

HALFWAY TO FREEDOM

THE HISTORY OF
BLACK
WASHINGTON, DC

**MAURICE
JACKSON**



*"Halfway to Freedom is destined to
become the canonical text on Washington, DC"*

—Henry Louis Gates Jr.

HALFWAY TO FREEDOM

BUY

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The History of
Black Washington, DC

MAURICE JACKSON

Foreword by Lonnie G. Bunch III

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To Laura, who gave me love
To Jack DeGoia, who gave me opportunity
and to
James “Bennett” Bennett, who gave me friendship

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Foreword

Washington, DC, has always been a place shaped by the conundrums, paradoxes, and complexities of race. Or at least that is what it seemed to me as a seventeen-year-old freshman who came to the nation's capital to attend Howard University in the fall of 1970. After being told that I would live in Slowe Hall, a dormitory several blocks off campus, my father, who would not admit we were lost, drove slowly down Seventh Street, turning frequently with only an Esso map as our guide, until we stopped at 1919 Third Street NW. Rather than the campus and dorm that echoed the beauty and the comfort that I assumed was the lot of all college campuses, I found myself in the hood, the inner city, the ghetto. No matter what it was called, I could not understand the contradictions: Beautiful homes marked Le Droit Park, as a place of Black strivers yet there were just as many surrounding spaces ripe with blight, crime, and the threat of violence. What I could not see was the profound impact, the powerful and historic role that Howard University played in shaping the city and the nation.

That first night a group of us freshmen from New Jersey, Buffalo, Boston, Arkansas, Cincinnati, and New York City decided to explore the city we now called home as we made our roundabout way to see the US Capitol Building. In essence, we wanted to begin our time in DC by grappling with the symbol that spoke of democracy and freedom to some, but to those of us who had read James Baldwin, Nikki Giovanni, Eldridge Cleaver, and Maya Angelou, it was a reminder that America is made better when we demand it live up to its better angels and founding ideals.

For the next several months we explored all aspects of what we learned was called by many "Chocolate City." While we rarely saw the remains of the impact and presence of slavery in the District, the scars of the destruction from the violence of 1968 that followed the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. were omnipresent, from Georgia Avenue NW to Anacostia (SE) to H Street NE. We learned that while there was much chocolate in Chocolate City, with a Black population representing 70 percent of the city's residents, the Black community had little access to political

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power and limited economic opportunities except for those with “a good government job.” I remember being drawn to visit the Black Panther Headquarters in Northwest Washington. I expected to see Panthers in black leather jackets and berets but came away more moved by their free breakfast program. The burgeoning cultural scene was beyond our freshman budgets, but we had access to an amazing array of film and musical talent that came to Howard’s campus. My strongest memory is waiting five hours for Sly and the Family Stone to finally arrive at Crampton Auditorium.

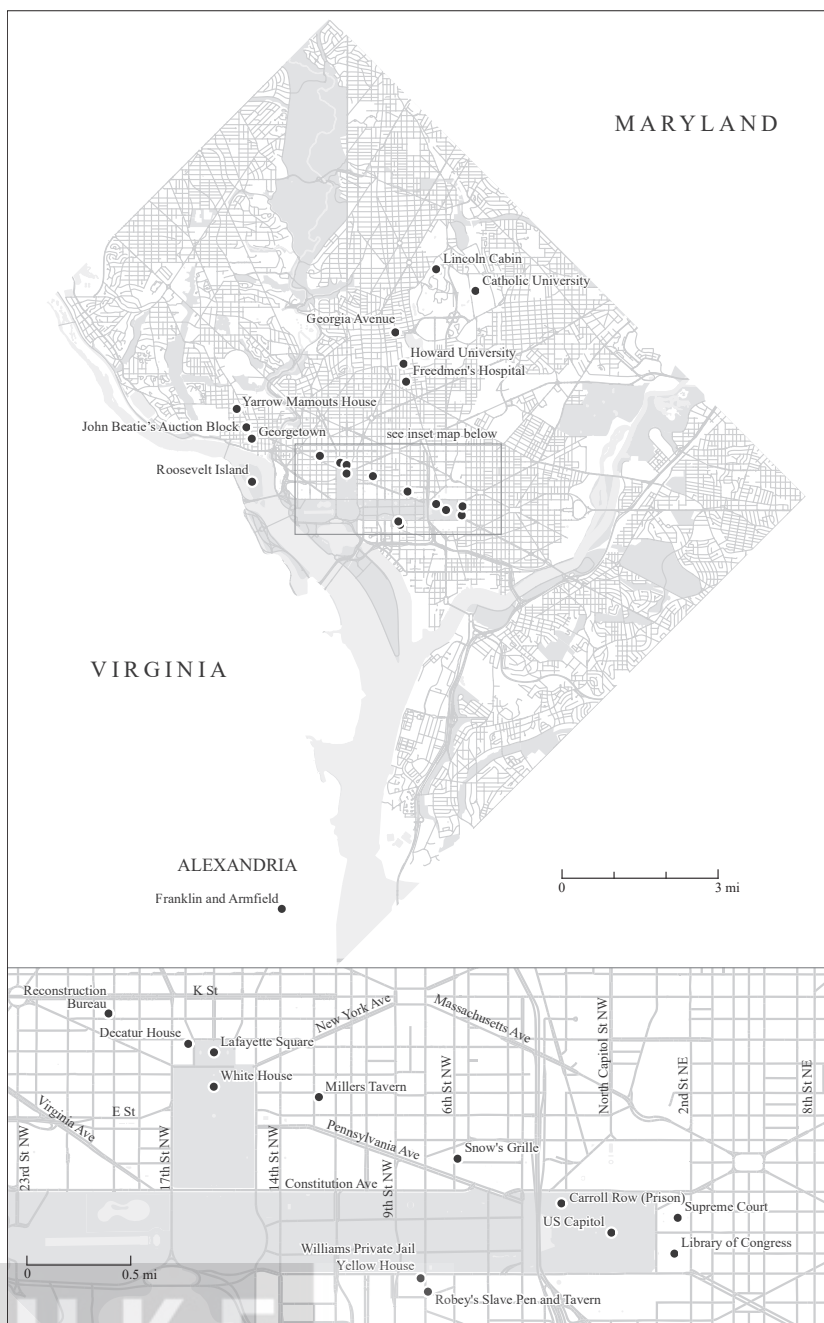
Later that year, I boarded the G2 bus, which traveled from the dorm down Rhode Island Avenue, past DuPont Circle and onto P Street, and ultimately took me into Georgetown. I was stunned at the world I had no idea existed. I was amazed that the city did not all reflect the conditions I experienced at Howard. I remember thinking, “Where did all the white people come from?” The color line was clearly drawn. Segregation—residential and cultural—was at the heart of Washington, DC. It became obvious that there were many Washingtons: from the federal city to sites like Howard that were educational and cultural oases, to communities where integration was a word and not a deed; from working-class neighborhoods to elite enclaves like Georgetown or Cleveland Park. Washington was a place of contradictions, conundrums, and complexity where race not only mattered, it shaped the experience of all who called the District home.

Not until I read Maurice Jackson’s magnificent work *Halfway to Freedom: The History of Black Washington, DC* did I find the answers to many of my questions. Suddenly the Gordian knot that had obscured the impact of race in DC loosened. Jackson has crafted a brilliant and essential publication that unlocks the history of Black Washington, in a manner that provides greater clarity and understanding to the history of the nation’s capital, and to the history of our nation. Jackson weaves a narrative that helps us understand the ways that slavery shaped all aspects of each Washington—especially how Black Washingtonians and their allies creatively fought to expand freedom and fairness in a city where those basic freedoms were never meant to be shared by all. In a meticulous and engaging fashion, Jackson describes how Black Washingtonians struggled, protested, suffered, debated, and improvised in order to make the District a home where Black people did more than simply survive. By exploring the past and the contemporary history of DC, Jackson makes clear that the struggle never ends, but neither does the creativity and resiliency of Black Washingtonians.

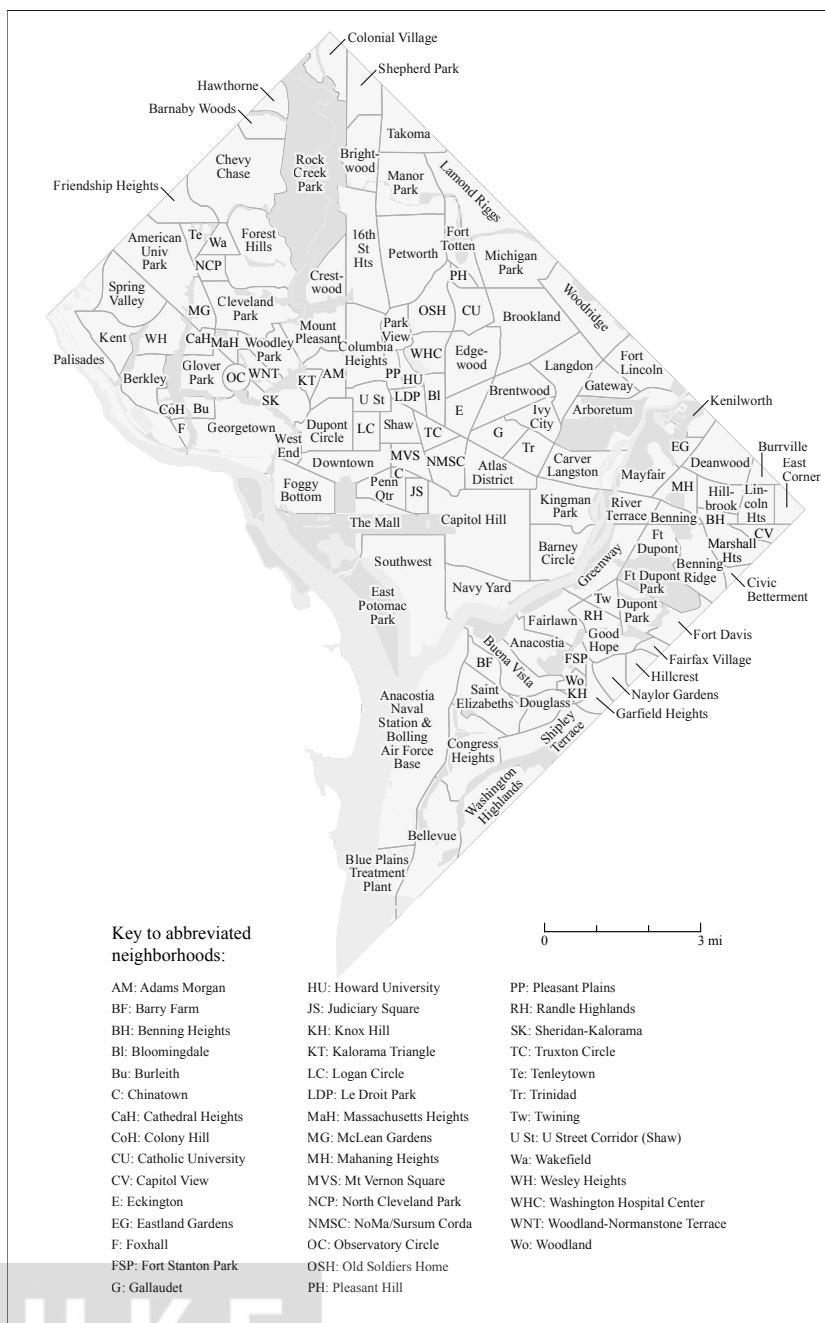
—Lonnie G. Bunch III

Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution and
Founding Director of the National Museum of
African American History and Culture

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MAP 1. Washington, DC, historical locations. Map by Jake Coolidge.



MAP 2. Washington, DC, neighborhoods. Map by Jake Coolidge.

Introduction

Washington, DC, Is the City Where . . .

Washington, DC, is the city where educator Mary Church Terrell proclaimed in 1898, “And so, lifting as we climb, onward and upward we go, struggling and striving, and hoping that the buds and blossoms of our desires will burst into glorious fruition ere long.”¹ This book is the story of those hopes and desires, of that struggling and striving.

The history of Black Washington reveals the same mix of structural oppression and inequality—with compelling struggles against that oppression and inequality—as can be found in the rest of the United States. DC has served as a place of hope for Black people seeking freedom—from slavery, the Jim Crow South, economic exploitation, and racism. While there has never been full equality in or for District residents, the city has always been, in the African American imagination, a “city upon a hill” and a destination that was at least halfway to freedom.

Washington was established from land ceded by Maryland and Virginia. Free Black and enslaved African peoples made up a quarter of Washington’s population. The marble city was surveyed, in great part, by the Black self-taught scientist and mathematician Benjamin Banneker and built largely by slave labor.

Black people who purchased their freedom or were manumitted in Virginia and Maryland were not allowed to stay in those states, so many moved to Washington, where federal Black Codes regulated the movement of enslaved and free alike.²

Although Washington was named after George Washington, one of the people who fought for a country dedicated to the high ideal that “all men are created equal,” the capital city became a place where the American dream of liberty and freedom and the American nightmare of slavery and oppression passed each on the streets daily. After a visit to the nation’s capital in 1842, Charles Dickens called it “the City of Magnificent Intentions,” but also a place where “any justice of the peace may bind with fetters any Negro [slave or free] passing down the street and thrust him into gaol: no offense on the black man’s part is necessary. . . . He is sold to recompense his gaoler.”³

It was the desire for freedom in 1848 that led seventy-seven enslaved Black people, aided by a few white men, to set off in a small boat christened the *Pearl* from the southwest wharf in DC. This became the largest nonviolent mass escape attempts in the history of US slavery. They were captured two days later on the Chesapeake Bay. By then, the number of free Blacks in Washington exceeded that of enslaved Blacks.

DC became even more of a destination for enslaved Black people during the Civil War. President Abraham Lincoln signed the First Confiscation Act in August 1861, giving the federal government authority to emancipate any enslaved person forced to labor for the Confederacy during the war. Black people responded by fleeing en masse into the District, where African American women such as Elizabeth Keckley, a former enslaved woman and First Lady Mary Todd Lincoln's dressmaker and confidante, rose to aid what were sometimes referred to as the "contrabands" who fled to Washington.⁴ Some were put in jail, where they observed some Union soldiers giving better treatment to Confederate soldiers imprisoned for treason than they did to Black men seeking freedom.

President Abraham Lincoln signed the DC Compensated Emancipation Act on April 16, 1862, eight months before the Emancipation Proclamation. Frederick Douglass, born into slavery in nearby Maryland and now a leader of his people, wrote of the events, "I trust I am not dreaming, but the events taking place seem like a dream."⁵ The compensation wasn't for Black people—Congress allocated \$900,000 to "compensate" the city's three hundred slaveholders \$300 each for the approximately three thousand Blacks they held in slavery in the city,⁶ while another \$100,000 was allocated to resettle "free persons of African descent" who lived in the District to Haiti or Central America.⁷

The Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, known as the Freedmen's Bureau, was established on March 3, 1865.⁸ Congress also approved the charter to create the Howard Normal and Theological Institute, later Howard University, founded in 1867.⁹ The Bureau made it possible for formerly enslaved people to live at Barry Farms on 375 acres in what is now Anacostia in southeast Washington. Blacks named some of the streets in the area after antislavery whites such as Congressmen Thaddeus Stevens, Benjamin Wade, and Charles Sumner as well as General O. O. Howard, the head of the Bureau and later president of Howard University.¹⁰

When Reconstruction came to an end in 1877, Blacks who faced mob violence fled the South, and many migrated to the District. Even Black leaders such as P. B. S. Pinchback, a former acting governor of Louisiana, weren't safe back home and came to the city. All told, during the Civil War years the Black population grew from eleven thousand to forty thousand. In the 1868 election, almost half of the registered voters in the city were African American men who helped pass progressive and antidiscrimination laws.¹¹

When the US government created the Civil Service System in 1883, Black people in Washington saw this as an opportunity for steady employment, although most were confined to low-level, menial jobs. Some few did obtain midlevel professional jobs, and even fewer, including Frederick Douglass, garnered patronage positions.¹²

It has never been easy for Black people. During the first Great Migration of the 1910s and 1920s, thousands more came to the city from the deeper South in search of jobs and equality. They encountered a mixed reception, even from elite Black people already living in the District.¹³ Under President Woodrow Wilson, African American federal employees found an increasingly hostile and segregated atmosphere as they sought the same job and housing opportunities as whites.¹⁴ For Black people in Washington, as in the rest of the United States, it seemed that progress followed the usual pattern of two steps forward, one step back, sometimes two steps back.

The city erupted in racial violence more than once. In 1835, an enslaved man's desire for freedom led to the Snow Riots, in which a mob of whites rampaged through the streets and forced several prominent Black people out of the city. In 1919, after demobilization at the end of World War I, the "Red Summer" riots saw white mobs kill more than one hundred Blacks in twenty-five US cities, including DC, where the police force turned its back as white people attacked Black people. Soon, Black men, many recently demobilized from the US Army, armed themselves and defended their communities. At least three whites, including two policemen, and four Black men were killed and hundreds injured.¹⁵ In the aftermath of the riots, the "New Negro" concept associated with the Harlem Renaissance also created a Washington Renaissance for African Americans, many of whom came to the city to study at Howard University.¹⁶

After World War II, Black men and women who had fought under the "Double V" banner—victory abroad and victory at home—again came in droves to DC as part of the second Great Migration (1940–70). As a result, by 1957 Washington became the first major city in the United States with a majority-Black population. The assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. in 1968 also prompted widespread violence and rioting, when underlying factors such as job and housing discrimination and police brutality contributed to a spontaneous display of frustration.

The city, as a federal district, was not allowed to elect a mayor or participate in federal elections. For many years it was run by congressional committees led by white congressmen from the South. By 1970 the Black population of Washington reached over 70 percent.¹⁷ Shortly after the assassination of Dr. King, on April 4, 1968, the Washington-born actor Robert Hooks founded the Negro Ensemble Company in New York and then the DC Black Repertory Company in 1971. He took up space at the Old Colony Theater on Georgia Avenue and renamed it the Last Colony Theater.¹⁸ Soon residents began calling the District the "Last Colony,"

signifying the lack of voting representation and political independence and comparing its status to that of the American colonies in relation to Great Britain prior to independence and to that of the US “territories” Puerto Rico, Guam, and the US Virgin Islands.¹⁹ Congress granted a limited version of home rule in 1973, and since then residents have elected their mayor and city council, and also their nonvoting delegate to Congress; but the delegate still does not have the power to cast a vote on the floor of the full US House of Representatives. This led to the city issuing license plates with the slogan “End Taxation Without Representation.”

Washington is the city where Black women educators such as Mary Church Terrell and Anna Julia Cooper played leadership roles in W. E. B. Du Bois’s Pan-African movement. It is the city of Nannie Helen Burroughs who, when denied the right to teach in DC’s public schools, founded the National Training School for Women and Girls in 1909.

Washington is the city of Sylvester Duckett, a teenager who found his way to New York City, lied about his age, joined the army during World War I, and was killed in France. Washington is the city of James Reese Europe, the jazz man who enlisted in the army, went to France with the Harlem Hellfighters, and took his music there. Both Duckett and Europe are buried at Arlington National Cemetery.

Washington is the birthplace of Edward Kennedy “Duke” Ellington, Shirley Horn, Buck Hill, Billy Taylor, Marvin Gaye, and a local condiment known as mambo sauce. It is the city where two Turkish-born brothers, Ahmet and Nesuhi Ertegun, opened their home in the Turkish embassy to Black musicians when white establishments would not, later becoming cofounders of Atlantic Records.²⁰ Washington is the city where Chuck Brown became the godfather of go-go music.

Washington is the city where Josephine “Jo” Butler, the daughter of sharecroppers, arrived in the 1930s to work as a laundress, and along the way became a leading trade unionist and activist for women’s rights and statehood, working for six decades. Washington is the city where William “Bill” Johnson, an honest and hard-working and proud Black man, fought for the right of workers and was abandoned by his trade union when he refused to sign an un-American anticommunist affidavit.²¹ He retained his dignity through the decades-long ordeal it took for his honor to be restored.

Washington is the city where Black people have always united the local, national, and global struggles for freedom; where labor and militant student activists marched and protested against Italian aggression toward Ethiopia in 1936; where young Black men joined the Abraham Lincoln Brigade to fight against Francisco Franco’s fascist forces in Spain; and where Howard University scholars like William Leo Hansberry, Doxey Wilkerson, and Alphaeus Hunton brought the decolonization and independence struggles of the African and Caribbean peoples to the city. It is the city where Black women such as Sylvia Hill, Cecelie Counts, Sandra Hill,

Kathy Flewellen, and Karen Jefferson formed the South African Support Project, which played a major role in igniting the fight against apartheid and welcoming a freed Nelson Mandela to the United States and to Washington.

Washington is the city whose homeboy, Coach “Big John” Thompson Jr., led the Georgetown Hoyas to an NCAA basketball championship and, along with the three-time champion Washington football team, brought a degree of racial unity in the late twentieth century. It is the city where soccer was brought to Black America by the Howard University soccer team—composed of players from all over Africa, the Caribbean, and the Americas—that won national championships in the early 1970s. Washington is also the city where I arrived to attend college, where I worked as a construction worker and community organizer, where I married a native Washingtonian, and where we raised two children.

Today Washington is undergoing a “renaissance” of redevelopment, with gleaming office buildings and expensive apartments, but the benefits have not gone equally to everyone. Housing costs, fewer job opportunities, crime, and poor inner-city schools have driven the Black population, in what in the last decades of the twentieth century had been widely known as “Chocolate City,” to below 45 percent for the first time in more than half a century.²² And with the loss of the Black population, a lot of the city’s Black history and culture is also in danger of being lost.²³

In 2019 alone, one white man who had recently come to Washington demanded that Howard University “move its campus” rather than change his own dog-walking and dog-relieving routine. Around that time, when newer residents called go-go music a noise nuisance along Georgia Avenue and wanted it banned near where Chuck Brown once held sway, the Council of the District of Columbia declared go-go the official music of the city.²⁴

Howard University professor and author Ta-Nehisi Coates wrote in *The Message* that “we could never practice writing solely for the craft itself, but must necessarily believe our practice to be in service of that larger emancipatory mandate.”²⁵

This book is about the history, the stories and music and culture, the heartbeats and heartbreaks, the “larger emancipatory mandate,” and the strugglings and strivings of Black folk in the capital city of the United States of America: Washington, the District of Columbia, where in 2026, 250 years after the birth of the republic, African Americans remain “halfway to freedom.”

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Notes

INTRODUCTION

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