

LeDroit Park Historic Walking Tour

Written by Eric Fidler, September 2016

Introduction

- Howard University established in 1867 by Oliver Otis Howard
 - Civil War General
 - Commissioner of the Freedman's Bureau (1865-74)
 - Reconstruction agency concerned with welfare of freed slaves
 - Andrew Johnson wasn't sympathetic
 - President of HU (1869-74)
 - HU short on cash
- LeDroit Park founded in 1873 by Amzi Lorenzo Barber and his brother-in-law Andrew Langdon.
 - Barber on the Board of Trustees of Howard Univ.
 - Named neighborhood for his father-in-law, LeDroit Langdon, a real estate broker
 - Barber went on to develop part of Columbia Heights
 - Barber later moved to New York, started the Locomobile car company, became the "asphalt king" of New York. [Show image S](#)
- LeDroit Park built as a "romantic" suburb of Washington, with houses on spacious green lots
- Architect: James McGill
 - Inspired by Andrew Jackson Downing's "Architecture of Country Houses"
 - Idyllic theory of architecture: living in the idyllic settings would make residents more virtuous
- Streets named for trees, e.g. Maple (T), Juniper (6th), Larch (5th), etc.
- Built as exclusively white neighborhood in the 1870s, but from 1900 to 1910 became almost exclusively black, home of Washington's black intelligentsia--- poets, lawyers, civil rights activists, a mayor, a Senator, doctors, professors.
 - stamps, the U.S. passport, two Supreme Court cases on civil rights
- Fence war 1880s
- Relationship to Howard Theatre

531 T Street – Originally build as a duplex, now a condo.

Style: Italianate (low hipped roof, deep projecting cornice, ornate wood brackets)

[Show image B](#)

525 T Street – Howard Theatre performers stayed here. Hotels in Washington were segregated and black performers had few options when visiting.

Style: Second Empire (mansard roof with scalloped slate shingles, an iron crest, dormers, sculpted details around the windows and doors, a tower)

[Show image C](#)

517 T Street – *Style:* Victorian gothic (steeply pitched roof; gable; multi-color slate pattern; tall, narrow proportions; oriel window)

[Show image D](#)

507 T Street – House of Secrets, an occasional speakeasy for over 50 years. Prince performed here twice in the 1990s according to a letter in the Washington Post from a neighbor upset with what she described as a nightclub.

421 T Street – Style: Queen Anne (possibly Eastlake) (large, asymmetry, projecting dormers and bay, geometric ornaments, spindles, low relief carvings, variety of façade materials and design by floor)

416 T Street – Price comparison: Bought in 1997 for \$122,000 (about \$183,000 in 2016 dollars). Now for sale (Sept. 2016) for \$1,075,000.

414 T Street – Home of Dr. Charles Sumner Syphax, a mathematics professor, and black descendant of Martha Washington's grandson, George Washington Park Custis. In the 19th century the Syphaxes were considered African-American aristocracy and owned large portions of what are now Arlington County and Alexandria.

412 T Street – Home of Ernest Everett Just (1883-1941), noted cell biologist, founder of Omega Psi Phi, and first recipient of the Spingarn Medal. Grew up poor in South Carolina in the late 19th century, but graduated from Dartmouth (1907) and from the Univ. of Chicago with a PhD in zoology (1916), overturning the existing theory of egg fertilization. Founder of HU's zoology school. Fought with HU's president over research vs. teaching. Also conducted research at the Marine Biological Laboratory in Woods Hole, Mass., the Stazione Zoologica in Naples, Italy, the Kaiser Wilhelm Institut in Berlin, and the Station Biologique in France. Briefly a prisoner of war until he returned to DC and died. Show book "The Black Apollo of Science". Show image T.

408 T Street – Home of Walter Washington (1915-2003) – First elected mayor of the District of Columbia when Congress re-established home rule in 1975. Mayor 1975-9. Before that, LBJ and Nixon appointed him as the Mayor-Commissioner of DC (1967-74). Lived here with wife Benetta Bullock.

400 T Street – Owned by Jesse Jackson, who lived here for a period in the 1990s. Bought the house in 1985. DC Shadow Senator 1991-1996. Frequently seen in the neighborhood. Wife witnessed a homicide in 1992. Previously the home of Fountain Peyton (1861-1951), who served on the school board and was a prominent black defense attorney.

326 T Street – Robert and Mary Church Terrell (TERR-ull) – National Historic Landmark. Probably the second AA homeowners in LeDroit Park. Their first house (1936 4th St) was purchased through a straw buyer.

Robert H. Terrell (1857-1925). First AA judge in DC. Graduated cum laude from Harvard in 1884, then Howard Law. Principal of the M Street High school, now called Dunbar High School. Appointed to the Municipal Court in 1910 over the objections of southern Democrats in the Senate. Founder of Sigma Pi Phi (1911). Born in humble origins in Virginia, waited tables at Harvard at Memorial Hall, then applied, studied at Harvard, and spoke at graduation commencement.

Married Mary Church Terrell in 1891 in a wedding that made the front page of the Washington Post. African-American power couple of their time.

Mary Church Terrell (1863-1954). Among first black women with a college degree. Born in Tennessee to a self-made millionaire. Graduated from Oberlin in 1884 (bachelors) and in 1888 (masters). Principal of the M Street High School. First AA woman appointed to a school board. President of the National Assoc. of Colored Women (1896). Founded the National Assoc. of College Women (now University Women) in 1896. Founding member of the NAACP in 1909. Helped establish sorority Delta Sigma Theta (1913-4). Suffragette. Wrote [A Colored Woman in a White World](#) in 1940, an autobiography. [Show image T](#)

Fought to desegregate places of public accommodation in DC in *D.C. vs. J.R. Thompson Co.* (1953), a landmark civil rights ruling from the Supreme Court that ended segregation in shops, hotels, and restaurants overnight in DC. DC had criminal misdemeanor laws from Reconstruction and the first home rule era prohibiting discrimination, but they were ignored. After the ruling she returned to the restaurant, ate lunch in front of a crowd of photographers. The manager carried her tray for her. Ruling delivered the same day of second oral arguments for *Brown v BOE* (1954), which was decided next year.

Cooper Circle – main public space in the neighborhood. Bisected during the 20th century. Re-enclosed in 1984 and named in honor of Anna Julia Cooper (more on her later). One of the few interior circles in DC. [Show photo of fireman at the circle \(N\)](#)

1901 & 1903 T Street – Gen. William Birney and Arthur Birney

1903 T - William Birney (1819-1907). Civil war general. Son of southern abolitionists. In the Battles of Bull Run (I &II), Chantilly, Fredericksburg, Chancellorsville, Olustee (Flor.), Chaffin's Farm, and the Petersburg Siege. Witnessed Lee surrender at Appomattox. In charge of enlisting black soldiers. Set up a law practice in DC afterward.

1901 T - Arthur Birney (1852-1916), son of William Birney, U.S. Attorney for the District of Columbia during the McKinley Administration.

Style: Second Empire (mansard roof). [Show image F](#)

1844 3rd Street (Elk's Lodge/UPO) – Estate of David McClelland, which was designed by James McGill, the architect of the original houses. McClelland engraved the Boschke map, which the U.S. Army confiscated at the start of the Civil War. Estate later sold to Improved Benevolent and Protective Order of Elks of the World, largest black fraternal organization in the country, created in 1898. The Elks bought the McClelland house ([point to photo attached to the building](#)). They sold most of the land to Safeway and built this lodge on the edge of their previous lot. The Safeway was badly damaged in the riots in April 1968. It became UPO, a large charity about 15 years ago.

201 T Street – Anna Julia Cooper (1858-1964). Born into slavery in North Carolina. Earned a bachelor's degree at Oberlin in 1884, same year as Mary Church Terrell. Also a teacher and principal at the M Street High School. Wrote [A Voice from the South](#) in 1892, considered one of the first books on black feminism. Earned a PhD from the Sorbonne in 1925, becoming the fourth AA woman with a PhD in the U.S. Her thesis was *The Attitude of France on the Question of Slavery between 1789 and*

1848. Ran Frelinghuysen University in her house from 1927 to the 1950s. Frelinghuysen Univ. was a night school for AAs who wanted a classical liberal arts education. Quoted in the U.S. passport on pages 26-7: "The cause of freedom is not the cause of a race or a sect, a party or class—it is the cause of humankind, the very birthright of humanity." [Show passport](#). [Show image T](#).

1922 3rd Street – Example of original detached houses on large lots. Now home of Ari Shapiro, host of NPR's *All Things Considered*.

Style: Victorian Gothic (steep gable; multi-color slate pattern; bargeboard; pendant)

[Show image G](#)

1919 3rd Street (Slowe Hall) – Built during WWII to house AA women working in the war effort. Since housing was racially segregated and in high demand, AA women had few housing options. A neighbor recalls watching Eleanor Roosevelt visiting to talk with Mary McLeod Bethune (McLoud Buh-thoon). Lucy Diggs Slowe founded Alpha Kappa Alpha (1908), which was the first black sorority. She was appointed the Dean of Women at Howard University (1922). The DC Water tunnel boring machine was playfully named after her.

1938 3rd Street – Childhood home of Sen. Edward Brooke (1919-2015). First *popularly elected* AA Senator. Republican Senator from Massachusetts 1967-1979. Went to Dunbar (née M Street) High School. Authored the Brooke Amendment, which limited public assisted housing rent to 25% of the tenant's income. Strong supporter of civil rights legislation. Awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 2004 and a Congressional Gold Medal in 2009.

Mention **116 Bryant Street** – Hurd v. Hodge (1948), a companion case to Shelley v. Kraemer, the Supreme Court cases invalidating racially restrictive covenants nationwide.

[Walk to the carriage house on U Street and show image H](#)

319 U Street (site) – Home of Christian Fleetwood (1840-1914) – Civil War hero and one of the first AA awarded the Medal of Honor.

338 U Street – Octavius Williams bought in 1892 or 1893 and is thought to be the first AA homeowner in the neighborhood (somewhat disputed).

[Stop the group at the corner of 4th and U Streets](#)

1934 4th Street – Paul Laurence Dunbar (1872-1906), a notable poet, novelist, and playwright rented this house owned by Mary Church Terrell's father. He later moved to 321 U Street (demolished) with his wife Alice. He was from Dayton, Ohio, but moved to DC in 1897 to work for the Library of Congress and lived here for 13 years, although he despised Washington's black society as bourgeois. He had works published in "Harper's Weekly" and the "Saturday Evening Post". He wrote the lyrics for the musical *In Dahomey* (1903), the first all-AA musical on Broadway. Dunbar High School is named for him. He wrote the poem *Lover's Lane* about U Street.

[Show engravings of McGill houses I, J, K](#). Most are duplex houses, each is unique, most are Italian Villa style.

419 U Street – Home of Rep. Oscar De Priest (1871-1951). First AA Congressman since Reconstruction. Republican representing Illinois-1, which covered the Loop and South Side of Chicago. Served 1929-1935. [Show images L and M](#)

[Walk up 5th Street to the grass alley between Elm Street and Oakdale Place](#)

[Show photo of Griffith Stadium P, Q, R](#)

Griffith Stadium – Originally built in 1891 as Boundary Field (a.k.a. National Park) for the Washington Senators, sometimes called the Nationals (1891-1899 in the National League). In 1901 the American League brought a new team called the Senators to the park. In 1905, the team changed its name to the Nationals. The original wood stadium burned in 1911 and was rebuilt in concrete and steel. The Nats played here until 1960, when the team moved to Minneapolis.

The Homestead Grays played here during the 1940s. The Washington NFL team played here from 1937 to 1960. In 1961, the team moved to DC Stadium, later renamed RFK Stadium.

In 1953 Mickey Mantle hit what is thought to be one of the longest home runs in baseball. The ball sailed over 5th Street and landed in the backyard of a house on 434 Oakdale Place, 535-542 ft.

512 U Street - Willis Richardson (1889-1977), accomplished AA playwright. Wrote “The Chip Woman’s Fortune” (1923) the first serious drama by an AA playwright performed on Broadway.

500 block of U Street – historic infill built in the past 15 years by Howard Univ. (architect Suman Sorg, a U Street-based architect)

Queen Anne (frame) - **1925-1917 6th Street** – “Highly modeled” façade: scalloped shingles in the gables, clapboard on the main body, panels below the first-floor windows.

Chateausque – **1900-1906 6th Street** – 16th century French design, steep-sided roofs with gables and “half-timbering”, oriel window.

At the arch mention this:

- **518 Florida Ave** – Ethical Pharmacy (1928-1960s). A longtime pharmacy part of the “ethical pharmacy movement”
- **500 block of Florida Ave** – housed the offices of many black physicians.