A Self-Reliant People

GREATER DEANWOOD HERITAGE TRAIL

Long a country town at the edge of Washington, DC’s urban center, Greater Deanwood rose from former slave plantations. It became one of Washington’s earliest predominantly African American communities. Follow this trail to meet the individuals who forged this oasis of self-determination and discover the handcrafted dwellings, parkland, families, and institutions they created.
Welcome.

Visitors to Washington, DC flock to the National Mall, where grand monuments symbolize the nation's highest ideals. This self-guided walking tour is the ninth in a series that invites you to discover what lies beyond the monuments: Washington's historic neighborhoods.

Forged from former slave plantations, Greater Deanwood early became a predominantly African American community. Its location away from the city’s center prompted its country-town atmosphere and a do-it-yourself ethic. This keepsake guide summarizes the 15 signs of *A Self-Reliant People: Greater Deanwood Heritage Trail.*
As you walk this trail, please keep safety in mind, just as you would while visiting any unfamiliar place.
• A Self-Reliant People
Greater Deanwood Heritage Trail

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Residentsof GreaterDeanwood in far
Northeast Washington are proud of their history. It's an American story, forged by a white society that
didn't question its practices of racial
separation and by an African American society
that refused to accept the judgments of outsiders.

In the 1800s Washington's powerful white devel-
opers favored areas northwest of the Anacostia.
Land east of the river, relatively far from the White
House, held little interest. Smaller investors and
individuals found a foothold here, and while
Greater Deanwood remained semi-rural into the
1940s, it still offered modest opportunity. Racial
restrictions were not applied to its housing, and
African American families found the area welcom-
ing, affordable, and convenient. Left to their own
resources, residents often built their own homes
and created communities where self-reliance
became the byword.

The seeds of Greater Deanwood were sown a few
years after the Civil War, when the Southern
Maryland Railroad built a station near the site of
today's Minnesota Avenue Metro station. With
new transportation to jobs downtown and at the

National Training School Founder Nannie Helen Burroughs, left,
and the Ladies Auxiliary, around 1915.
Navy Yard across the Anacostia River, landowners saw an opportunity.

The Sheriff family had owned 330 acres east of the station since slaveholder Levi Sheriff purchased them from the Benning family in 1833. About two decades later, Sheriff's daughters Mary Cornelia Sheriff Dean, Emmeline Sheriff, and Margaret Sheriff Lowrie inherited the land. After the railroad arrived in 1871, the sisters—hoping to get rich—established subdivisions they called Whittingham, Lincoln Heights, and Burrville. But sales were slow. It would be nearly another 20 years before Levi Sheriff's grandson Julian Dean would build 20 houses in his new subdivision, Deanwood. (Julian had added an E to the family name. Although the E was later dropped, the Deanwood name stuck.)

Deanwood's development received a boost in 1890, when Benning Racetrack opened just west of the train station. Described as "the best equipped racetrack in Washington," Benning provided entertainment for Washingtonians of all walks of life, as well as employment for nearby residents.

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At first Greater Deanwood’s subdivisions sheltered a racially mixed, working-class population. By 1895 the community was majority African American. Here home-grown draftsmen and carpenters designed and built small, wood-frame houses on lots with plenty of space for chickens, a garden, or even a horse. At a time when banks were reluctant to lend to African Americans, Deanwood builders kept costs low with simple designs, minimal windows, and bartered labor.

From the beginning the community paid great heed to matters of the soul and mind. The roots of Contee AME Zion Church were planted here in 1885, and many other congregations followed. By 1910 two important educational institutions were in place. First came the pioneering National Training School for Women and Girls, founded by Nannie Helen Burroughs. An outspoken activist.

Architect Lewis Giles, Sr., and craftsman Randolph Dodd designed and built the first two houses from the right (5007 and 5011 Lee St.), photographed in 1950.

Just inside the front gate of Suburban Gardens around 1935.
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A commercial corridor developed, too. Here, by the 1950s, away from the overt bigotry that kept many African Americans from patronizing downtown department stores, Deanwood shoppers found nearly everything. Often the small groceries, pharmacies, print shops, dry cleaners, bakeries, clothing stores, barber shops, and beauty salons
Deanwood students raise funds to fight polio, around 1943.

The Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. addresses a home rule rally in Deanwood, 1965.

were owned and operated by their neighbors. There was even a movie theater, several blocks east on Nannie Helen Burroughs Avenue.

Deanwood's tradition of self-reliance continues to be passed from generation to generation. In 2001 neighborhood children spearheaded a campaign to restore Watts Branch Park, the community’s beloved but sometimes neglected centerpiece. Today Marvin Gaye Park, as it was renamed in 2006, sparkles with new life, a testament to the neighborhood’s spirit and will to endure.

These children were part of a group that petitioned the City Council to clean up Watts Branch in 2001.
Across the street is Watts Branch, an actively used creek that has tied together many communities. Unfortunately, humans have not always been respectful of this resource.

In 1938, the U.S. government brought flood control measures to Watts Branch’s 1.6-mile-long park. In the decades thereafter, children played in the creek, and churches baptized parishioners in its waters. Yet residents and outsiders also dumped trash here.

A massive clean-up began in 1965 under Lady Bird Johnson’s Committee for a More Beautiful Capital, but another 30 years of neglect followed, when polluters, drug dealers, and addicts overwhelmed the park. Then in 2001, area children collected 1,500 signatures to petition the City Council to restore the park. Consequently, residents, the nonprofit Washington Parks & People, the District’s Department of Parks and Recreation, and thousands of volunteers joined in a multi-million dollar effort that continues to spark new life and new enterprise.

To your right is the Riverside Center, which opened in the former Barnett’s Crystal Room in 2004. Armstead Barnett had owned and operated this restaurant after working for 15 years in the Roosevelt, Truman, and Eisenhower White Houses. There he rose from pantry man to butler, and eventually to messenger, while building a catering business that employed and trained many Deanwood residents.

 Legendary R&B artist Marvin Gaye (1939-1984) spent part of his youth in this area, often singing a cappella with friends in the park. On April 2, 2006, the city officially rededicated Watts Branch Park as Marvin Gaye Park.
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A Day At the Picture Show

DIVISION & NANNIE HELEN BURROUGHS

Civic leader H.D. Woodson receives a testimonial, 1956.
Collection of Jon Woodson

The two-story Art Deco style building to your left was once the Strand Theater. Abe Lichtman, a Jewish businessman whose theaters catered to black patrons, opened the 600-seat Strand in 1928. Lichtman also operated the Lincoln and Howard theaters in Northwest DC.

Initially adults paid 15 cents and children paid 10 for first-run movies on Saturday afternoons. The Strand building also housed a pool room, dance hall, pharmacy, and doctor’s office.

From 1972 until 2008, the original H.D. Woodson Senior High School stood about a block to your right. Far Northeast’s only high school was an innovative, nine-story academic/vocational school intended to inspire its community. Instead, over time diminishing city funding, lack of maintenance, and design flaws led to its deterioration and, in 2008, its demolition.

The school’s name, though, reflected its community’s aspirations. Howard Dilworth Woodson (1876–1962), a Deanwood leader and one of a handful of black licensed architectural engineers in the District, designed government buildings throughout the United States as well as hundreds of private structures in DC. Locally he designed Union Station’s roof, the Metropolitan Baptist and Vermont Avenue Baptist churches, and houses along 49th Place in Deanwood. Woodson led residents in successful battles for public schools and parks, water and sewer systems, street paving and lighting. And he helped form key civic groups, including the Northeast Boundary Civic Association, the Far Northeast Council, and the Far Northeast Business and Professional Association.
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DIVISION & NANNIE HELEN BURROUGHS AVENUES NE

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Students learn printing.

Nannie Helen Burroughs School

Atop this hill are the sprawling grounds on which Nannie Helen Burroughs (1879–1961) founded the National Training School for Women and Girls in 1909. Burroughs advocated for women's rights, civil rights, and religious activism. Determined to teach her students to become independent women, she stressed the three Bs—Bible, Bath, and Broom—with lessons in Godliness, physical cleanliness, and housekeeping. But she didn't limit her charges' horizons: they also learned dressmaking, printing, and entrepreneurship.

The school grew quickly. In fact its presence helped Lincoln Heights and Greater Deanwood develop from sparsely settled hamlets to desirable residential communities. But when Burroughs had first proposed opening a vocational boarding school, few believed that such an institution was possible or practical in Washington. Even her friend Booker T. Washington (1856–1915), the foremost champion of black vocational education, advised Burroughs that such schools were more appropriate in southern locations. Washington said that DC's black population "could never be made to favor anything but styles and politics."

The school trained thousands from the United States, Africa, and the Caribbean until 1964. That year its trustees abandoned the vocational curriculum and created the Nannie Helen Burroughs School, offering nursery through sixth grade. The Progressive National Baptist Convention, owner of the school, has its headquarters on the grounds.

Across 50th Street is Washington & Sons Funeral Home, in business here since the 1920s. At one time this family-run neighborhood institution operated two additional funeral homes in Northwest DC.
The School Of the Three Bs

50TH STREET & NANNIE HELEN BURROUGHS AVENUE NE

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Descendants of Levi Sheriff gather at the homestead on the Jay St. ridge, 1917.

Collection of Charles Kern

In 1833 Levi Sheriff purchased several hundred acres along Watts Branch from William Benning’s nephew. With the labor of some 19 enslaved people, Sheriff raised livestock and tobacco. His three daughters—Mary Cornelia, Emmeline, and Margaret—inherited the family farm in 1853. Sheriff’s house, which stood near today’s 5000 block of Jay Street, passed to Mary Cornelia, who married John Dean. The last Sheriff descendant to live there was the Reverend Dr. Randolph W. Lowrie, Margaret’s son, who died in 1913. A surviving family home at 4421 Jay Street later became a church.

In 1871 the Southern Maryland Railroad built a station near the old Bladensburg-Piscataway Road (Minnesota Avenue) bordering the Sheriff farm. Hoping to improve their fortunes, the Sheriff sisters carved their farmland into lots for sale in three subdivisions: Whittingham, Lincoln Heights, and Burrville. They were disappointed with sales, but eventually a mix of black and white skilled laborers and craftsmen built houses there.

After 1895 what was now called Deanwood had a majority black population. Residents took the train to work, often at the Navy Yard weapons factories.

On August 4, 1965, the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., addressed a rally on the open land across from this sign. Sargent Memorial Presbyterian Church hosted him in Deanwood. The following day, Dr. King met with President Lyndon B. Johnson and received assurances that Johnson supported home rule for DC.
DEANWOOD ONCE WAS FARMLAND belonging to slave-holding families. Some of their names—Sheriff, Lowrie, and Benning—still mark local roads.

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“Look at the camera, son!”
An off-season view of Suburban Gardens Amusement Park, ca. 1930.
Collection of Richard A. Cook
A Whirl
On the Ferris Wheel

THE COMPLEX OF BUILDINGS on Hayes Street is the former Merritt Educational Center, which operated from 1943 to 2008. However if you were standing here in the 1920s and 1930s, in its place you would have seen exuberant crowds of fashionably dressed African Americans enjoying Suburban Gardens Amusement Park.

The seven-acre park was built in 1921 by architectural engineer Howard D. Woodson, writer John H. Paynter, theater magnate Sherman H. Dudley, and other investors of the black-owned Universal Development and Loan Company. It was the first and only amusement park within the District boundaries, providing a recreational haven for people who, due to racial segregation, were barred from white-owned amusement parks such as Maryland’s Glen Echo.

Visitors arrived by streetcar, commuter train, private automobile, and on foot. The park was so popular that on one Monday in 1921, jostling crowds waiting to pay the 10-cent admission fee knocked down the gate. Park-goers enjoyed the Deep Dipper roller coaster, Ferris wheel, aero-swing, swimming pool, games of chance, picnic grounds, and children’s playground. The park’s large dance pavilion presented both lesser-known musicians and well-known jazz artists such as Cab Calloway and Duke Ellington. After nearly two decades of operation, the park closed its gates for good in 1940.

The U.S. government built temporary barracks for soldiers here in 1943. Soon after, the building served as Emma F.G. Merritt Elementary School, honoring the educator, civic leader, and former president of the local NAACP chapter. The current school building went up in 1976.
Largely ignored by city officials and isolated from downtown DC, Deanwood remained semi-rural until around World War II (1941–1945). Lifelong residents who grew up in the 1930s and ’40s remember outsiders telling them that they lived in “the country.” And in many ways they did, with gardens and laying hens in the yards of their handcrafted homes. Some residents rode horseback (often on animals purchased from Benning Racetrack) alongside the cars on Deanwood’s dirt roads. At least one resident continued boarding horses that competed at Laurel, Bowie, and Pimlico racetracks into the 1970s.

While most found peaceful Deanwood endearing, they also yearned for modern plumbing and electricity. In the 1940s and ’50s, the Northeast Boundary Civic Association and others finally persuaded city officials to provide paving and street lighting, and to support building projects. The National Capital Housing Authority tore down old houses to build apartment complexes. Suburban Gardens Apartments was one of those modernizing efforts. Begun in 1941, this 203-unit project to your right on the Jay Street ridge was designed by Harvey Warwick, an architect responsible for dozens of garden apartment complexes in the DC Metropolitan Area. The 13 two-story buildings with landscaped courtyards opened during a severe citywide housing shortage that began when thousands came to help end the Great Depression and prepare for what became World War II. The development attracted middle-class, African American families. Former DC Mayor Sharon Pratt Dixon’s parents, Mildred and Carlisle Pratt, were among them.
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The Greater Deanwood Heritage Trail, A Self-Reliant People, is composed of 15 illustrated historical markers, each capped with an H. You can begin your journey at any point along the route. However, we recommend that you take Metrobus U8 (toward Capitol Heights) to the stop at Nannie Helen Burroughs Avenue and Division Avenue, then turn right on Division Avenue, and walk one block to Sign 1. The trail ends at the Minnesota Avenue Metrorail station. The walk should take about 90 minutes.
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Lewis Giles, Sr., 1917. He interrupted his education to serve in World War I. Collection of Lewis W. Giles, Jr.
MORE THAN THREE-QUARTERS of Deanwood’s buildings are wood-frame, single-family dwellings built between 1895 and 1946. African American draftsmen without academic training designed most of them, in styles ranging from “Folk” and Craftsman to Colonial Revival. But in 1924 the DC government decreed that designers needed professional training to operate as “architects.” This policy forced many traditional draftsmen from their work.

The professionally trained Lewis Wentworth Giles, Sr. (1894–1974), however, thrived. He designed hundreds of houses, apartments, and churches here and across the city. Along the block to your right on 49th Street, Giles designed numbers 1017, 1021, 1023, 1025, 1027, 1031, 1035, and 1045. As was often the case, Deanwood builder Randolph Dodd constructed Giles’s designs.

Giles graduated from Armstrong Technical High School and then studied architecture at the University of Illinois on the eve of World War I (1914–1918). He was drafted, however, before he could graduate. After serving honorably in France with the U.S. Army’s all-black 92nd Buffalo Soldier Division, Giles returned to Washington. In 1921 he opened an architectural practice on U Street, NW. In 1929 he moved his office to the home he designed and built at 4428 Hunt Place.

Giles and his wife Gladys raised two sons on Hunt Place. Lewis, Jr., recalled a happy childhood here, sailing home-made boats on Watts Branch and roaming freely. He also became an architect and designed the Deanwood Professional Building, where he, his father, and brother, physician Julian Giles, all kept offices.
Edward L. Wright in his electronics workshop on 47th Pl., early 1960s.

Collection of Jeanette K. Wright
Up the hill on 48th Street are several of Deanwood’s signature handcrafted houses. Beginning in the late 1800s, Deanwood attracted skilled black migrants, who freely passed on their know-how.

In the 1920s Jacob and Randolph Dodd built about 50 structures in Deanwood, including numbers 906, 910, 920, 925, 926, 928, and 929 48th Street. They often built to designs of Lewis W. Giles, Sr. To save money, the Dodds installed windows only in the front and back of the houses. Owners sometimes cut side windows later.

Louis Jasper Logan worked as a brick mason and general contractor in DC, building homes for his family at 4905 Meade Street and 1000 48th Place. According to the family, Logan arrived from North Carolina in the 1920s with training from North Carolina A&T, “a peanut crop, and $100 in his pocket.” Logan parlayed these into success, “led a humble life, yet died a millionaire” known for his generosity.

Edward L. Wright of 47th Place, another self-sufficient craftsman, built Deanwood's first television set, and trained others to make TVs and broadcast and citizen band radios. Andrew Turner's mechanical aptitude led him to become a Tuskegee Airman during World War II. Neighbors still remember the day he made a detour to fly over the neighborhood.

The walk along Sheriff Road to Sign 9 passes unevenly placed houses. Road grading that took place years after the houses were built left some far below or above street level.
Earl E. King, Sr., stands in front of his 24-hour self-service ice machine, 1950.

Collection of Elaine King Bowman
SHELTERED FROM THE OVERT BIGOTRY many African Americans experienced when venturing downtown, Deanwood shoppers of the 1950s found nearly everything along Sheriff Road, in pharmacies, print shops, dry cleaners, bakeries, clothing stores, barber shops, and beauty salons often owned by their neighbors.

Among the businessmen was Earl E. King, Sr., who started selling ice and coal from his home in 1925. King and his family also delivered ice for home iceboxes. In the late 1950s, he installed the only 24-hour, self-service ice machine in Northeast DC. It is still visible behind 4501 Sheriff Road. He also offered limousine service.

Al and Ida Mendelson were among the Jewish proprietors who ran businesses here. In the 1940s they lived above their Certified Food Market at 4401 Sheriff, where cash-strapped customers could simply sign "the book" and settle accounts later. Their son Murry developed "big burger" patties and sandwich steaks for sale to restaurants. The Mendelsons sold the grocery in 1948 to focus on Murry’s Steaks, offering wholesale frozen meat products. In its third generation, the business continues as Murry’s Family of Fine Foods, retailing in the mid-Atlantic region.

Another multi-generation business began when Henry Parker opened Suburban Market and a filling station at 49th Place and Grant Street in 1944. Some 20 years later the market moved to 4600 Sheriff Road. After Parker’s death, his son Irving ran the market, while son Reginald opened a barber shop across the street. The Parkers supported neighborhood activities, including the Roper Recreation Center’s baseball team.
The First Baptist Church of Deanwood is but one of Deanwood's many houses of worship. All testify to the central role religion plays in the life of this community.

First Baptist emerged from humble beginnings. In January 1901 a small group of believers gathered at blacksmith Jesse Bumbry's home, 45th Street, to organize the Deanwood Mission, a Sunday school. Within a year the congregation grew so large that its members formed the First Baptist Church of Deanwood. They erected a building at Whittingham Place (now 45th Street) in 1908. Then, under the leadership of Reverend George W. Brent, they broke ground for a second building, Brent Memorial Chapel, in 1929. Over the following nine years, members relied on the labor of their own hands to erect the chapel and financed the entire project without borrowing a penny. A third building, now the main sanctuary, was constructed in 1961.

As a center of religious worship and fellowship, First Baptist, like other neighborhood churches in the era of segregation, regularly hosted concerts, field days, and sporting events. The church's bus trips to Carr's and Sparrows beaches in Maryland were especially popular.

Deanwood's array of historic churches includes Antioch Baptist, Beulah Baptist, Church of the Incarnation, Contee AME Zion, Mount Olive Baptist, Randall Memorial United Methodist, Sargent Memorial Presbyterian, Tabernacle Baptist, and Zion Baptist. New Bible Baptist Church, to your left at the end of 45th Street, incorporates a house that once belonged to the Sheriff-Dean family.

First Baptist Church's junior nurses, photographed around 1955.
Collection of Elaine King Bowman
This Far by Faith

45TH STREET & SHERIFF ROAD NE

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As a center of religious worship and fellowship, First Baptist, like other neighborhood churches in the era of segregation, regularly hosted concerts, field days, and sporting events. The church’s bus trips to Carr’s and Sparrows beaches in Maryland were especially popular.

Deanwood’s array of historic churches includes Antioch Baptist, Beulah Baptist, Church of the Incarnation, Contee AME Zion, Mount Olive Baptist, Randall Memorial United Methodist, Sargent Memorial Presbyterian, Tabernacle Baptist, and Zion Baptist. New Bible Baptist Church, to your left at the end of 45th Street, incorporates a house that once belonged to the Sheriff-Dean family.
In 1907, when Greater Deanwood's African American children needed a school close to home, city officials built an elementary school on 45th Street. Snowden Ashford (1866–1927), the District's inspector of buildings, designed the original four-room schoolhouse in the Renaissance style. Distinguished educator Francis L. Cardozo, Jr., served as principal and oversaw the addition of four rooms, two annexes, a gym, and kindergarten. Deanwood Elementary also attracted children from nearby Maryland suburbs. With some teachers living nearby, all students received lessons well beyond the traditional reading, writing, and arithmetic. They developed a pride in their country, community, and race. During World War II (1941–1945) students purchased war bonds and a Jeep to support the troops. Deanwood Elementary was renamed George Washington Carver to honor the black botanist and educator (1864-1943) shortly after his death. In 1968, during the disturbances that followed the assassination of the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Carver parents safely smuggled white teachers to homes across town in the trunks of their cars.

The larger Deanwood community also shaped the young. James "Sleepy" Harrison, who played basketball for the local recreation center team, later coached and mentored other athletes. Dave Bing played for Harrison, and went on to star at Spingarn High School and play for the Detroit Pistons, Washington Bullets, and Boston Celtics. Several years after a 1961 fire, Carver School's oldest section was razed and replaced. The school closed in 1988, reopening 11 years later as the idea Public Charter School.

Thelma Baltimore's class creates a model of the National Mall, 1939.

Summer School Museum and Archives
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Saturday at the Deanwood Chess House: 12 boards await players.

Collection of Eugene Brown
Designed to Compete

43RD STREET & SHERIFF ROAD NE

This quaint frame building has served several church congregations since its construction in 1908. The first, Zion Baptist Church, stayed for more than 60 years. Since 1993 members of Joshua’s Temple First Born Church have worshiped within its walls.

One of the city’s first academically trained black architects, William Sidney Pittman (1875–1958) designed this understated structure. Pittman trained at Tuskegee Institute, where he won the support of founder Booker T. Washington and later taught. In 1905 Pittman established a private architectural practice in DC. A year later, Pittman won the design competition for the "Negro Building" at the Jamestown Ter-Centennial Exposition. In 1907 he married Washington’s daughter Portia, and the couple moved to a house Pittman designed in nearby Fairmount Heights, Maryland, an all-black community he helped to plan. Among Pittman’s DC commissions were Garfield Elementary School and the 12th Street Colored Young Men’s Christian Association (now the Thurgood Marshall Center for Service and Heritage).

Pittman also designed the building to the right of the church, home of the Deanwood Chess House, a branch of the Big Chair Chess Club since 1991. The club uses chess to teach children and adults that their decisions in life, as on the game board, have consequences. Mentors demonstrate how the concentration and self-discipline required by chess are important life skills. “Always think before you move” is the club’s motto. Chess instructors occasionally take the giant chess set above the entrance to schools for teamwork exercises.
Lady Bird Johnson rededicates Watts Branch Park, May 18, 1966.

Photo by Robert Knudsen, LBJ Library
ON MAY 18, 1966, CROWDS GATHERED here to witness Lady Bird Johnson (1912–2007) rededicate eight acres of Watts Branch Park. "No one more than the residents of this area knows what magic has been wrought here at Watts Branch," observed the First Lady. Hundreds of volunteers had cleared tons of garbage, replacing it with flower beds, trees, and well-manicured grass. But Lady Bird Johnson's Capital Beautification initiative didn't stop with surface beauty. She raised America's awareness of the threats from pollution, urban decay, and lack of recreational opportunities.

Despite the attention to Watts Branch, city officials ignored the blight of Kenilworth Dump, formerly located across the railroad tracks to your right. When they selected the dump's location in 1942, officials simply saw it as remote from downtown, ignoring its proximity to River Terrace, Deanwood, and surrounding communities. For decades, smoke from burning garbage and toxic run-off polluted the air, land, and waters of Watts Branch and the Anacostia.

Still people found ways to benefit from the dump. Some adults tracked the arrival of department store trucks filled with useable goods and recycled them. Longtime resident Thomas Childs recalled childhood adventures in the dump. "We would take our wagons and...go shopping" for parts to make go-carts. Despite continuous complaints, Kenilworth Dump was not closed until 1968, after seven-year-old Kelvin Mock died tragically in a pile of burning trash. Although illegal dumping continued into the 1990s, the reclaimed grounds now offer public recreation.
Jockeys press their horses across the finish line at Benning, 1913.

Library of Congress

If you had stood here 100 years ago, you might have heard the cheering crowds and thundering hoofbeats of Benning Racetrack just across the railroad tracks.

Beginning in 1890, Benning was the best-equipped race course in Washington. Some of the nation's leading thoroughbreds had their first runs at Benning before delighted crowds including presidents and plumbers alike. "Nowhere may such a cosmopolitan crowd be seen as at Benning," declared the Evening Star.

In 1908 reform laws ended legal gambling at Benning. Nevertheless, and despite the loss of the elegant grandstand to fire in 1915, horse training and automobile races continued into the early 1930s. Although Congress debated bills to revive betting, religious reformers and animal rights activists defeated them, and the race track closed for good.

In 1942 Howard University Architecture Professor Albert I. Cassell (1895–1969) purchased the old racing grounds to build Mayfair Mansions, the Colonial style garden apartment complex he designed. Elder Lightfoot Solomon Michaux, famed Washington evangelist and host of the CBS radio show "Happy Am I," became a major investor.

Mayfair Mansions' 500 first-rate, affordable units for working- and middle-class black families opened in 1946, at a time when housing covenants severely limited options for African Americans. Elder Michaux commented, "Some people talk about going to Heaven and living well. I believe in people living well down here."

Mayfair Mansions was listed on the DC Inventory of Historic Sites and the National Register of Historic Places in 1989.
From Gambling to Garden Apartments

HAYES STREET & MINNESOTA AVENUE NE

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Formerly known as the Bladensburg-Piscataway Road, Minnesota Avenue has long served as an eastern gateway into Washington. Since the original wooden Benning Road Bridge was erected nearby in 1800, countless people have crossed the Anacostia River here. During the Civil War (1861–1865), Fort Mahan, named for U.S. Military Academy Professor Dennis Mahan, defended this entry point against Confederate attack. From checkpoints at the foot of the bridge Union soldiers searched the wagons of everyone entering the city.

By the early 1970s, brightly painted shops and markets operated here. Yet the nearby junkyard, numerous boarded-up buildings, vacant lots, and electric power plant smokestacks gave the area a bleak feeling. Many local merchants and residents, unable to attract support of area banks, believed that city officials would never show interest in this long-neglected section.

Things changed when the Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority began construction on Metro's Orange Line, linking Vienna, Virginia, with New Carrollton, Maryland, through here. Deanwood stood to benefit from a new, quicker trip downtown. When the Minnesota Avenue Metrorail station, and the nearby Deanwood station, opened in November 1978, residents saw the dawning of a new day. "We're not forgotten any longer," one told a newspaper reporter. "We've got Metro."

The Metro station was once the site of Benning Elementary School, established in 1883 for the area's white children under the city's segregated public school system. The school closed in 1952.
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the process of creating a Neighborhood Heritage Trail begins with the community, extends through story-sharing and oral history gathering, and ends in formal scholarly research. For more on this neighborhood, please consult the Kiplinger Library/The Historical Society of Washington, D.C., and the Washingtoniana Division, DC Public Library. In addition, see the following selected works:

- DC Historic Preservation Office, Building Permits Database, 2008, Washingtoniana Division, DC Public Library.

Hiram Haywood, Sr., tends his fruit trees in the rear garden of 4838 Sheriff Rd., 1947. Collection of Geraldine Carroll
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Acknowledgments

Cultural Tourism DC (CTdc) is a nonprofit coalition of more than 200 arts, heritage, cultural, and community organizations throughout the nation’s capital. We help visitors and Metro area residents experience Washington’s authentic arts and heritage, while promoting local culture as a tool for economic development.

Create your own urban adventure using neighborhood guides, self-guided trails, and histories at www.CulturalTourismDC.org. While you’re there, sign up for the Events Update, a free e-calendar delivered every Wednesday to your inbox.

The Deanwood Heritage Trail Working Group is an ad-hoc, diverse coalition of neighborhood residents, business owners, activists, scholars, and others organized to develop the Greater Deanwood Heritage Trail in cooperation with Cultural Tourism DC.
A Whirl on the Ferris Wheel is the former Merritt Educational Center, which operated from 1920 to 1929. However, if you were standing here in the 1930s and 1940s, in its place you would have seen exuberant crowds of fashionably dressed African Americans enjoying Suburban Gardens Amusement Park.

The park was built in 1924 by architectural engineer Howard D. Woodson, writer John H. Paynter, theater magnate Sherman H. Dudley, and other investors of the black-owned Universal Development and Loan Company. It was the first and only amusement park within the District boundaries. Suburban Gardens park provided seven acres of recreational haven for the region’s African Americans who, due to racial segregation, were barred from white-owned amusement parks such as Maryland’s Glen Echo.

The public flocked to Suburban Gardens by streetcar, commuter train, private automobile, and even on foot. The park was so popular that on one Monday in 1925, jostling crowds waiting to pay the 3-cent admission fee actually knocked down the gate. Park-goers enjoyed the Deep Dipper roller coaster, Ferris wheel, aero-swing, swimming pool, games of chance, picnic grounds, and children’s playground.

The park’s large dance pavilion presented both lesser-known musicians and well-known jazz artists such as Cab Calloway and Duke Ellington. Entertaining African Americans for nearly two decades, the park closed its gates for good in 1944.

The U.S. government built temporary barracks for soldiers here in 1942. Soon after, the building served as Emma F.G. Merritt Elementary School, honoring the educator, civic leader, and former president of the local NAACP chapter. The current school building went up in 1960.

On this self-guided walking tour of Greater Deanwood, historical markers lead you to:

- A park honoring DC’s legendary R&B artist Marvin Gaye
- The hilltop where activist Nannie Helen Burroughs founded a landmark vocational school for young women
- The site of DC’s only amusement park
- Time-tested, handcrafted homes
- The spot where the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., rallied for DC home rule
- The storefront where Murry’s Family of Fine Foods got its start
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