

U Street & The Black Mecca: **Be Not Forgotten, Be Not Denied**

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Each generational change in a community laments the loss of the past and a fear of the future. “Remember the good ole days” is the refrain. And then someone will add, “Well, the good ole days was not always so good.” Indeed these words ring loud and clear about *The Black Broadway*, the U Street Corridor, the Shaw-Cardozo-LaDroit Park neighborhood - also known as - the *Black Mecca of America*.

There is no denying that the U Street Corridor emerged between the late 19th century until the 1970s as one of the most illustrious communities of black excellence, progress and envy in America. Author Briana Thomas makes the case convincingly, graphically, empirically and with style. Black intellectuals, politicians, businessmen and women, artists and everyday travelers would purposely stop in Washington, DC to visit the U Street Corridor to bask in the sunshine of Black excellence. A walk down U Street on a Sunday afternoon was not just a walk, it was a promenade. “Men had to wear ties and women wore white gloves”, so went the motto. U Street was Black America’s *Champs D’Elyse*. After church on Sundays, it was the place to see and be seen. Famed photographer Addison Scurlock captured it frequently. If you were photographed by Scurlock, you had made it in the annuals of the best and the brightest of Black America frolicking U Street.

Black people throughout America made it a point to visit the *Black Mecca* and its gleaming crown jewel Howard University. Intellectuals, politicians, artists, lawyers, doctors and men and women of letters referred to poet Georgia Douglas Johnson’s home as *The Halfway House* because it was halfway between Black Atlanta’s famed Morehouse and Spelman and Harlem New York. Johnson’s house at 1461 S Street, just steps from U Street, was the go-to venue for monthly literary salons that featured Black intelligentsia like Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, Alain Locke, Dr. Charles Drew, Oscar DePriest, Everett Ernest Just, Jessie Redmon Fauset, Angelica Grimke, Arron Douglas, Mary Church Terrell, Carter G. Woodson, Charles Hamilton Houston, Anna Julia Cooper, Lois Mailou Jones, Alma Thomas, Madame Evanti, Thurgood Marshall and WEB DuBois. Yes, those were the glory days.

But those glory days were not always so glorious. It would be easy to romanticize the U Street Corridor as the *Black Mecca* where everything was enviable within the most successful Black community in America, where Blacks were known as the Black Bourgeoisie along U Street and LaDroit Park. And, a few blocks west, they were known as the Black Aristocracy in the “Strives Section” of Dupont Circle. In this community adjacent to U Street lived Mary Church Terrell, Langston Hughes, Charles Hamilton Houston, The Murray Family (Black printing business), General Benjamin

Davis, Charles and Louis Douglass and where the headquarters of Delta Sigma Theta and Kappa Alpha Psi reside. These were heady days and spaces in the *Black Mecca*.

But Jim Crow, segregation and violence against Black people was frequent and debilitating in these neighborhoods during the years of the *Black Mecca*. Let us not be too romantic. Jim Crow, also known as domestic terrorism, was real. Blacks could not go to the National Zoo on Easter Sunday as was the tradition in our Nations Capital for White people. Blacks could not try on clothes or a hat in downtown clothing stores. Black children hungry for a sandwich could not sit at lunch counters in downtown department stores. Blacks could not attend "Whites Only" theaters. Blacks could not sit in a park on Sunday afternoon in a White community because "No Blacks, Jews and Dogs Allowed" signs prohibited their entry. The city had a 90% White police force when the city was 75% Black. What's wrong with this picture? White police living in Maryland and Virginia "occupying" the Black community of the U Street Corridor could literally get away with murdering Black people because Blacks were not registered to vote and could not serve on juries. Blacks could not elect their own local or national representatives. The five universities in the city were reserved for whites only. White Supremacy ruled.

No, the good ole days were not so good. But the heroic struggles of Black youth and White allies in the South ushered in a new era: The Modern Civil Rights Movement. Sparked by the horrific torture and killing of Emmet Till in 1955, an uprising of militant youth and church-based moral movements led to the passage of the 1964, 1965 and 1968 Civil Rights Acts that opened doors, housing, libraries, schools and jobs to Black people hitherto denied. And with the loosening of Jim Crow segregation, Black people who could move, moved. Middle and professional class Blacks left their old segregated neighborhoods for greener grass and for newer communities. Just as generations of Italians, Polish, Irish, and Jewish people left their old communities when they had an opportunity, Blacks did as well. That's a basic American ideal, the next generation moves out and on up. Hello "The Jeffersons".

Blacks moved to the suburbs in the 1950s-80s because they could. Prince Georges County in Maryland became a new *Black Mecca in the Burbs*. And just as this movement began, a hot bullet sliced through the cool Memphis air entering Dr. King's body felling this man of non-violence and peace. Pent up rage at 300+ years of white supremacy exploded onto 130 cities rising up and rebelling against his murder. From April 4 - 11 smoke, fire, looting, arson and death reigned down on cities and *mini-Black Meccas* everywhere. When the rebellion ended in mid-April 1968, American cities looked like war zones. Indeed, they were. A war against white supremacy, against police brutality, against segregation, against insult and 300 years of denial wrecked and weakened segregated Black American enclaves.

With businesses and homes destroyed peoples' spirits were destroyed as well. Once proud sections of Black businesses lay in ruins. Almost immediately, an exodus occurred. DC's U Street Corridor was devastated. Black communities now entered a long period of isolation and shock. Boarded up Black homes, businesses and institutions gave rise to communities that attracted crime, drugs and violence. As community

deteriorated in these Black enclaves the exodus increased. The 75% Black population decreased to 65% in 1980, then 60% in 1990, then 50% in 2000 down to 45% in 2020 leaving behind vacant homes, businesses, churches, social venues and institutions. For 30 years, 1968-1998, Black flight out of Shaw, Cardozo, LaDroit Park left gaping holes in the community being filled first by an immigrant Ethiopian community fleeing their own civil wars in Africa. When Mayor Marion Barry opened the Reeves Center at 14th & U Streets in 1986, then the Metro opened at 13th & U Street in 1991 and then Dr. Frank Smith opened the African American Civil War Memorial and Museum at 10th & U Street in 1998, the community began to bounce back. The 1992 dot.Com explosion brought a renewed sense and life-blood to urban communities and real estate values began to bounce back. Young people tiring of commutes from suburbs began to flock to cheap real estate opportunities in urban centers with Shaw, Cardozo, LaDroit Park and Columbia Heights leading the way. Soon cafes, cinemas, coffee shops, boutiques, dog parks and bike lanes began to pop up as fast as beer gardens. Generational change was happening again. By 2005, gentrification was on.

By the year 2019, the U Street Corridor became the most gentrified community in the United States. Home values skyrocketed. Businesses boomed. Restaurants and beer gardens exploded on the scene. Single family homes became multi-million dollar condos. Large luxury apartments grew up on spaces that were once burned out by the 1968 rebellion. Those Blacks who moved out did so because they could. They left because poor schools and dangerous communities pushed them out. In came a new generation. The city's population went from 570,000 in 1980 to 710,000 in 2020 with one thousand people per month moving into one of the "hippest cities in nation". U Street today bustles as it did back in the Black Broadway days only rather than it being mostly Black it is now one of the most diverse communities in America.

And who can complain that U Street now reflects Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s vision of a community where all of God's children can eat, drink, laugh, live, play and walk together down the street in harmony and friendship. This is U Street today - Dr. King's vision actualized.

But there is a "but." U Street is back. And its *Black Broadway* vibe still exists at numerous theaters and clubs such as The Lincoln, The Howard, U Street Music Hall, 930 Club and Ben's Next Door. Even Bohemian Caverns is coming back. The street is packed evenings with new restaurants, pop-up music and street performers. Over 25 murals adorn the street remembering and celebrating DC's Black history and culture. But, at the same time, Black institutions, businesses and social clubs that were the essence of Black excellence on the corridor are rapidly disappearing. Some of the most historic churches that were open since the Civil War are closing due to a lack of attendance as the Black population declines leaving the city for *greener pastures*. Where there was once over 200 Black businesses lining U Street from 1910 - 1970, only five of them are still operating today: The Howard Theatre, Prince Hall Masonic Temple, Lee's Florist, Industrial Bank and Ben's Chili Bowl. Currently there are only fifteen Black American businesses on U Street. That number is a far cry from over 200 during the Black Broadway heyday. This trend sees no end in sight. Washington, DC is a desti-

nation city for young, aggressive entrepreneurs, professionals and urban pioneers who find diversity, culture and history attractive themes looking for a place to live, work, learn and play.

The challenge for local residents that cherish their history and culture is to stay vigilant and not be erased out of existence. Black businesses must band together to help other Black businesses stay, succeed and start new ones. City elected officials must find ways to give tax breaks and incentives not just to new developers coming into the corridor but to those long time historic Black businesses that hung into U Street during the dark and dangerous years. Property tax increases, although good for the local economy, should not run long time minority and women owned businesses out of the city.

Local residents must be conscious of where they shop and from whom they buy. Black residents, indeed all local residents, must renew their efforts to shop Black and support Black businesses. Howard University is still the incubator for Black excellence in the U Street corridor and must re-double its efforts to preserve and protect their history and culture in this community. Howard continues to pump new blood into the body-politic of the *Black Mecca*. Go-Go music, the sound of DC, cannot allow newcomers from “busting loose” its sound and beat. *Black Mecca* aficionados must stand fast to their history and culture with more street art, performances and renewed Black entrepreneurship.

Let a thousand murals bloom. Let a million Go-Go beats go on and on and on. DC used to boast five Black newspapers. Today only two remain: *The Washington Informer* and *The Afro-American*. Local residents should consciously subscribe to these newspapers that bring the good and relevant news to the U Street corridor. One can have more than one bank account. One of those accounts should be with the Black owned bank, Industrial Bank on U Street, that has been supporting the *Black Mecca* community since 1938. Need flowers and gifts?, go to Lee’s Flowers and Gift shop on U Street. Walk the walk of preservation and progress, not just talk.

No one is saying that change is not good. Change, actually, is the only thing that’s permanent. It’s here to stay. The good ole days was not so good. But the *Black Mecca* was. Carter G. Woodson admonished us long ago, “A people who do not know and defend their history and culture is people without a soul. A people with no soul will not be remembered and will be extinguished.” As long as they say your name, you remain alive. Let us continue to protect, defend, advocate, advance and celebrate this U Street history and culture and call its name: be not forgotten, be not denied.

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