

1963
1975

TWELVE YEARS
THAT SHOOK AND SHAPED
WASHINGTON



Smithsonian
Anacostia Community Museum



Rufus Mayfield and members of Youth Pride, Inc., August 7, 1967

Rufus "Catfish" Mayfield (pointing) employed some 900 African American youngsters to clean up the neighborhoods where they lived.
Associated Press Image Archives



Photograph by Susana A. Raab, Anacostia Community Museum

The exhibition *Twelve Years that Shook and Shaped Washington: 1963-1975* offers an exciting opportunity to continue the work of documentation of urban community long undertaken by this museum. Established in 1967 and located East of the Anacostia River, the Anacostia Community Museum's founding staff were led by a group of local community organizers. Their main effort was to engage and empower diverse constituencies to examine

local history and enter into public dialogue about contemporary issues. People and populations around the museum shaped the entire mission, its approach to community engagement, and many of its exhibitions.

Over the years and with a variety of projects—including the *Anacostia Story and Evolution of a Community*, developed by historian Louise Daniel Hutchinson, and later with *Black Mosaic: Race Color and Ethnicity Among Black Immigrants in Washington DC*; *East of the River: Continuity and Change and Community and Creativity* led by curator Portia James—this work has continued. The *Urban Waterway* research and engagement project led by historian Gail Lowe explores the connection of local communities with the Anacostia River while considering issues of other urban river communities around the country. This expansion of national scope enables important documentation and preservation efforts and encourages dialogue and exchange between people in local and distant urban communities. This tradition of documentation, preservation, and dialogue exchange continues into this current exhibition.

Twelve Years examines the rapidly changing racial, political, cultural, and built landscapes of this period. Washington experienced the destruction and reconstruction of whole neighborhoods, developed new public and private institutions, cultivated a rise in black leadership, and took steps toward home rule. Beyond the exhibition narrative, Washingtonian voices provide first hand experiences about local issues, efforts to organize, and the results of their activism.

Today, our city is once again amid radical change. Cranes dot the skyline and development is transforming neighborhoods. New residents are joining long-established resident in our neighborhoods. Many questions present themselves: How will development benefit local communities? How will our neighborhoods remain home to people in every level of the economic spectrum? How will the unique home-grown culture of neighborhoods be preserved?

Never has there been a more important moment to engage Washingtonians in the history of the city and especially of this immediate past. Local responses to issues and conditions of today will have impacts decades into the future. We hope that this exhibition and the extensive public program series are an opportunity for residents in Washington and elsewhere to remember the struggles of the past, to discuss their city of today, and to imagine their shared city of tomorrow.

Camille Giraud Akeju

Director,

Anacostia Community Museum, Smithsonian Institution

1. Introduction

An Era of Profound Change

A seismic shift in national consciousness opened a new era in the 1960s. Social activism sought to address longstanding injustices of poverty, race, and gender. Issues of war and peace reshaped law and politics, while new trends in art, theater, and music reworked the social fabric. Change was in the air, some of it unsettling and threatening to the status quo. Woven into the texture of national change was the transformation of the city of Washington. It had become the nation's largest city with a majority African American population. Its leaders were honed in civil rights struggles and the grassroots politics of empowerment.

The District changed physically as federal policies and funds imposed the car-centered freeway on a largely reluctant population, mostly for the benefit of white suburbanites who wanted access to the downtown business district. Residents waited impatiently as the long-delayed Metrorail system moved slowly to completion, accompanied by hopes that it would provide transportation for the urban masses and diminish auto congestion and air pollution.

Robert Kennedy Addressing Protestors, June 1963

*Attorney General Robert Kennedy addresses a crowd at a protest rally against racial discrimination in front of the Justice Department, June 14, 1963, several months before the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom.
Library of Congress*





New public housing appeared on the periphery of the nation's most ambitious urban renewal effort in Southwest Washington. Thousands of residents were displaced and the land flattened. Many left the Southwest for Anacostia, which changed from a sleepy backwater to a large urban neighborhood. Elsewhere, in Capitol Hill, Shaw, and Adams Morgan, growing community self-consciousness, discontent, expanded expectations, and racial politics aroused new populist activism. Problems in the schools, issues with the police, and concern about public services and individual rights provided a local counterpoint for national unrest, social injustices such as racial discrimination, and political causes such as the end to war in Vietnam.

During those years, the creation of public colleges opened access to higher education, while battles over black studies and women's studies reshaped the traditional curriculum. The increased visibility of feminists, gay culture, and a growing immigrant population gave the city new voices. Creative bursts in theater, art, and dance reflected newfound rights and freedom. Yet an undertow of violence marked everyday life, especially in the city's less affluent neighborhoods. Civil resistance, protest, and demonstrations were everyday events.

Everything didn't happen all at once or in every place, and everything didn't happen to everyone at the same moment. However, it was an extraordinary time when men and women took to the streets and redefined what was right and proper and what was legal and equal. And when it ended, the outlines of today's city had emerged, with limited home rule, an engaged black middle class, public higher education, viable public mass transit, and an arts community growing in confidence, opportunities, and recognition.

The Federal Response

Federal planners despaired over the flight to the suburbs of affluent residents and business. Fearing the loss of significant property and income taxes, the city's primary sources of revenue, they undertook the largest urban renewal plan in the nation to create an attractive alternative to the suburbs. The federal response, which encompassed 600 acres in the Southwest, was implemented largely through the National Capitol Planning Commission (NCPC) working closely with the Redevelopment Land Agency (RLA), an independent agency charged with buying and clearing slums for construction of new housing.



Brick House Demolition, 4th and L SW, 1959

Demolition of buildings on the northwest corner of 11th Street and Virginia Ave, SW, February, 1959

Historical Society of Washington, D.C., Garnet Wolesey Jex Slide Collection

Photo: Garnet Wolesey Jex

The federal government supported the most radical alternative for urban redevelopment in Southwest Washington. Other redevelopment models were considered and rejected, including the widely admired house-by-house transformation model – not yet called gentrification – that had transformed relatively downtrodden Georgetown during the 1950s. NCPC's hotly debated plan to redesign 600 acres of the Southwest authorized the RLA to reclaim land by right of eminent domain. The RLA financially compensated property owners but not renters, and established limited programs that enabled displaced residents to find alternative housing.

The demolition of the Southwest displaced most of the quadrant's residents. In citizens' meetings, news articles, and testimony before Congressional committees, residents and advocates complained about the patent disregard for the disruption of the pre-existing Southwest community, especially its poorest members who had the fewest resources or options to relocate.

Nevertheless, the demolition and rebuilding proceeded swiftly, in keeping with prevailing political and social values. To most it seemed appropriate and self-evident that the wholesale demolition of sub-standard housing, like the building of new highways, was evidence of national progress. Washington was the capital of the free world, argued the policymakers and planners, and ought to be a showplace for the best of American life.

Metro and the Freeways

Congress favored construction of freeways through the core of the city, but met opposition from residents worried about the destruction of their neighborhoods. Metrorail was intended to be a regional counterpart to the freeways. Delayed by construction obstacles, insufficient federal support, and disputes about coordinated funding from Maryland and Virginia, it did not celebrate its official opening until March 1976.

There was great uncertainty about the likelihood of Metro's success, especially in the suburbs, where the national love affair with the car had supported passage of highway construction bills in Congress. Debate surrounded the system's financing and the question of who would use it. Would it serve the inner city, with its heavily African American population, or the white suburbs? Could it do both? Where would the lines run, and which communities would have stations?

The Flow into Anacostia

Many of the displaced residents from Southwest Washington relocated to Anacostia, just east of the river. Their arrival transformed greater Anacostia and disrupted the historic semi-rural pattern of small communities. White neighborhoods became African American, and established African American neighborhoods lost cohesion. The new residents found themselves crowded into often shoddily built new private or public housing, as Anacostia's population swelled to far beyond what it could comfortably hold. Old neighborhoods lost their former closeness. Crime became a common worry. And the poor state of public transportation accentuated Anacostia's separation from the greater city both physically and psychologically.



View of Metro Construction from 7th and Pennsylvania, SE, 1974
DC Public Library, Washingtoniana Collection

2. Politics from the Ground Up

A new political class emerged in the 1960s. All life became a political statement, from how you dressed, spoke, and walked to who your friends were and what causes consumed your attention.

Federal legislation and funding helped drive the new politics. Laws were passed to implement the War on Poverty and address the goals of President Johnson's vision of a Great Society. These laws targeted pervasive discrimination, poverty, and inadequate educational opportunities; barriers that stunted individual's lives and hindered the nation's full potential. The government opened a flood of funding for grassroots economic organizations, new educational institutions, and a variety of training programs. At the same time, major philanthropies like the Ford and Rockefeller foundations became important sources of funding for programs that addressed economic inequality and discrimination.



Demonstrators at Poor Peoples March, 1968

Photo: Comedy

Anacostia Community Museum Archives, Smithsonian Institution



In Washington, where city affairs were long the domain of a small clique of white men with ties to New York banks, street-smart leaders seasoned by the civil rights struggle suddenly had access to millions of dollars from new sources. People who never imagined themselves as political actors became a new brand of citizen, demanding their rights and defining their own issues.

Federal and foundation support for anti-poverty programs, education, and workforce development supported community development corporations (CDCs) that introduced a new form of organizing to secure resources for overcoming poverty and achieving political power. Youth Pride, Inc., for example, was established in 1967 to engage youths from low-income families in a federally funded cleanup program. The success of that effort led the organization to expand its activities to include job training, with greatly increased federal funding. Pride's founders, who included Mary Treadwell, Marion Barry, and Rufus Mayfield, quickly made Pride, Inc. the most visible anti-poverty program in the District.



WTI Graduation Ceremony, 1974

Graduation takes place at Washington Technical Institute's original campus, former site of the Bureau of Standards on Connecticut Avenue and Van Ness Street NW.

Archives of the University of the District of Columbia

Public Higher Education

The District had never developed a public college system that provided reasonably priced higher education like that for residents of the 50 states. Its only public higher education institution, District of Columbia Teachers College, operated under the authority of the school board and had a student body of less than a thousand. Federal legislation that instituted guaranteed student loans authorized two new public colleges in DC: Washington Technical Institute (WTI) and Federal City College (FCC). They began classes in the fall of 1968 with an open admission policy that attracted 15,000 registrants. Reflecting the times, the new colleges offered courses that were relevant to the populations they served and at locations their students could reach via public transit.

WTI was a two-year institution that trained students in trades and semi-professional skills. Federal City College, a four-year institution, was a center of educational innovation and controversy from the day it opened. Lacking a central campus, it held classes in rented quarters spread around downtown DC. Federal City became a center of Afro-American studies, a new discipline whose advocates wanted to reshape the curriculum to make it less centered on European traditions. As in many colleges and universities of the period, Afro-American studies at FCC drew strong responses, for and against, from students, faculty, and administrators.



Jean Camper Cahn with Law School Students
Archives of the University of the District of Columbia

Law for the People

In the District, where law was big business, legal services for the disadvantaged and affordable legal education had disappeared with the professionalization of the discipline in the late 1920s. In the early 1960s, Antioch College, located in Yellow Springs, Ohio, brought an innovative legal program to Washington. It featured clinics that engaged students in hands-on legal work and provided legal counsel for people unable to access expensive law firms. The clinic-based education model thrived in DC. When Antioch College decided to disband the law school for financial reasons in the mid-1980s, members of the DC Council arranged temporary financing as a bridge to making the school part of the city's higher education establishment. The result was the David A. Clarke School of Law at the University of the District of Columbia.

3. New Voices: Women, Gays, Newcomers

The civil rights movement gave language, tactics, and visibility to groups in addition to African Americans. In Washington, as African American activists organized community-based organizations with support from federal anti-poverty funds and private foundations, new groups that had been largely “underground” or on the margins of social acceptability also became more visible, organized, and politically active. Feminists, gays, and new immigrant groups demanded respect and equal rights. Their growing visibility gave additional tones to the District’s historic black and white, officially heterosexual coloration.

Feminism

By the late 1960s, small groups of women across the country were participating in “consciousness raising” to explore, articulate, and address their growing discontent. Feminists attacked the legal and social strictures that made women a secondary gender. The feminist surge of the 1960s coincided with the widespread availability of the first birth control pills and a nationwide effort to change restrictive laws on abortion. Women sought control over childbearing because it shaped their lives and formed the basis for laws and customs that left them unequal with men.

Feminists founded local and national organizations that articulated a political agenda of equality. Studies of income and wealth revealed that collectively women were far poorer than men. Poor women – both African American and white – were the poorest groups in the country. Feminists succeeded in gaining access to anti-poverty programs and funds as well as foundations that supported the city’s African American community-based organizations. Feminism struggled to be inclusive of African Americans and lesbians, and it elicited strong responses, both for and against.





Gay Activists at the White House, April 17, 1965
National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution

Emergence of the Gay Community

The Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender (LGBT) community “came out” during the 1960s and 1970s. Never absent from society, gay men and women had long been vilified, declared mentally ill, and made into criminals for their private behavior. Feminist lesbians demanded recognition and inclusion from heterosexual feminists. Feminism became increasingly inclusive of lesbian rights as male gays gained the confidence to challenge social stereotypes and limitations long imposed on them. A sudden transformation in consciousness came in 1969 with the Stonewall riots in New York City, when patrons at a gay bar defied police harassment and fought back. The riots reverberated around the country.

In Washington, Franklin Kameny and the Mattachine Society had been pioneers in public gay activism since the 1960s. In 1971 DC’s Gay and Lesbian Activist Alliance (GLAA) organized to secure “full rights and privileges” for gay people. In 1972 the DC School Board banned discrimination based on sexual orientation – the first U.S. city to do so. And in 1973 Mayor Walter Washington signed DC legislation against gay discrimination in housing, public accommodation, bank credit, and employment.

New Communities

Federal legislation in 1965 changed the nation’s immigration laws. Congress abolished the national origins formula dating from 1921, which favored northern European immigration. It was replaced with a preference system that focused on employment skills and family relationships with U.S. citizens. The changes led to a much larger flow from nations in Asia and Central and Latin America that had not been major sources of immigration. The DC metro area became a destination for newcomers from Central and South America, the Caribbean, the Philippines, Vietnam, and China.

4. Becoming Established Culture

Until the late 1960s Washington was not a nationally recognized center of the arts, although it had a lively, largely black local culture centered around jazz, church music, and popular dance. During the 1960s new sources of money from foundations, the newly established National Endowments for the Arts and the Humanities, and the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, among others, helped give innovative artists and African American cultural creators the means and skills to place themselves as equals to anyone in the nation.

Printmakers like Lou Stovall and dance impresarios like Doris Jones stepped out as major figures in the District's cultural scene. Chuck Brown invented Go-Go. Alma Thomas and Sam Gilliam of the Washington Color School of painters nurtured close connections with their New York City brethren. Arena Stage and Robert Hook's Black Repertory Theater made the District a theater town second only to New York. And on Capitol Hill, a young Roberta Flack drew raves for her passionate, nuanced singing.

In the early 1970s many African American artists were inspired by the AfriCOBRA (African Commune of Bad Relevant Artists) movement. AfriCOBRA artists drew upon African American history and culture, the religious and spiritual iconography of the African diaspora, and the revolutionary tenor of the times.



Washington Theater Club

The play Inner City is produced at the Washington Theater Club in 1973. The Washington Theatre Club was established in 1957 to provide innovative plays, oftentimes with radical political themes.
Washington Post



Painting: Washington Color School

Influenced by the abstract art movement that appeared in New York City during the 1950s, the members of the Washington Color School were second generation abstract artists. They contributed to abstract art a unique vocabulary of form and color. The School was founded by a group of painters who showed their works in the 1965 exhibition Washington Color Painters, which traveled around the country and spread their fame. The exhibition had opened at the Washington Gallery of Modern Art, which during its brief existence in the 1960s became a nationally significant art venue and helped make Washington one of the nation's nodes for abstract art.

Dance: An Explosion of Black Talent

Dance blossomed across America beginning in the 1960s. Not only did most middle-class girls have ballet or tap lessons, but a uniquely blended art form that joined traditional ballet and modern dance with African dance became part of popular culture. In DC, activists like Doris Jones, Louis Johnson, and Mike Malone offered opportunities to local black dancers and created new experimental dance forms. Club-dancing culture became more popular as dancing became part of the mainstream urban experience.



"Fichandler Stage" at Arena Stage
Arena Stage

Theater: New Turns

Theater, too, turned its back on convention. Traditionally, plays were presented on a proscenium stage with the audience sitting in front. Beginning in the 1950s, theater groups started experimenting with arena-like settings that placed the stage in the center, with the audience seated in concentric circles around the performance space. The new configuration erased the absolute distinction between performers and audience, blurring lines that were also being blurred in other art forms.

Washington's Arena Stage was an early adopter of the new concept. From modest beginnings in the 1950s, Arena Stage became a District staple by 1975, presenting well-loved and new American plays that invited close interaction between audience and the actors.

Music: DC's Pop Stars and Jazz

Between 1963 and 1975, Washington's music scene gained variety and energy with the advent of rock music and the mainstreaming of black popular music. The first U.S. concert of the Beatles drew enormous media attention. But much more was happening in the city's music venues, including the debut of Roberta Flack and the creation of Go-Go by Chuck Brown.

The jazz scene had a gifted advocate in radio host Felix E. Grant, who drew his programming and interviews from the stream of local and visiting musicians and singers who played at venerable Bohemian Caverns, the new Blues Alley, and other clubs. It was only a matter of time before some of these pop and jazz artists found themselves performing at the Kennedy Center, which opened in 1972, and other bastions of the cultural establishment.



Chuck Brown Performing, 1978
Photo by James Fortune

5. Coming Apart

The rapid social, racial, and cultural changes sweeping America in the 1960s and 1970s brought excitement and apprehension, creativity and destruction. Washington was at the epicenter. Although the city experienced less of the mass violence that began erupting in black neighborhoods around the country, from New York to Los Angeles, it was where the nation's protesters wanted to make their statements and confront national policy face to face and in full media glare.

Protestors became more aggressive, and the police and National Guard more determined. The growing violence in confrontations affirmed a common perception that society was at odds with itself, coming apart, divided by the war in Vietnam, women's demands for changes in society and the family, surging divorce rates, free and easy sexual mores, and codes of behavior that defied the buttoned-down virtues of hard work and traditional patriotism.

The District had its own problems. Poverty had not disappeared, despite the many antipoverty programs. Young people challenged traditional sensibilities. Drug addiction moved into the street. The police force, still mostly white, was regarded with suspicion by the predominantly African American population. Clearly, the traditional white establishment was losing its grip on local affairs, but the emerging African American leadership did not yet have the authority or the means to assert firm control.

Protestors at Peace Moratorium, November 16, 1969

During the 1960s, the District Police Department had to expand its law enforcement horizons beyond ordinary street crime to include civil protests. The earliest protests addressed civil rights issues. But as the Vietnam War heated up, the District also became a center of antiwar protests, both by outsiders and, in this case, by local residents.

Photo: J.P. Laffont/Sygma/Corbis





Within the African American community many voices called for change. Separatists called for their own nation, and Black Muslims developed an ideology based upon their unique religious beliefs. Black power advocates like Stokely Carmichael wanted an assertive and united African American community in DC that demanded its fair share of American life. Mainline civil rights leaders like Walter Fauntroy and Sterling Tucker preached working patiently within the traditional system of laws, civility, and mores. The many perspectives and agendas within the District contributed to a sense of unease that paralleled the excitement and challenge of changing times. Everything seemed possible, and anything might happen.

Antiwar Movement

The antiwar movement adopted many protest techniques from the civil rights movement, but it was hardly a clone. Led primarily by university-educated, white young men, it secured a broad-based alliance with liberal groups of every kind to mount a political attack on the pursuit of the Vietnam War. Many in the District's African American communities opposed U.S. involvement in the war. They complained that the military draft took a disproportionate number of African American men, while whites could escape service through enrollment in a college or university. The February 6, 1968, edition of the *Washington Afro-American* ran an article entitled "Black Hessians." It decried the situation of poor black men who enlisted in the military and became, in effect, mercenary soldiers like the Hessians who fought for the British in the American War of Independence. African American men lacked other career options, noted the story: "Slum life forces them to volunteer."



Aftermath of DC Riot, April 1968

A soldier stands guard at 7th and N Street, NW, Washington, D.C., with the ruins of buildings that were destroyed during the riots that followed the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr.

*Photo by Warren K. Leffler
Library of Congress*

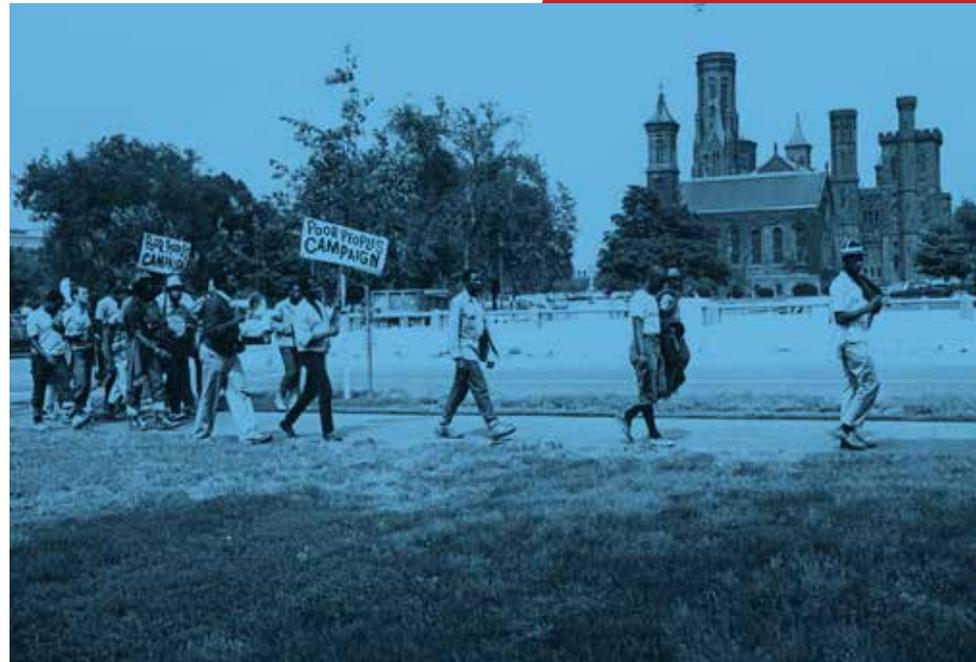
The Riots, 1968

During the 1960s, when people spoke ominously of a coming long, hot summer, they weren't referring to the weather forecast. Riots and civil disturbances had become a summertime occurrence in African American neighborhoods throughout the nation. Black urban ghettos reverberated with broken promises and discontent, and young people filled the streets on hot nights looking for action. "I don't know whether or not, in the face of continued abuse, the Negro can follow a passive, non-violent approach," declared DC civil rights leader Sterling Tucker in June 1966. "I'm less concerned about the leadership than the masses. No matter what the leadership says, the masses are going to want to strike back."

They did – but not until 1968, after the assassination of Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. Activists led by Stokely Carmichael demanded that stores and businesses, many owned by whites and serving blacks, close for the day to honor King. Roving bands, feeding on their own adrenalin, soon began to loot the stores, and then to burn them.

Poor People's Campaign

After the riots, rights activists decided to go ahead with Rev. King's plans for a Poor People's March on Washington. Washingtonians were a major part of the effort. Churches like St. Augustine's in Southwest were staging areas, and leading public figures graced the organizing committee. The People's Camp, or Resurrection City, located on the Mall, brought poverty into public view through civil disobedience in the nation's capital. It succeeded. But life in the makeshift camp was difficult and uncomfortable, and local and federal law enforcement personnel were a constant and often unfriendly presence.



**Demonstrators in Poor People's Campaign
March Past Smithsonian Castle, 1968**

*Poor People's Campaign Collection,
Anacostia Community Museum Archives, Smithsonian Institution*

6. Conclusion: Coming Together

Whatever their divisions of opinion over race, politics, or ideology, most Washingtonians agreed on one thing: they wanted home rule. They had been governed for almost a century by federally appointed commissioners, and they were tired of it. If DC was the capital of the free world, they asked, shouldn't its residents be able to elect their local government?

U.S. Presidents from Eisenhower through Nixon agreed with this assessment and were generally sympathetic to giving the District home rule in some form. But the conservative, mostly Southern members of Congress who controlled the District committees refused to give up their power. However, the Southern bloc was unable to prevent passage of the 23rd Amendment to the Constitution, which in 1963 gave District residents the electoral vote for President and Vice-President of the United States. Four years later, in 1968, DC got the right to elect its own school board. And in 1970 it gained a nonvoting delegate to the House of Representatives.

President Johnson was able to work around the Congressional bloc in 1967 by replacing the three appointed DC commissioners with an appointed District Council and an appointed Mayor-Commissioner, although it was not until 1974 that Congress allowed the District to adopt a city charter that included a popularly-elected council and mayor.





First Elected Members of the DC Council, 1975

Left to right seated, Nadine Winter, Polly Shackleton, Mayor Walter Washington, Sterling Tucker, Willie Hardy; left to right standing, William Spaulding, Arrington Dixon, Jerry A. Moore, Jr., David Clarke, Marion Barry, James Coates, John Wilson, Douglas Moore. (Julius Hobson was not present.)
DC Public Library

1968: a Pivotal Year

In the District's long history, few years were as pivotal as 1968. It began with the assassination of Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. and riots in DC and around the nation. It continued with the assassination of Robert Kennedy, who was running for the Democratic presidential nomination. And it finished with a divisive presidential election that pitted a badly split Democratic Party against the well-organized campaign of Richard Nixon. In between was the chaotic and sometimes violent Democratic National Convention in Chicago. Meanwhile, DC residents campaigned hotly but voted peacefully in their first election in a century – for members of the School Board.

Some 62 candidates competed for the 11 positions on the School Board. Many of the candidates, including Marion Barry, Julius Hobson, Rev. Walter Fauntroy, and Rev. James Coates, had gained public recognition through community-based organizations. Some would later become the first elected members of the DC Council.

Home Rule

The District gained the limited right to govern itself, with Congressional oversight, after a realignment of forces in the House of Representatives. Congress passed the District of Columbia Home Rule Act of 1973. The next year District voters elected their first city government since 1871. In addition to electing a mayor and a District council, voters approved the creation of Advisory Neighborhood Commissions (ANCs), volunteer boards to advise the council on neighborhood concerns.

Election winners took office in January 1975. Walter E. Washington, who had already served many years as the appointed mayor, won the mayoral election and proudly took the oath of office. Sterling Tucker, a long-time activist for civil and economic rights, was elected chair of the new council.

An End and a Beginning

Home rule meant the beginning of real politics in a city that faced an alarming range of challenges, from poverty and poor housing to crime and inadequate education and healthcare. Home rule opened the way for the District's residents to begin implementing their own vision of Washington, alongside that of the federal government and the planners. Yet most of the fundamental decisions had already been made.

It was now clear that this largely African American city would have a government and city administration reflecting the racial and cultural characteristics of the residents. No more neighborhoods would be demolished to build freeways. Everyone was awaiting the beginning of Metrorail service, and meanwhile the District had bought out the private mass transit company. Public housing was still inadequate, even scandalous, but no one was proposing to bulldoze whole sections of DC. Artists and performers once seen as marginal by the dominant white establishment were becoming part of the national cultural scene, often appearing at the new and very official Kennedy Center. Washingtonians could imagine their city as a creator—not just a consumer—of culture.





Succeeding decades would show that home rule by itself was no cure for all problems. But most people cheered it as an important beginning. As Mayor Washington noted in his 1975 inauguration speech, for decades Washingtonians had been treated as second-class citizens, “but now we are going in by the front door!”



Resurrection City, Poor People's Campaign, 1968

Photo by Watkins

Anacostia Community Museum, Smithsonian Institution

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www.anacostia.si.edu

The mission of the Anacostia Community Museum is to enhance understanding of contemporary urban experiences and strengthen community bonds by conserving the past, documenting the present, and serving as a catalyst for shaping the future.