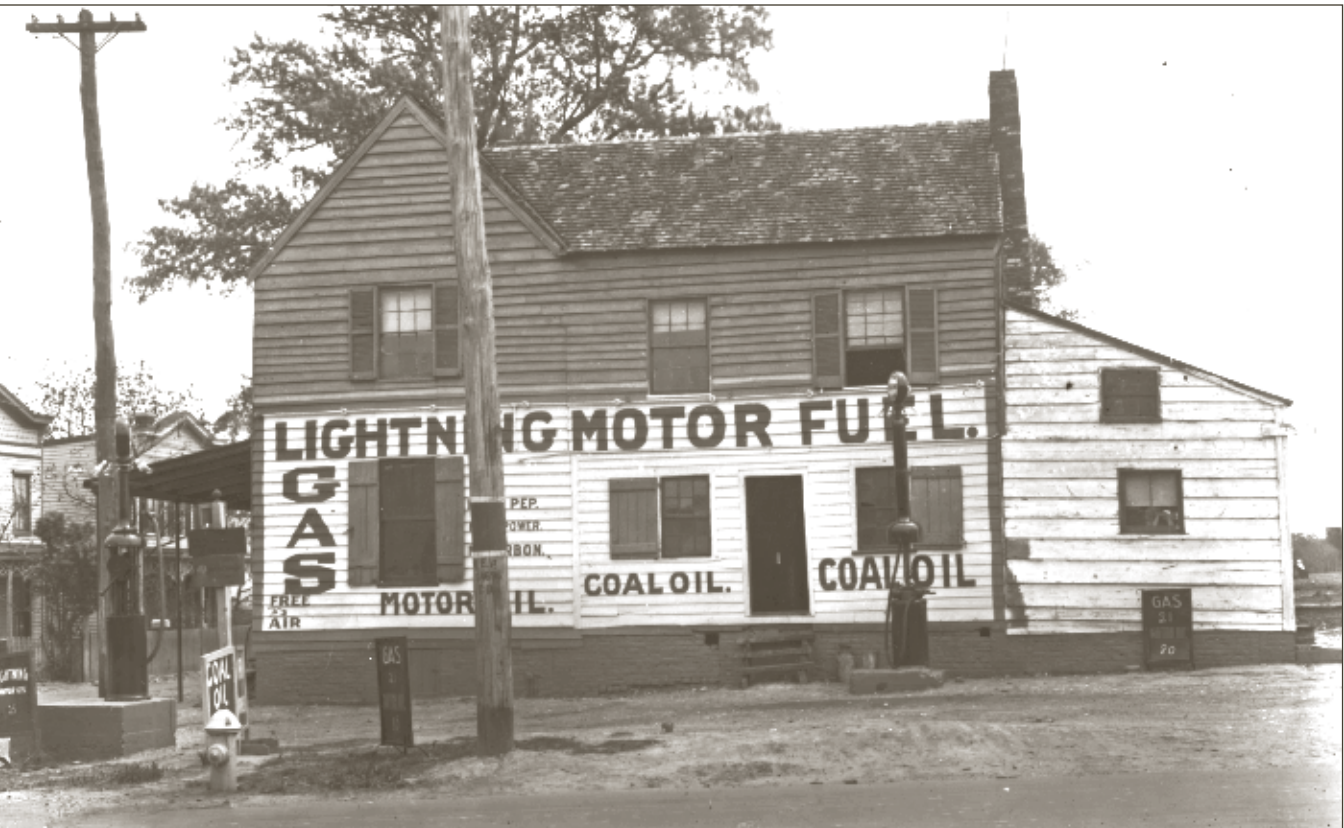
Alethia Browning Tanner.
Moorland Spingarn
Research Center

among her race, and commanded the respect of all who knew her.... Mrs. Tanner was alive to every wise scheme for the education and elevation of her race.”³⁵

In the 1820s, another black family built an extended homestead on their property along what is now Alabama Avenue SE. In 1813, Tobias Henson [or Hanson], a slave belonging to Henry Evans, managed to save enough money to purchase his freedom. He immediately set out to purchase the freedom of his family members as well as to buy enough land to ensure their livelihood. In 1826, Henson purchased twenty-four acres of land, a tract known as the Ridge, from Thomas Jenkins.

By the 1870s, the Henson family was the biggest landowner in the community of Stantontown, centered around Hamilton and Stanton roads. Before World War I, the family sold the land on the other (i.e., the eastern) side of Hamilton Road (Alabama Avenue) to the federal

Gas station at
Good Hope, 1950s.
Photograph by John
P. Wymer. Courtesy
Historical Society of
Washington, D.C.



government, and it became the site of Camp Simms, a training site for the D.C. National Guard. “[Our homes] represent our only claim to security as well as our heritage, our symbol of industry and good citizenship with which we had hoped to guide our children in building worthwhile, industrious lives.” So states a Henson family letter to Eleanor Roosevelt in 1943.⁵⁶

Property located near commercial developments or main roads was usually more valuable and costly than property in rural or even residential areas. The first businesses east of the river developed along the main roads of what are today Good Hope Road and Naylor Road in the early 1820s. These first businesses were the origin of the village of Good Hope.

The Village of Good Hope

The first major settlement in far southeast Washington developed at Good Hope Hill sometime in the 1820s. The starting point of the community is found near what is today the conjunction of Good Hope and Naylor roads, at which point the ridge of the hill crests and could still provide a breathtaking vista of the city of Washington were it not for the buildings and trees obscuring the view. Because this arduous road was one of the most well-traveled entryways into the city from southern Maryland, one of the first businesses to spring up there—and for a long time one of the oldest, lasting well over a century—was a tavern, offering sustenance to weary travelers. Shortly thereafter, across the road from the tavern, there came a blacksmith shop, where wagons, carriages, and carts could be repaired, and a stable, where injured horses could be cared for and fresh horses obtained.

It is not known when the first tavern was built there. Maps show one there as early as 1839, and early accounts indicate that it was already old by that date. The tavern was first known as Good Hope Tavern, and later as Spaulding’s Tavern; by the 1830s, it was known as Smoot’s Tavern; then it was called Jenkins’ Tavern; and at one time it was Vermillion’s Tavern and also Duvall’s Tavern. In the 1920s, in a nod to the advent of the automobile, a filling station was added alongside the tavern. By the 1930s, the tavern had disappeared entirely. The filling station remains today.

J. Harry Shannon commented in 1924: "When you come to the hamlet of Good Hope, you will see in the fork of roads an old house with dusty silver poplars and gas pumps about it. That was Good Hope Tavern.... It is true that Good Hope has fallen into the depths of modern ways and that scarlet tanks stand where Anderson's blacksmith shop was, and where a covered well and a mossy horse trough stood in the shade of silver poplars before Tom Jenkins tavern. But those things are memories that live in old men's minds."³⁷

Other early landmarks were Tom Anderson's blacksmith shop, and the Good Hope Post Office, established in 1847. Good Hope resident Judson Richardson was the community's first postmaster. He or his son served as postmaster until the Good Hope Post Office was closed in 1886.

Across from the tavern stood the blacksmith shop of Thomas H. Anderson, an enterprise almost as old as the tavern itself. Anderson's daughter, Clementina Anderson Hutton, alleged that her father named the area. He raised twenty children by working in his blacksmith shop "from morn til night" and raising vegetables that he sold at Center Market in downtown Washington. Clementina remembered growing up there fondly when reminiscing with J. Harry Shannon, a reporter known as "The Rambler": "[His] house had a look of hospitality, when at the top of the hill where the Naylor road joins the Good Hope road, you could see the big, old-fashioned chimney, with long porches on both sides of the house, windows on all sides, large cherry trees called May Dukes, with a gravel walk from the shop up to the house, roses in bloom all summer, where a horse's hoof had never trod. We took great pride in keeping it up like other homes around Good Hope." Anderson was born in Oldfields, Prince George's County, in 1792; he died in 1882, shoeing horses on the day of his death.³⁸

A small free African American community developed in the area of Good Hope Village. The first African American church east of the river was Allen Chapel African Methodist Episcopal Church, established at least a decade before the beginning of the Civil War in 1861. Some of the earliest African American residents included the Bruce, Hill, Tiney, Ambush, King, Joyce, Marlow, Fletcher, Moody, Pacum, Peai, Seafers, and Steel families.

St. Elizabeths Hospital

In the mid-1800s, there was also the new suburban development of the Government Hospital for the Insane, a federally funded institution for the mentally ill. In 1853, the federal government, spurred by the lobbying and advocacy of Dorothea Dix, purchased the 320-acre St. Elizabeths tract from Mr. and Mrs. Thomas Blagden for the purposes of constructing the first federally funded mental institution in the country.³⁹ Dr. Charles Henry Nichols was given responsibility for design, construction, and oversight of the institution. During the Civil War, the hospital expanded to include the care of soldiers injured in battle. In the last half of the century, many new structures were built, and the campus underwent further development.

St. Elizabeths became not only an important source of employment, but also an important cultural asset because of its historic campus and buildings. Believing in the therapeutic value of the beauty of nature, Nichols had the grounds landscaped to highlight the natural beauty of the place. Area families enjoyed picnics and other recreational outings on the expansive hospital grounds. The hospital became self-sufficient, with a farm, dairy, and carpentry and other shops. The hospital even had a railroad line that operated until 1967. Nichols Avenue (today, Martin Luther King Jr. Avenue) was named for Dr. Nichols in commemoration of his efforts to develop St. Elizabeths Hospital and in recognition of the impact that the hospital had on development in Far Southeast.

Uniontown

In the early 1850s, as the central portions of Washington City began to fill in, the land across the Eastern Branch once again became the subject of interest of investors and speculators. Some farmers sold their property in small lots (less than fifty acres) to wealthy and middle-class families for summer homes in the country to get away from the humid heat experienced by District residents. Former District mayor Sayles J. Bowen was among those who purchased a summer home in the area. Developer John Fox also built a country estate there. Dr. Arthur Christie built the "Fairlawn" plantation near Anacostia, as a virtual fantasy escape, installing bear pits, wandering peacocks, and dog kennels. He made the place a showcase in the region. Other landowners, some of whom worked at the Navy Yard, sold property to developers. The land

brought more money and proved more valuable for housing and residential development than for raising crops.⁴⁰

In 1854, Enoch Tucker, a landowner who worked at the Navy Yard and who had earlier leased his land to sharecroppers, sold one hundred acres of his 240-acre property, part of the old Chichester land tract, for \$19,000 to the Union Land Association, controlled by John Van Hook, John Fox, and John Dobler.⁴¹ While Good Hope and other locations in the area were hilly, the flat, even terrain of this parcel of land, which the Union Land Association called Uniontown, allowed for the maximum amount of development. In this new housing development the grid system of roads could easily be imposed on the terrain, regardless of the surrounding topography. In Good Hope and older areas, roads followed the contour of the hills and dales of the land in Far Southeast.

Uniontown land was divided into a grid with 700 rectangular lots, 24 feet wide and 130 feet deep. The association made lots available to white families for as low as \$3 per month.⁴² Early advertisements boasted of easy access to downtown D.C. and offered prices and payment plans amenable to blue collar workers. As historian Louise Hutchinson described it, Uniontown

... consisted originally of fifteen square blocks, bounded by Harrison Street (Good Hope Road) on the north, Jefferson Street (W Street) on the south, Taylor Street (Sixteenth Street) on the east, and Monroe Street (Martin Luther King Jr. Avenue) on the west. The streets named for the presidents were given letter or number names in 1908, and the presidential street names were relocated within Washington's Mall area. Even before the development of Uniontown as a planned community, Harrison and Monroe streets were major arteries (Marlborough and Piscataway roads), which linked the Anacostia community with Washington City and southern Maryland. In the center of the development, a tree-lined esplanade (now Logan Park), a block long and forty feet wide, became the center of community activities.⁴³

Civil War

The outbreak of the war in 1861 and the mobilization of troops and materiel brought tremendous changes to the nation's capital. It also brought great opportunities for many of those held in bondage nearby. By the summer of 1861, there were over 50,000 troops camped out

around the city, including in Uniontown. They provided a ready market for black vendors of prepared food, fresh vegetables and fruit, seafood and fish, and laundry and other domestic services. Union soldiers also often provided assistance to escaping slaves.

By 1865 there were sixty-eight forts surrounding the capital, eleven of them along the Eastern Branch and in the southeast quadrant of the city. The forts attracted many escaping slaves from Virginia, Maryland, and other nearby states, as forts employed a large number of free blacks and escaped slaves. There were three large forts constructed in Far Southeast: Fort Stanton, Fort Greble, and Fort Carroll. Fort Stanton was the first fort in Anacostia. Construction began in 1861.

George Washington Young also leased a large parcel of his land to the U.S. government for a cavalry depot in Giesborough. Almost 15,000 horses and mules were stabled there. After war's end in 1865, the horses and mules at the Giesborough Cavalry Depot were sold off to area residents, and the area became a popular location for middle-class summer cottages and large family homes for working-class whites.⁴⁴

The destruction of the forests along the Eastern Branch to build the forts and the injury to the land as a result of the thousands of horses and mules housed at Giesborough caused further silting of the Eastern Branch and resulted in other environmental problems that lasted well after the end of the war.

Emancipation

On April 16, 1862, President Lincoln signed into law a bill outlawing slavery in the District of Columbia. The act also provided funds to compensate slave owners for the loss of their slaves. Slave owners who were unhappy with the amount of compensation could appear before a local commission to appeal. Henry Naylor, George Washington Talbert, James L. Addison, J. Fenwick Young, and Thomas Blagden were among slaveholders in Far Southeast who appealed before this commission.⁴⁵

Many slaves born in Far Southeast had been allowed to lease their own time and live in the central part of the city. But there had still been many slaves working on the small farms and large plantations near the Eastern Branch. Some of these ex-slaves were the first African Americans to buy land in the area after the war. Some African Americans, with better means to earn their livelihoods or with pre-existing networks of friends and family in the area, settled in the Good Hope area. They

preferred the fresh air and open spaces of rural Good Hope, rather than the crowded, often dangerous alley dwellings found in Capitol Hill and southwest D.C. Allen Chapel remained at the center of this rapidly expanding black community. In 1865, the Freedmen's Bureau opened Good Hope School to serve this population. The Reverend John S. Dore was the first teacher for the school. By May 1866, the school was reporting 339 students.⁴⁶

Anacostia

In 1875, H. A. Griswold, a resident of Far Southeast Washington, organized the Anacostia and Potomac River Street Railroad Company to serve residents in Uniontown. Initial stockholders included John Van Hook, the developer of Uniontown or Anacostia, and Lewis Douglass, Frederick Douglass's son. The streetcar company began with two one-horse cars providing service from the Navy Yard gate to Uniontown. *The Anacostia Story* states: "Despite access to public transit, the rate of home building in Uniontown was still disappointing to investors. Although most of the Uniontown lots had been sold by 1860, the community still had only a few settlers, most of whom had built their homes near the main thoroughfares of Monroe and Harrison streets. When all 700 lots were finally sold, many had been purchased by absentee owners and land speculators. A study of the grid map for the next quarter of a century discloses that homes were built at the average of four a year during that period. This was hardly the response the proprietors had expected."⁴⁷

By the late 1870s, the Union Land Association (by then the Union Land Company) had gone out of business; and the Anacostia and Potomac River Street Railroad Company was struggling to survive. John Van Hook was forced to sell his grand home, Cedar Hill, to satisfy his debtors. In 1877, Frederick Douglass bought Van Hook's old Cedar Hill estate and brought his family to live there.⁴⁸

A core of families lived in the development, however. Uniontown remained sparsely populated until the late 1880s–1890s, when there was a wave of new residents, many of whom were veterans or had been employed in some capacity in the Civil War effort. Other new residents were part of the burgeoning federal bureaucracy or worked in enterprises that served the government. Residential and commercial development tended to concentrate along a corridor extending from the long-standing businesses of Harrison Street (Good Hope

Road) to newer ones along Monroe Street (today, Martin Luther King Jr. Avenue).

The homes of gentlemen farmers and the summer cottages that existed before the subdivision of Uniontown was created tended to be grand, elaborate homes. By the late 1910s, most of these had been destroyed; the best surviving example is Cedar Hill, Frederick Douglass's old home. The homes that were built for the families that moved in at the turn of the century were more modest. These were mainly detached or duplex, two-story frame houses covered with clapboard or stucco, or frame row houses. They were well-placed in deep, rectangular lots, with small front yards, sometimes distinguished by iron fences. Like housing in most southern towns, homes had ample front porches, and façades often had elaborate architectural details. The recurring use of these elements and the overall uniformity of the homes and lots in Anacostia created a style unique to the community.

The area had many of the amenities of city life. Logan Park, planted with shade trees and located in the middle of the neighborhood, provided a place for families to gather and socialize. Anacostia Methodist Church had been founded in 1841; the Anacostia Baptist Church was established in 1884 and dedicated in 1889. One of the earliest churches built in Anacostia, St. Teresa of Avila Catholic Church was established in 1878. Black and white parishioners jointly contributed funds to build the church, but black parishioners, unhappy with discriminatory policies at the church, left around 1910 and later established Our Lady of Perpetual Help Catholic Church in 1920.

The Anacostia Citizens Association, founded in 1882, became an active and engaged voice for residents, successfully lobbying local officials for improved streets, electrical lighting, and public transportation. Between 1887 and 1894, Anacostia residents established five weekly newspapers: *Anacostia Herald* (G. O. Walson, publisher; 1887–1888); *The Anacostia* (W. G. White, publisher; 1887–1888, for only one year); *Anacostia News* (E. B. Russell, publisher; 1890); *National Press* (1891); and *Anacostia Herald* (relaunched in 1894 with publisher H. F. L. Allen).

The post office that served the area before Uniontown was developed was located at the foot of the Eleventh Street Bridge and was called the Anacostia Post Office. It was renamed Uniontown Post Office in 1865 in deference to the growing residential development of Uniontown. An act of Congress changed the name of the community back to Anacostia in



Willard King family.
Anacostia Community
Museum Archives

"Anacostia was a lovely little town when I was growing up. I remember how many of the grown-ups were pleased with so many new families moving in from across the river and people from out of town. . . . The names of the streets were another attraction as they were named after all the Presidents of the United States. . . ."

Willard A. King, early resident of Anacostia



Eliza Spottswood
Shippen. Anacostia
Community Museum
Archives



Solomon G. Brown.
Courtesy Smithsonian
Archives

1886.⁴⁹ By that time the name Anacostia referred to the original Union-town development as well as to Griswold, Shannon, and other additional subdivisions. The Anacostia Post Office also served the few remaining grand estates—remnants of the old prewar plantations—such as Cedar Hill, the Frederick Douglass estate; Mont View, the old Talburtt family plantation bought by H. A. Griswold; and Fairlawn, owned by Arthur Christie. Fairlawn and Mont View would later become subdivisions of single-family homes.

Barry Farms

Charged with the responsibility to assist the ex-slaves in Washington after the end of the Civil War, General Oliver Otis Howard became commissioner of the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands in 1865. Howard soon took \$52,000 of Freedmen's Bureau money and transferred the funds to be held in trust for three schools newly established for the education of freedmen: Richmond Normal School in Richmond, Virginia; St. Augustine Normal School in Raleigh, North Carolina; and Howard University in Washington, D.C. On April 23, 1867, he issued Special Order 61 to create a board of trustees to oversee the acquisition and sale of land. Their first efforts to buy land were spurned, so with secrecy they simultaneously purchased the 375-acre Barry's Farm from Juliana and David Barry, heirs of James D. Barry. The trustees intended profits from the resale of the property to benefit the three schools. They hoped this process would serve as a model that could be replicated around the country.⁵⁰

They divided the land into one-acre plots and sold the lots to African American families "on time." The price ranged from \$125 to \$300 an acre. The trustees also provided each purchaser with \$76 worth of lumber, and the new homeowner was enjoined (contractually obligated) to construct a house on the property. Payments averaged \$10 a month, comparable to what blacks were paying for tenements in the city, and most of the homes constructed were modest A-frames.⁵¹ Not only ex-slaves, but also free black families purchased lots. Those with means bought additional lots and extra lumber and built larger homes. Others with money to invest purchased several lots, constructed homes on them, and rented or sold them at a profit. By October 1868, the trustees had sold three hundred lots, and nine lots remained along with \$23,000 available to distribute to the three schools.⁵²

The homes built were usually A-frame houses, as described in *The Anacostia Story*: “Called A-frame because of the slant of their roofs, the homes were two stories in height, usually divided into two rooms. The lower one, a combination living and dining room, had a fireplace for cooking; the upper room provided sleeping quarters. Families who could afford to do so purchased additional lumber, modified the standard design, and built according to family size and needs. Others built additional rooms as the family increased in size.”⁵³

The first landowner in Barry Farms was the Reverend William Hunter, who helped establish Macedonia Baptist Church. Mrs. Eliza Spottswood Shippen was one of the first black women to own land in Barry Farms.⁵⁴ Shippen, wife of the Reverend John M. Shippen Jr., invested in land and owned several homes in Barry Farms. She also owned a grocery store on Nichols Avenue SE.

When first developed, Barry Farms had been called Barry’s Farm, Barry Farms, Potomac City, and, briefly, Hillsboro. In 1874, residents had the District’s governing body change the name of the community to Hillsdale. Civic activists focused on improvements such as paving the main roads, getting attached to the public sewer system, and arranging for public transportation.⁵⁵

Just as in Uniontown, an active community association, the Hillsdale Civic Association, quickly formed and began to put pressure on city officials to improve conditions in the new community. Solomon G. Brown, who had been free before the Civil War, and Frederick Douglass provided the initial political leadership and guidance for the community. Both men served on the territorial government. Solomon Brown, a popular and trusted figure, had been elected to represent residents of Far Southeast; Douglass, however, had been appointed by President Grant. Other important leaders included Charles and Lewis Douglass, Frederick Douglass’s sons; Elzie Hoffman, head of the Hillsdale Civic Association; Fred and Minnie Smoot; and Mark McKenzie.

One of the first things the newly established community came together to do was build a school. Even before the end of the war, black families living in the area had worked with the Freedmen’s Bureau to establish schools for the families fleeing slavery. A school at Good Hope had been established in 1865 and also one at Giesborough Point. When the Barry Farms community was established, black families there also constructed a school, Mt. Zion Hill School (later renamed Howard



Minnie Smoot. Anacostia
Community Museum
Archives



Above: Holiday program at Campbell AME Church. Anacostia Community Museum Archives
Left: Our Lady of Perpetual Help Catholic Church. Anacostia Community Museum Archives

School), in December 1867 on Douglass Road for children in the community. Hillsdale, the community's first public school, opened in 1871, and James G. Birney School opened in 1889.⁵⁶ Hillsdale School, located at the intersection of Nichols and Sheridan avenues (now Martin Luther King Jr. and Sheridan), housed day classes for young people and evening classes for adults.

Early Churches

Churches were at the center of community life in Barry Farms. They sponsored social and literary events and educational classes, and played an important role in articulating the demands and concerns of residents. Church officials and ministers also provided political leadership for the growing community.

At a meeting of the Hillsdale Civic Association in the 1920s, members recalled that "Families coming from Virginia were almost invariably Baptist, while those from the southern counties of Maryland were preponderantly Catholic with a fair leavening of Methodists and Episcopalians. The preacher was looked upon as a leader in all spiritual as well as secular affairs affecting the welfare of the community."⁵⁷

The first church in the new settlement was Mt. Zion AME, constructed on Douglass Road on Mt. Zion Hill sometime in the 1860s. When the church moved to Nichols Avenue in 1890, it was renamed Campbell AME. Noted historian Charles Harris Wesley served as one of its ministers. The present structure was built in 1928 under his leadership.⁵⁸

Members of Mt. Zion also established Israel Mission, later Hillsdale Station Colored (now Christian) Methodist Episcopal Church. Hillsdale was later renamed St. John CME. The church was originally located at Stanton and Pomeroy roads, but later the church was moved to Douglass and Stanton roads. Building plans for this new church were made by Ulysses Banks.⁵⁹

Two Episcopal churches were established early in the community: St. Philip the Evangelist Episcopal Church, started in 1887, and Emmanuel Episcopal Church, established in 1869. There were also new Baptist churches: Macedonia Baptist Church, founded in 1867 by Sandy Alexander, and Bethlehem Baptist Church, founded in 1876 by Pastor Henry Scott. Bethlehem Baptist Church was an outgrowth of Macedonia Baptist Church.

By the 1890s, Barry Farms was a thriving community of black homeowners, attracting skilled craftsmen, truck farmers, businessmen, and professionals. It was a sought-after location for up-and-coming black families in the region. During the first decades of the twentieth century, African Americans were buying lots in Barry Farms as profitable investments. Most of the original one-acre lots were later subdivided by the original owners and sold at considerable profit.⁶⁰

Modernization

Bridges connecting the area to the central city have always been important to residents in Far Southeast. Also of importance to early residents was the expansion of paved streets that provided access to major roads



Hillsdale street scene. Anacostia Community Museum Archives



Trolley car in Barry Farms. Anacostia Community Museum Archives

and provided relief from muddy, hilly terrain. In March 1890, the rebuilding of the Pennsylvania Avenue Bridge brought a new wave of development and land sales in Far Southeast.⁶¹ The increasing value of the land prompted several landowners to subdivide their farmland into suburban lots and sell them to would-be homeowners.

A land boom in the area had begun as early as the 1880s, when H. A. Griswold subdivided his land lying right next to Uniontown and sold over two hundred lots. His success prompted other landowners in the area to do the same. A residential development was also established in the Garfield section in 1882 for African American residents by developers George E. Emmons and Brainard H. Warner. One of the most successful investors in the 1890s was the Bliss-Havemeyer syndicate, which developed a tract known as Danforth's Farm, purchased in 1807 from Anthony Addison by William Marbury and handed down to Marbury's family.⁶² Randle Highlands, adjacent to Pennsylvania Avenue and developed by Colonel Arthur Randle, was another new residential development.

Developer Oscar C. Brothers Jr. purchased Fairlawn, the old plantation estate of Dr. Arthur Christie, located a few miles past the end of the Eleventh Street Bridge. In 1911, Brothers divided the 120-acre farm into lots averaging from 1,400 to 3,500 square feet. Advertising for Fairlawn boasted that it was "only fifteen minutes by electric car from the Capitol Building." Prices for lots there ranged from \$400 to \$1,500.

In 1898, the Anacostia and Potomac River Street Railroad Company, owned by Col. Randle, began providing electric trolley service from the Navy Yard gate to Uniontown and beyond. The route followed Nichols Avenue, past St. Elizabeths Hospital and south up Asylum Hill through the rural countryside. The access provided by this trolley line allowed Col. Randle to develop the old Giesborough tract into the residential community of Congress Heights.⁶³

Businesses expanded in Far Southeast, especially in the communities of Good Hope, Uniontown, and Barry Farms. Business establishments were primarily aligned along Good Hope Road and Nichols Avenue, and these two thoroughfares solidly constituted the main business corridors for Far Southeast by the turn of the century.

Businesses arranged along the commercial corridor, which stretched from Good Hope Road down Nichols Avenue and along Howard Road, served residents of Anacostia, Barry Farms, Garfield, Good Hope, and

other nearby areas. Beginning in the 1820s with the simple tavern, stable, and blacksmith shop occupying the summit of Good Hope Hill, by the 1860s there were several businesses along Nichols Avenue and within Uniontown. Campbell's Hardware, Coal and Wood store was one of the earliest. It was established to serve the families of the men who worked at the Navy Yard and people living in Good Hope and Anacostia. In the 1890s, businesses in Hillside and in Uniontown included Len Peyton's General Store; Henry Sayles' coal, wood, and ice establishment; Epps's Restaurant; and the Samuel Lucas plant nursery. In the 1900s, Butler Hall and Douglass Hall housed black professionals such as doctors and lawyers, a dentist, and a pharmacist. By the 1920s a bank, a grain and feed shop, a coal and oil dealer, florists, attorneys' offices, doctors and pharmacists, pleasure halls, barbershops, and a host of other enterprises flourished along the area's main streets. Most served both black and white customers.⁶⁴

Community organizations such as the East Washington Heights Citizens' Association lobbied local officials to bring public water and sewers, electricity, and streetcar lines to Far Southeast. With the trolley lines came electricity for houses. With the connections between Potomac Electric Power Company (PEPCO) and the streetcar industry, PEPCO often offered electric service first to homes along the trolley lines. Once the electric trolley tracks were laid, it was easier to extend electrical service to those homes. As a result, communities grew fastest along these routes. The first homes in Fairlawn, for example, were mainly located along Pennsylvania and Minnesota avenues.

The Anacostia Citizens Association was formed around 1882 by H. A. Linger to lobby city officials for public improvements that would benefit the community. Dr. Arthur Christie, owner of Fairlawn, and blacksmith Thomas Anderson were among the founding members. By 1922, the organization boasted that it had helped bring about improved streets and bridges, and that the community enjoyed a fire station, bank, public school, police station, Anacostia public park, and public water, sewer, and lights. *The Anacostia Echo* noted: "...[T]here are a few names that stand out prominently for some particular activity during the life of [the Anacostia Citizens Association]. These are H. A. Linger and Dr. Wm. L. White for their activities for Minnesota avenue and the Pennsylvania avenue bridge; H. A. Griswold for the first street car line in Anacostia; Dr. A. M. Green for Anacostia's bank; and



View of Naylor Gardens, 30th and Erie streets, SE, 1949. Photograph by John P. Wymer. Courtesy Historical Society of Washington, D.C.

Dr. George C. Havenner and his associates of 1895 for modernized street car facilities.”⁶⁵

The Hillsdale Civic Association also fought for improved public services, but with less success than did the Anacostia Citizens Association. By the 1920s, families living in Hillsdale, Stantontown, Garfield, and places distant from the Anacostia development and the newer developments still had no public sewer or water, no electric, and no direct access to public transportation. Political leaders Solomon Brown and Elzie S. Hoffman were early leaders of the Hillsdale Civic Association.

By 1920, virtually all of the old plantations had been sold off to developers. The Plantation of Fairlawn became the suburban development of Fairlawn; the old Floral Hills plantation, a fruit and flower farm owned by Dr. Lee White, also was divided into lots by the family and turned into a suburban community of single-family homes.

World War II

World War II brought thousands of new residents to Washington to work in war-related industries. Many of them ended up living in Far Southeast, as several large installations nearby attracted large numbers of employees. In response to the local housing crisis created by World War II, vast war housing projects were developed around the city, including those of Barry Farms and Naylor Gardens in Far Southeast. The government also converted existing public housing units into housing for wartime workers. Occupancy was limited to people arriving in the city within the past twelve months, people living in temporary or makeshift housing, displaced people without suitable housing, and people living beyond reasonable commuting distances. Anacostia was identified as an ideal location for housing development as there was a great deal of vacant land available, and it was also cheap. The population of Far Southeast increased 200 percent during the 1940s. After the war ended, these projects were either razed, converted into public housing, or sold to private owners.

In 1937, both the federal and city governments passed housing acts that provided funding for public housing. Under the authority of those acts the Barry Farms housing project and the Frederick Douglass housing project were completed in 1940 by the Alley Dwelling Authority/National Capital Housing Authority. The Barry Farms and Douglass housing projects were originally constructed for low-income black

families. But when the war began, these projects were claimed for use as housing for black wartime workers.⁶⁶

The Naylor Gardens housing project was developed on forty-four acres off Naylor Road near Good Hope by the Defense Housing Corporation (part of the National Housing Agency) as housing for white middle- and high-income war workers in 1943. The project was designed to attract residents, with 45 two- and three-story buildings, colonial architecture, wood trim, and slate roofs. Rent for the 748 apartments ranged from \$58.50 to \$78.50, with all utilities included. Included in the construction were play areas for children, professionally designed landscaping, and cement sidewalks, curbs, and gutters. Streets were also constructed to withstand heavy automobile traffic.

In the early 1940s, the federal government also passed a Federal Housing Administration authorization bill, which provided insurance for private developers. The program, FHA 608, insured 90 percent of the mortgage of a new building. FHA 608 was enacted in response to the crisis in housing that swept cities and hampered the war effort, and was meant to encourage new housing construction across the country. Private developers lobbied the government for passage of the bill, promising that they would provide better housing more quickly and at less cost than the federal government. While the program provided needed housing of good quality during the war, it was later abused by developers who used it to produce a large number of low-quality, poorly designed apartment buildings in Far Southeast.

Urban Renewal

Neighborhoods in the city, where inadequate and unsanitary housing were concentrated, were labeled as “slums” and were increasingly the subject of congressional inquiries and newspaper stories. In 1934, Congress created the Alley Dwelling Authority (later the National Capital Housing Authority, or NCHA) to clear out the areas with the worst housing conditions. The policy of “slum clearance” was seen as a way to eliminate concentrations of poor people living within the boundaries of the city.⁶⁷ Because it was situated across the Anacostia River and away from the central city, and because there was so much cheap and vacant land available, Far Southeast was designated as the area to receive most of the city’s low-income apartment projects. But it was not until after the war that urban renewal really began to reshape the face of community life in Far Southeast.



Poor application of zoning laws resulted in crowded and poorly constructed apartment buildings. Anacostia Community Museum Archives

The 1949 Housing Act created the Urban Redevelopment Agency and empowered it to subsidize slum clearance and urban redevelopment projects. The act also provided funds for mortgage insurance and for the construction of public housing units. This legislation, and others that followed, provided a legal and financial foundation for the physical transformation of Far Southeast. By the 1950s, the area was host to a large number of multi-family apartment projects, transforming the almost rural, village-like atmosphere that had previously existed.⁶⁸

Between 1954 and 1958, approximately twenty thousand people were moved out of southwest Washington. Black families living in Georgetown were also displaced by urban renewal. Although urban renewal programs were meant to target impoverished and substandard neighborhoods, areas of stable working-class and middle-class homes were also destroyed. Many of these displaced families ended up in Far Southeast. From the 1940s through the 1950s, the number of apartment buildings and complexes expanded to absorb the black families being made homeless through urban renewal projects. NCHA continued to build public housing developments in Far Southeast, including Stanton housing project (for blacks) and Knox and Highland housing projects (for whites).⁶⁹

Transformed from an area composed primarily of homeowners, Far Southeast became a place dominated by tenants. Some resident and neighborhood organizations sought to stop the construction of the public housing projects; others focused on lobbying city officials to provide improved infrastructure and increased neighborhood facilities for the expanding population. James Banks, executive director of the NCHA under Mayor Walter Washington, observed: "In about three decades [after the war], Far Southeast became essentially a rental area. In addition to the mostly garden-style apartment housing, much of the war housing in the city was converted to public housing for low-income families. The war changed the housing stock and the population of many parts of the city, particularly Far Southeast."⁷⁰

The construction of Suitland Parkway in 1943 also created a barrier within the Barry Farms community, displacing over one hundred families. Suitland Parkway was built to provide access between the various military establishments in the area, including Camp Springs (later Andrews Field), Bolling Air Force Base, and federal and military-related offices downtown. When Suitland Parkway opened in 1944, it effectively divided Barry Farms in half. Suitland Parkway was constructed over the Stickfoot Branch, a stream that ran through the Barry Farms community. The construction of the parkway proved to be a formidable barrier to residents and pedestrians.

Federal and city officials continued to appropriate land for the purposes of public facilities and military bases, which they were unwilling to



Suitland Parkway, 1950s.
Its construction cut Barry Farms in half. Anacostia Community Museum Archives

locate in other parts of the city. Blue Plains water treatment facility was completed in 1938, and the municipal landfill, the Blue Plains Home for the Aged and Infirm, Camp Simms, and Bolling Air Force Base were all located in Far Southeast.

Partly as a result of integration, many white families in the District of Columbia removed their children from public schools in large numbers. In 1946, for example, 55.3 percent of public school students were white; by 1966 only 9.2 percent were white. The overall percentage of white families living in Far Southeast declined from 82.4 percent in 1950 to 67.7 percent in 1960, and to 14 percent in 1970.⁷¹

Until the 1960s, Far Southeast remained a racially diverse area, with black neighborhoods and white neighborhoods often divided by strips of parkland or by the hilly terrain. Resident and neighborhood associations were also racially divided for the most part. Associations in white communities called themselves “citizen associations,” while associations of black residents were called “civic associations.” After initial demonstrations against integration of recreational facilities and swimming pools, there was little organized resistance. There were also anti-integration demonstrations at Anacostia High School, but after a flurry of media attention, students quickly adjusted.

Decline of Neighborhoods

By the late 1960s, Far Southeast was an area suffering from a concentration of high-density residential apartment projects, many of them garden apartments.⁷² Much of the new construction had been financed through the FHA’s Section 608 program, which guaranteed loans covering 90 percent of the project’s development costs. Growth and new construction in the area were haphazard and uncontrolled. Vacant land was being rapidly filled with the construction of apartment buildings. Lots with older homes were also razed and converted into land for apartment buildings.

The application of R-5-A zoning in Far Southeast, which allows multi-family apartment buildings and complexes, resulted in a skewed concentration of garden apartments and high-rise apartment buildings.⁷³ The authors of *Far Southeast 70*, a publication that starkly outlined the destructive impact of skewed zoning laws in the area, observed that “The shortcomings of zoning in the Far Southeast concern fundamental issues. The many basic inadequacies that are evident strongly suggest that zoning in this area of Washington has been structured to favor



Children playing.
Anacostia Community
Museum Archives

private investment interests, while largely ignoring the primary public interest of promoting a stable community growth pattern.... Further imbalance in the development pattern or land use mix of the Far Southeast is apparent in the insufficient amount of land available for commercial use and in the over concentration of public housing developments in the area.”⁷⁴

City planners for public services failed to take into account unique features and needs of Far Southeast. For example, the high concentration of apartments required more garbage and trash pickups, stronger public transport systems, and more recreational, school, and health facilities. Children needed play areas; in northwest Washington, D.C., these needs were partially met by front and back yards. In Far Southeast, with a far higher ratio of children, most developers included no recreational space. The result for children and the community was higher wear and tear and more anxiety. Inappropriate zoning of steep slopes for apartment use also intensified land erosion.⁷⁵ As observed in *Far Southeast 70*, “extensive apartment developments have introduced large roof tops and asphalt parking lot areas which shed vast quantities of water down hillsides during heavy rains. The city does not have adequate erosion control regulations requiring developers to construct retaining walls or adopt other effective measures to guard against soil erosion.”⁷⁶

Far Southeast had long absorbed significant numbers of new families who had been pushed out of the central city by urban renewal initiatives. Despite the expanding population and the increasing pressure on social and recreational services, local officials often offered fewer services, few new public facilities, and little development of infrastructure. Schools, employment centers, police services, garbage and trash removal, shopping centers, public libraries and recreational facilities, health care centers, child care facilities, and transportation were not planned to keep pace with the demands of residents. Unemployment, drugs, and crime plagued many of the neighborhoods.

By 1970, city zoning laws designated almost 75 percent of the land area in Far Southeast for apartment buildings; 85 percent of the total housing supply in Far Southeast consisted of multi-family apartment buildings. This served to promote the interests of private investors and to encourage land speculation at the expense of community and public interests. One of the most harmful results of poor zoning in Far Southeast was to discourage home ownership in the area. High-rise and garden apartments were allowed to crowd out single-family homes.

Because of the deteriorating conditions, neighborhood workers, funded by Southeast Neighborhood House and United Planning Organization, helped area residents organize protests directed at city officials.⁷⁷ Organizers focused their efforts on families living in Barry Farms Dwellings. They organized a number of groups that successfully challenged housing and welfare officials to improve some of the worst conditions. Youth groups demanded paved streets, new streetlights, and more recreational facilities. Civic, professional, and business groups in other neighborhoods also sought to improve conditions.⁷⁸

In 1993, Congress created the Hope VI program to provide grants to cities for destruction and replacement of severely distressed public housing projects. The Frederick Douglass and Stanton Dwellings, Valley Green, and Skytower housing projects were razed and the new housing units of Henson Ridge and Wheeler Creek developed to replace them.

Today, neighborhoods in Far Southeast are once again experiencing growth and rapid change. Current zoning regulations reflect a more balanced view of development in the area, and new townhouses, row houses, and detached single-family homes are an important part of the new construction. There are proposals by developers and investors to build new shopping centers and to develop homes and

recreational facilities. The federal government is pursuing plans to develop the west campus of St. Elizabeths Hospital into offices for the Department of Homeland Security.

In 2000, there was still more vacant land in Far Southeast than in any other quadrant of the District of Columbia. This situation, combined with the high cost of housing in the central city and the wider metro area, resulted in expanded interest in purchasing property in Far Southeast. Would-be homeowners, who might not have earlier considered Far Southeast as a prospective place to live, sought to purchase homes in the area.

There has been a surge in development of private single-family and multi-family housing. Even for older homes, prices have almost doubled in the last few years. The rapid growth and development have spurred fears of displacement in some residents, however. The high costs of homeownership cause many families to fear that they may be unable to purchase homes in the area. Some African American residents have complained that black families are being priced out of the city and are being forced to move to Prince George's County (or other suburban areas in Maryland and Virginia).

Today, the role of community activists is more important than ever. Citizens who lobby developers and city officials to address residents' concerns, review the design and appropriateness of proposed developments, and fight to protect community assets are critical to the process of ensuring that growth is well balanced and responsive to community needs.



Henson Ridge homes.
Photograph by Steven M.
Cummings. Anacostia
Community Museum
Archives