

Washington, D.C.



Celebrations of Freedom in Washington, D.C.

Washington D.C. has had a significant black presence since the colonial era. In 1800, enslaved African Americans constituted 25 percent of the city's population. As the debate over slavery intensified in the mid-1800s, more and more free people migrated north and chose Washington D.C. as their new home. As more blacks settled in D.C., they brought along celebrations of freedom and commemoration of slavery. Over the years, there have been various ways to celebrate freedom in Washington D.C., such as parades, concerts, festivals, historical reenactments, art exhibitions, and educational programs.

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Early Emancipation Celebrations (1890's)

Before the abolition of slavery, Washington D.C. was a significant location for trading slaves within the country. However, in the early 1800s, the city passed laws that banned the ownership and sale of slaves. As a way to celebrate their newfound freedom, the formerly enslaved and freed people of Washington D.C. marked April 16th, 1862 as "Emancipation Day" and observed it each year.

Solidarity Day - June 19, 1968

In 1968, Juneteenth celebrations were combined with Solidarity Day in Washington D.C. during the Poor People's Campaign march on the National Mall. A rally was held on June 19, 1968, which brought an estimated 50,000 individuals to the Lincoln Memorial. Attendees sang, prayed, and listened to prominent civil rights leaders including Coretta Scott King and Rev. Ralph Abernathy.

Juneteenth Celebration (1984)

Twenty-one years after the Juneteenth-Solidarity Day rally in 1968, the Anacostia Community Museum, part of the Smithsonian Institution, held its first Juneteenth celebration.

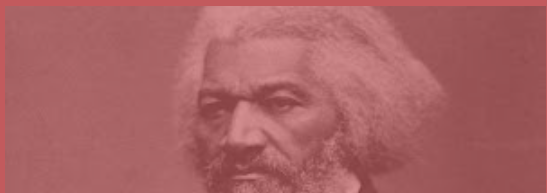
The Nation's Capital Officially Recognizes Juneteenth (2003)

Washington, D.C. passed a legislation in 2003 to recognize Juneteenth as a District holiday.

Juneteenth becomes a Federal Holiday (2021)

In 2021, President Joe Biden signed federal legislation officially recognizing Juneteenth as a federal holiday, marking the second day to honor the freedom in the Black community in Washington D.C.

Trailblazers of Freedom



Frederick Douglass

Frederick Douglass was born in 1818 and became a leader of the abolitionist movement. He ran away from his Maryland home at the age of twenty and settled in Washington, D.C. He was an advisor to President Abraham Lincoln and wrote his autobiography, "Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass". He established the "North Star" publication and was an advocate for women's rights.

Benjamin Banneker

Benjamin Banneker was a mathematician and astronomer who was born free. Despite having little to no formal education, he taught himself the skills that were necessary to become a prominent naturalist, surveyor, and author. He successfully wrote a series of almanacs that are still relevant today. Banneker is widely remembered for his role as a surveyor for the site of what would later become the nation's capital.



Gardner L. Bishop

Gardner L. Bishop was a well-known civil rights activist and business owner in Washington, D.C. During the 1950s, D.C. was considered a black mecca, but the city faced major issues of racial discrimination and poverty in black communities. Bishop's work focused on achieving better schools for black children, which included organizing a strike led by students of Browne Junior High School. As a result of the strike, the *Bolling v. Sharpe* case was filed, which led to a court decree against school segregation in the District.

Chuck Brown

The "Godfather of Go-Go", Brown invented the unique sound and genre of music associated with Washington, D.C. The hit song "Bustin Loose" brought national recognition of the new sound and became a number-one hit in 1978. Today "Go-Go" music remains a signature sound of the DMV area.

The Path to Absolute Equality

Congress Passes the District of Columbia Emancipation Act (1862)

Issued on April 16, 1862, nine months before the Emancipation Proclamation, the act abolished slavery and granted manumission to the enslaved people of Washington, D.C.

Migration to the District (1861 - 1877)

After the Civil War and in the ensuing years, more than 25,000 African Americans relocated from the South to Washington, seeking economic and political opportunities following their emancipation. The city became a beacon of freedom for black people. In 1867, three years before the ratification of the 15th amendment, Freedmen obtained the right to vote in Washington and were already holding office as early as 1868. By the 1900s, Washington had emerged as a center of black political power in the United States.

The "New Negro" Emerges (1920 - 1945)

After President Wilson's segregation orders were enforced, black resistance to discrimination increased rapidly. In 1919, a massive race riot broke out in Washington, which led to the emergence of an early civil rights movement of the "New Negro." Originally, the term "New Negro" referred to the cultural renaissance of art, music, and literary scholarship in Washington. However, it soon acquired political connotations as the New Negro Alliance launched campaigns and demonstrations to combat segregation and police brutality in the 1930s.

The Chocolate City

During the late 1950s, more than half of Washington's population consisted of African Americans. The increasing political and economic influence of the African American community attracted many black citizens to the city in search of federal jobs. By 1975, the black population of Washington had exceeded 70%, making it the city with the highest black population in the United States. In 1974, Walter Washington was elected by the citizens to become the first black mayor of Washington, D.C.

Black Lives Matter Movement

In the wake of the murder of George Floyd, Washington D.C. took center stage as mass protests and demonstrations took place in the city during the summer of 2020. Major standoffs between protesters and law enforcement were televised, shedding light on the resistance to police brutality in the nation.



Mary McLeod Bethune

Mary McLeod Bethune was born to parents who were formerly enslaved people. She was a prominent leader in the fight for black education and civil rights. Bethune founded the National Council of Negro Women and established an academic institution that is known today as Bethune-Cookman University. She served in the FDR administration as the highest-ranking African American in government and was a member of his "Black Cabinet". Throughout her life and career, she set standards and advocated for black education and civic participation.

Duke Ellington

D.C. native, Edward Kennedy "Duke" Ellington, was a renowned jazz musician and composer. He is associated with the black cultural region of U Street, also known as "Black Broadway". In the 1920's he gained national attention for his orchestra performances in Harlem's Cotton Club. In 1999, he was awarded a posthumous Pulitzer Prize Special Music Award.

Paul Laurence Dunbar



Carter G. Woodson



SMITHSONIAN NATIONAL MUSEUM OF AFRICAN AMERICAN HISTORY AND CULTURE



GREATER U STREET



BARRY FARM DWELLINGS

LAFAYETTE SQUARE



Historical Resources and References

African American Heritage Trail Guide

<https://planning.dc.gov/node/958872>

PBS: Notable Black Washingtonians

<https://www.pbs.org/ellingtonsdc/noteWriters.htm>



www.absoluteequality.org