

A recent addition to Washington's Shaw neighborhood is a 20-foot statue of jazz legend Duke Ellington.



Since 1881, the O Street Market has been a bustling retail hub for the Shaw neighborhood.



COURTESY CITY MARKET AT O STREET

Black America's Capital Neighborhood

NATALIE HOPKINSON

If a single building could ever tell a story of the black urban experience in the United States, it is the Howard Theatre in Washington.

In 1910, it became the first performance space built for African Americans in the United States. It hosted famous black musicians such as Ella Fitzgerald, Louis Armstrong, Billie Holiday, Nat King Cole, Marvin Gaye, Aretha Franklin, Dizzy Gillespie, Otis Redding and Lena Horne.

Earlier, after slavery was abolished in 1865, many blacks left the Southern farms on which they had been forced to work and settled in cities like Washington. Although no longer slaves, black people were segregated from white people across the United States by Jim Crow laws — named for a stereotyped minstrel-show character offensive to blacks.

All-black neighborhoods sprang up. “We had the same things that everyone else had,” said Dianne Dale, a native Washingtonian, historian and author, recalling Washington’s Jim Crow era. “It was just smaller.”

One such neighborhood was Washington’s Shaw, named for Robert Gould Shaw, the commander of a famous all-black Civil War infantry unit. It was in Shaw that the Howard Theatre was erected.

Until the 1960s, the strip that begins at the Howard Theatre and extends down U Street was known as the “Black Broadway.” Although born of racism, the community aspired to be as great as the famous Broadway in New York.

By the 1950s and 1960s, the civil rights movement demanded a society in which black people were free to live, learn and work wherever they pleased. Jim Crow laws were overturned by the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. But when Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated in 1968, many black communities exploded with anger. Protesters burned down segregated neighborhoods in Washington and other cities, such as Newark, New Jersey, and Detroit. The federal government sent troops into neighborhoods like Shaw to put out the fires and restore order.

The riots caused many black families to leave Shaw and move into white communities that had been closed to them previously. Their old neighborhood suffered from poverty and crime. By the late 1970s, Shaw had become a difficult place to live, with crumbling schools and violence that was related to the illegal drug trade. Burnt buildings had been left abandoned. Go-go bands, which played a signature style of Washington music, performed some of the last concerts at the crumbling and rat-infested Howard Theatre before it was shuttered in the early 1980s.

Countless buildings lay in ruins until the late 1990s, when real-estate investors began flooding Shaw and other formerly mostly black neighborhoods in Washington. Public-housing buildings were torn down and replaced. Young professionals both black and white flocked to the area, restoring some of its Victorian-era row houses. Restaurants opened. Schools were repaired. Crime rates dropped.



COURTESY HOWARD THEATRE

1980: The Howard Theatre is abandoned. By 2002 it is named one of Washington’s most endangered historic places.



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2012: Following a \$29 million renovation, the Howard Theatre reopens.

More than a century after it was built, the Howard Theatre was reborn with a \$29 million renovation in 2010.

Until the restoration, the Beaux Arts–style theater had been abandoned for 30 years. “Decrepit and sad, the theater was just another example of American ruins,” said artist Sean Hennessey, who bought a house blocks from the theater in 2003 and was later commissioned to sculpt the trumpet for the “Jazzman” figure that now crowns its edifice.

Today, the streets of the Shaw neighborhood reflect its origins in the Jim Crow era as well as its transformation over the last century.

Up the street from the Howard Theatre stands Howard University, established in 1867 to educate freed slaves. It enrolls more than 10,000 students and competes for black students with other top universities. The Howard University Hospital to the north “up Georgia Avenue” was originally built as Freedmen’s Hospital during the Civil War and still trains black doctors and dentists.

Famous neighborhood clubs, such as Bohemian Caverns and Republic Gardens, where jazz greats from Duke Ellington to Miles Davis once played, have been open again intermittently in recent years.

Shaw’s Anthony Bowen YMCA, established as a health club for blacks in 1853, reopened as a state-of-the-art, 4,100-square-meter facility in 2013.

Washington is more affluent today. As more young professionals head into the city, its identity is again changing. Many black native Washingtonians have mixed feelings about recent changes. “It’s like someone walked in your living room, came inside, and rearranged all the furniture,” said Dale, the Washington historian, about the changing neighborhood.

Many families who owned and rented houses through the years of instability following the riots find it unfair that today’s rising prices mean they can no longer afford to stay. They embrace the rebirth of institutions like the Howard Theatre, but fear they will not be able to enjoy the performances there.

“I still walk by the theater weekly and am always overwhelmed with pride and a sense of place, both geographically and as a marking in the historical continuum,” said the sculptor Hennessey. “The future is certainly one of continued renewal. Hopefully, it is a future that will include everyone.”

Natalie Hopkinson, Ph.D., is the author of Go-Go Live: The Musical Life and Death of a Chocolate City and lives in Washington. ■

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