

EVERY STEP TELLS A STORY: The Anacostia Historical District

In the 1850s, America was heading toward a deadly confrontation between free and slave states. To promote unity between the North and the South, this area in Southeast DC. was initially named Uniontown. It was a White suburban community at the time. After the Uncivil War, new towns called Uniontown started cropping up all over, creating confusion for services like mail delivery. To ease the confusion, Congress enacted legislation to change the name to Anacostia on April 22, 1886, making Anacostia the only community whose name was affixed by Congress. The name Anacostia was derived from a Native American word meaning “village trading center.”

Site #40: Barry Farm Site (Freedmen’s Village) 1230 Sumner Road, SE

Beginning in the 1850s, thousands of enslaved Black people began escaping from slavery to DC. Burgeoning free Black communities began sprouting up in DC in Foggy Bottom, Georgetown and Southwest DC. By 1850, DC was 80% free Blacks; by the 1860s, DC was 90% free Blacks.

Black people running out of slavery could hide and assimilate into free Black communities, work to save money until they could buy themselves out of slavery, or just assimilate into freedom. These runaways lived in tent cities in Foggy Bottom and the Shaw community since they had no money or work and were illiterate.

In 1865 when the Uncivil War ended, a White Union General from Maine named Oliver Otis Howard was named director of the Freedmen’s Bureau, which was created to help rehabilitate former slaves during the period of Reconstruction. In 1868, General Howard (also the founder and namesake of Howard University) paid \$52,000 to purchase 375 acres of farmland east of the river, then owned by James Barry. His mission was to erect a Freedmen’s Village for runaway slaves living in squalor in tent cities in the Shaw community in DC. Within three years, thousands of runaways moved to Barry Farm.

This farmland became the largest Black village of free men and women in America, as well as a model Black community. It included homes for 270 Black families who were freed or runaway slaves. By the 1870s, the villagers assisted by Frederick Douglass’ sons Charles and Louis built their own homes, schools, churches, businesses and civic associations, becoming a model Black community by the early 1900s.

The streets running through Barry Farm were all named after White abolitionists like General Oliver Otis Howard, US Senator Charles Sumner, educator John Eaton, US Senator Benjamin Wade, US Senator Samuel Pomeroy, Congressman Thaddeus Stevens, and the original board members.



1023 Howard Road SE, razed to make way for the Anacostia Metro Station. Photo from the Library of Congress.



Children at Barry Farms Housing Development in April 1944. *Gottschob-Schleisner, Inc., photographer. Photo courtesy of the Library of Congress.*



Rear view of development (1944) ([Library of Congress](#))

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In the early 1920s and 1950s, the federal government ran railroad tracks and highways through Barry Farms while integration saw hundreds of successful families leave the dwellings for “greener pastures.” Barry Farm (now sometimes called Hillsdale) went into despair by the 1970s. The crack-cocaine epidemic destroyed the community in the 1980s.

Barry Farm today has been razed and a new development is rising with the opportunity for former residents to return into affordable units of the "glory days" of the original Barry Farm as a freedmen's village.



Jack Rottier Collection/George Mason University Libraries
Activists marching under the NWRO banner in the Poor People's Campaign, Washington, D.C., May-June

Did You Know?

National welfare rights activist Etta Horn, Founder of the National Welfare Rights Organization and head of the Citywide Welfare Alliance got her start organizing her neighbors at Barry Farms in Anacostia.

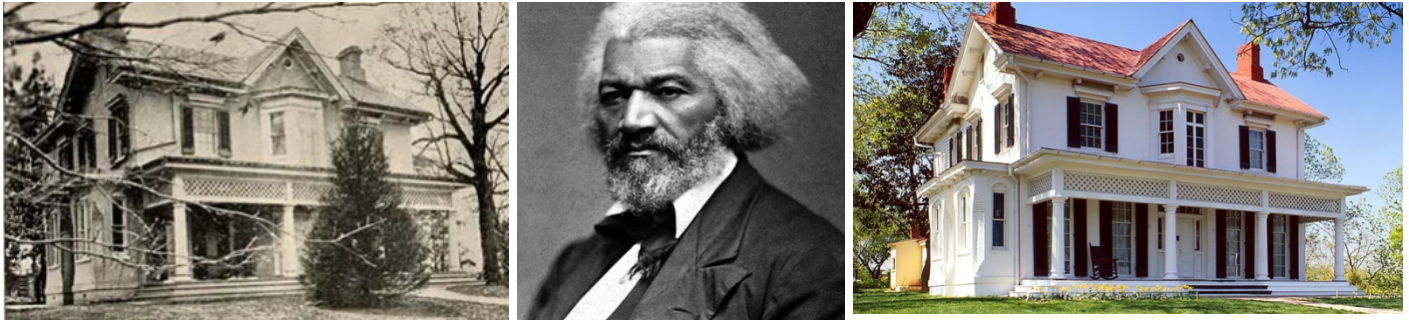
In the 1960s conditions at Barry Farm had grown increasingly dire. Living conditions were poor, and although the majority of the tenants received government assistance most could barely afford to feed or clothe their families.

In 1966 President Lyndon B. Johnson's War on Poverty provided funds that helped the neighborhood to organize. With the help of Etta Horn they formed "Band of Angels" an all-women tenant association that demanded improvements for the community members and Barry Farm Dwellings.

Within a year, funds to fix up Barry Farms were increased, recreation & daycare programs were established, a black police captain was assigned to the local precinct and job counseling was provided.

Site #41: The Frederick Douglass Home, on Cedar Hill (1411 W St., SE)

Former slave Frederick Douglass — a 19th Century abolitionist, author, orator, accomplished violinist, statesman and the leading voice for Black people's civil rights in America — made his home here on Cedar Hill, overlooking Barry Farm from 1878 until his death in 1895. His mother was of Native American ancestry and his father was of African and European descent.



Front view of Cedar Hill, circa 1880s to 1890s. NPS Photo, Frederick Douglass (circa 1879) National Archives, Cedar Hill today, Library of Congress

Often called the “Father of the Civil Rights Movement,” Frederick Douglass was one of the most famous abolitionists and civil rights advocates in American history. He dedicated his life to freedom and justice for all Americans, believing that the fight for equality and freedom for one, affects the equality and freedom of all.

His life spanned nearly 80 years, from a time when slavery permeated American society and culture to the years where slavery was condemned and no longer permitted on American soil.

Douglass, who was of Native American, African, and European decent, was born into slavery on the eastern shore of Maryland and given the name Frederick Augustus Washington Bailey, after his mother Harriet Bailey. When he was six years old, he was “taken” from his mother and used as a playmate for the Edward Lloyd family on the Wye Plantation. At the time, the Lloyds owned most of Talbot County, Maryland and over 750 slaves.

As a teenager, with the help of Sophie Auld (a relative of the Lloyds who took a liking to Frederick), he learned to read and write — which was taboo at the time). He went on to teach other enslaved people to read using the Bible and was severely punished when word spread of his efforts.

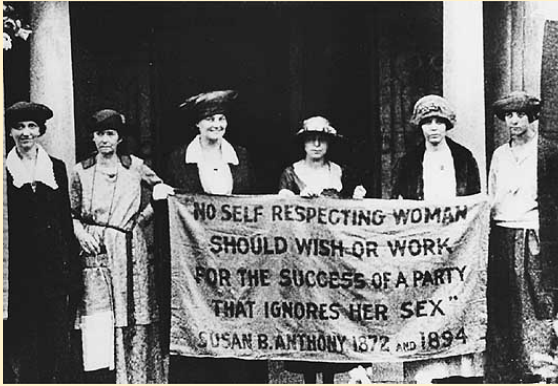
At the age of 20, he was “rented out” as a slave to the Auld family in Baltimore to work as a ship caulker. While in Baltimore, he observed free Blacks on ships going in and out of Baltimore as stevedores. His observation of the stevedores inspired an idea — to disguise himself as a shipmate and flee from slavery. In 1838, Anna Murray — a free Black woman who later became his first wife — purchased forged freedom papers and a sailor's uniform for him that allowed him to carry out his escape plan. Dressed as a sailor, he boarded a train to Delaware and caught a ferry up the Delaware Bay to Philly where he was finally on free soil.

Once he reached his final destination — New Bedford, MA he joined the American Anti-Slavery Society and became a sought-after antislavery speaker. By 1845, he published the first of three popular autobiographies and arguably his most famous work, *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, launching him as one of the premier abolitionists of his day. After the passage of the 1850 Fugitive Slave Act — which required that slaves be returned to their owners, even if they were in a free state — he was hunted by slave catchers and fled to Canada and then to Ireland. While on the run, he changed his name several times so no one could find him. Due to the success of his book, Douglass became so well known that he feared recapture by his owner. As a result, Douglass fled to England.

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In 1851, a wealthy White patron bought him out of slavery. Upon his return to the States, he became the leading agitator against slavery, and a trusted advisor to President Lincoln and other White abolitionists.

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Officers of the National Woman's Party outside the NWP headquarters in Washington, D.C., June 1920. (AP Photo)

Did You Know?

In addition to being a staunch abolitionist, Frederick Douglass also spoke out about women's rights. He was the only African American to attend the Seneca Falls Convention, the first women's rights convention in the United States. Held in July 1848 in Seneca Falls, New York, the meeting launched the women's suffrage movement.

"In this denial of the right to participate in government, not merely the degradation of woman and the perpetuation of a great injustice happens, but the maiming and repudiation of one-half of the moral and intellectual power of the government of the world."

~ Frederick Douglass – Seneca Falls Convention

By the time of the Civil War, Douglass was one of the most famous black men in the country. Throughout the war, Douglass promoted equality and freedom and championed the use of African American soldiers in the war. Douglass and one of his sons supported the Union by serving as recruiters for the 54th Massachusetts Regiment, while his other son fought with this regiment during the Battle of Fort Wagner.

After the Civil War, he took on local and federal jobs as DC Recorder of Deeds and Minister to Haiti. In 1877, encouraged by his sons, Douglass and his wife Anna Murray paid \$6,700 to the Freedman's Savings and Trust Company to purchase a little over nine acres of land for what would be his final home, an estate on a hill in Anacostia surrounded by cedar trees and with a commanding view of the river and city. Douglass named his home Cedar Hill.

By purchasing the estate, Douglass became one of the first Black men to break a covenant in Washington, DC. Even though the original deed prohibited blacks from purchasing the estate, Douglass was able to purchase the home.

He had five children with Anna with one girl dying at the age of 10. Anna died in 1881. Douglass later married his secretary, Helen Pitts, in 1884. He died in 1895 and is interred in Mount Hope Cemetery in Rochester, NY. His former home Cedar Hill in Anacostia is on the National Registry of Historic Places.



Douglass's Growlery, circa 1880s-1890s (NPS Photo)

Did You Know?

The Growlery Behind Douglass's Cedar Hill mansion is Douglass's secret hideaway known as "The Growlery." Douglass was so popular and his wife so open to receiving visitors to the Douglass mansion that Douglass could only find peace and quiet to write and think by building a secret small house he used to escape "the big house."

Douglass often read Charles Dickens and learned that Dickens called his library "The Growlery," a place where he would go to scream and growl out loud to relieve himself of the anger he harbored about the miserable social conditions of the poor in London. Once he let out a strong, loud growl, he would settle down to write. Douglass designed his own Growlery on the woods edge down the hill from his mansion to escape the guests in his house when he needed space to think, relax and write in quiet. Douglass's Growlery is not on the tour but tour guides will show you where it is if you want to see it.

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Site #42: Anacostia's Home-Grown Black Business Corridor of DC Culture

Within two blocks of each other, one can take a short walk soaking up Anacostia's rich, famous, inspirational and fun history and culture by visiting the local Black businesses below.

We Act Radio (1918 MLK Avenue, SE) combines broadcasting social, cultural and political programs, hard-hitting news, music, poetry and progressive analysis of current events while advocating for social justice, racial equity and racial reckoning in this Era of George Floyd. At 1480 AM on your radio dial, the driving force behind the news station is the ever-so-cutting-edge DJ Kymone Freeman -- the voice of the voiceless in southeast DC.

Check-It Enterprises & Go-Go Cultural Center (1920 MLK Avenue, SE) is a clothing store, cafe, performing arts venue and soon-to-be Go-Go museum. Check-It Enterprises promotes DC's home-grown music, Go-Go, and was the driving force behind making Go-Go DC's official musical sound. Go-go is a popular subgenre of funk music with an emphasis on live audience call and response. It originated in the African-American community in the Washington, DC area in the mid-60s to late-70s. Check-It sells attractive DC-centric and Go-Go apparel and hosts programs advocating for Black entrepreneurship and the cultural pride of Anacostia.



The Big Chair (on the corner of V St. & MLK, Jr. Ave., SE: In 1959)

One of the most endearing stories and local community symbols in our Nation's Capital belongs to the Curtis Brothers furniture store. In 1959, the brothers, looking for a way to get the word out about their furniture business, built the biggest chair in the world in front of their store. It stands 19½ feet high and is a direct replica of a Duncan Phyfe-style chair. The marketing gimmick worked; everyone from miles around came to their store to see the giant chair and their sales skyrocketed.

In the summer of 1960, the brothers hatched another marketing idea that immortalized them to this day in Anacostia — they built a 10-foot x 10-foot glass house on the chair. The house was furnished with a shower, bed, toilet, heater, air conditioner and balcony. They asked one of their patrons, Lynn Arnold, if she would live in the house atop the chair for a month. She said, “Yes,” and became known as “Alice in the Looking Glass.” Thousands of people came to see her living in the glass house on top of the giant chair. She stayed there for 42 days and the company advertised “*See her eat, sleep, exercise and sunbathe, a site you'll never forget.*”

Think about it. This was reality TV thirty years before it Reality TV!

Eventually the chair fell into disrepair and in 2006 was replaced by a new one made entirely of aluminum. The Big Chair has become a symbol of economic development, opportunity and creativity in Anacostia ever since.

Today, it is a commonly known meeting place.... “I'll meet you at the big chair at 1pm.” The Big Chair is a reminder of the neighborhood's economic potential.

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Busboys & Poets & The Marion Barry Room (2004 MLK Avenue, SE), whose first location opened in 2005, is a chain of eight restaurants and bars in the DC area that are named after former DC resident Langston Hughes who was a busboy and a poet. The eateries host community dialogues on progressive causes. There is a progressive bookstore in each restaurant. The company hopes to inspire social change while having a good time. Some of the restaurants' clientele and patrons included Angela Davis, Danny Glover, Amy Goodman, Tom Hayden, Maxine Waters, Sheila Lee Jackson, Harry Belafonte, Common and many others. The Anacostia location was opened in 2019. The common room here is named after DC Mayor-for-Life Marion Barry. There are numerous murals throughout the Anacostia restaurant paying homage to the beloved mayor.



Busboys & Poets common room, Anacostia, Washington, D.C. (Photo: WTOP/Kristi King)

The Anacostia Playhouse (2020 Shannon Place, SE) is around the corner from the above stores and is of the best and most beloved local drama playhouses in DC. Founded in 2013, the Playhouse personifies the rich history and cultural promise and performance of life, culture and society East-of-the-River. With a seating capacity of 200, the theatre hosts drama and acting workshops, new playwright discussions, hires local actors and drama craftspeople.

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Congresswoman Eleanor Holmes Norton
https://www.facebook.com/CongresswomanNorton/photos_stream

Did You Know?

DC Congresswoman Eleanor Holmes Norton's great-grandfather was one of those runaway slaves mentioned above.

In 1850, Richard Holmes was enslaved on a tobacco plantation just outside of Richmond, Virginia. He was owned by Josiah Holmes, which is how he got his last name. One night, sick and tired of being sick and tired of slavery, he walked off the plantation at midnight and began his 125-mile lonely walk north to DC to seek freedom. He heard through the slave grapevine that Black people in DC were free and would hide him until he made his way to the North onto free soil.

Runaways had to walk at night fearing slave catchers prowling the roads for runaways. If they slept, it was during the daytime hiding deep into the woods. After two months of walking in the woods at night, Mr. Holmes successfully crossed the "Long Bridge" across the Potomac River which is today's 14th Street Bridge. He discovered other runaways hiding in alleys in free Black communities in Southwest DC being sheltered.

After three years of odd jobs and manual labor, Richard Holmes saved over \$300. By this time, his owner Josiah Holmes had given up on finding his runaway, figuring he had made it all the way to Canada or had been eaten by wild boar. But, much to his surprise, Josiah received a letter from his runaway with \$250 inside, asking his owner to give him his freedom papers. Josiah complied with Richard's request and sent him his freedom papers.

One could suggest that both were honorable men in their business dealings of the day. Congresswoman Eleanor Holmes Norton comes from this ancestral stock of being honest, visionary, and still determined to win freedom and justice for all Americans.

