

# Washington, D.C.: It's Our Home



## Welcome

*by Anthony Gittens*

I am the son of West Indian parents who immigrated to the United States in 1917. They left Barbados to move to Brooklyn, New York. Later I left Brooklyn to move to Washington, D.C., for, ironically, the same reason they left Barbados — to search for a better life. Just as they found what they were looking for in Brooklyn (they never once returned to Barbados), I have found what I was looking for in Washington. What is it about Washington that makes it my home?

If I had only five minutes to illustrate Washington to someone, I would take them to the corner of 29th and O Streets in Georgetown on a Sunday











Left: Shoppers survey the rich autumn harvest at Eastern Market in Southeast D.C.

Photo by Harold Dorwin

Previous page: The spirit of celebration is alive and well at the Hispanic Heritage Festival parade in Northwest D.C.

Photo by Jonathan French

afternoon just as the African-American congregation of Mt. Zion United Methodist Church was coming out from service. I would ask my friend to observe the down-home feeling of people hugging each other in their Sunday best, as around them yuppie Georgetowners walk their dogs while reading the *Washington Post* or hop into their Mercedes on their way to Sunday brunch. These represent two of the worlds of Washington.

While these worlds may seem divergent, they actually conspire to make Washington one of the most fascinating cities in the United States. The legacy of free Blacks who settled in Washington even before the Civil War has resulted in a competent, well-educated, self-assured Black community. The waves of immigrants who followed have contributed to creating a city of incredible social complexity, one of the most international in the world. It is a city where an Ethiopian cab driver is probably better educated than most of his passengers, and where the fine dishes in better restaurants are prepared by Salvadoran chefs; where the ATM machines give you a choice of Spanish or English,

and where the call to prayer can be heard from the Islamic Center as you drive up Massachusetts Avenue on Friday afternoon. The history of Washington is paradoxical and unique. Most of our citizens do not hail from "Old Europe," and they have not worked in factories. Monuments form our skyline, and the city boasts few CEOs. Non-native Washingtonians have come here to hold power, plead a cause, or become part of public life. African-American expressive traditions lie at the city's cultural heart, but new immigrants from places in turmoil have enriched the 21st-century mix.

People who call Washington home live in 127 named neighborhoods. The Potomac and Anacostia rivers embrace the District, a circle of green forms its hilly perimeter, Anacostia Park stretches for five miles through the Northeast and Southeast portions of the city, and Rock Creek Park stretches through Northwest. These landscape features shape many Washington neighborhoods.

Washington is a city of wonderful human scale,



where one never feels subservient to his or her physical environment. Because of architectural restrictions, there are no skyscrapers blocking the sky, no towering structures whose sheer size dominates the spirit of the people within them. The rivers, the abundance of trees and parks, the logical streetscape of the L'Enfant plan all make Washington a city for people. The result is a citizenry who feel empowered by as opposed to dominated by their environment.

This environment of human scale allows people to maintain contact with their traditions without being absorbed into a homogeneous whole. At times, one can be thrust into small foreign villages — dancing in the streets during the Caribbean Carnival, attending an Ethiopian wedding ceremony where they kiss twice on the cheek, or observing people leaving service at the Greek Orthodox cathedral, where they kiss three times.

The geographical location of Washington results in something for everybody. Washington is close enough to the South so that its hospitality and culinary traditions are quickly appreciated. Washingtonians easily travel along the Boston-D.C. corridor for business and to check out New York styles. The city is located close to farmlands, the traditions of which still live in the back-grounds of those who migrated to Washington. There are thriving home gardens, community gardens, and farmers' markets.

While much of Washington is about political power, much of it is also about doing good. Unlike many parts of the United States, the federal government and its bureaucrats do not intimidate Washingtonians, because those bureaucrats are our neighbors. People are proud of being public servants who work hard to solve huge social problems. This has resulted in a can-do culture as opposed to one of constant complaint.

Yet Washingtonians must often draw on huge reservoirs of courage and resilience, as it sometimes seems as though we live in a city designed to ignore us. The center of town is the U.S. Capitol, not city hall. We do not have home rule

or congressional representation, and all local government activities are closely scrutinized by out-of-town members of Congress. The transportation system is designed to move workers between the suburbs and their downtown offices, and tourists around the National Mall. Our only major newspaper concentrates on national — not local — issues, and when visitors consider Washington culture, they draw upon images of the Smithsonian Institution, the White House, and the Kennedy Center, as though those who live here have little to offer.

This is why the Folklife Festival's focus on Washington, D.C., is a unique opportunity to showcase, appreciate, and celebrate what is uniquely Washington, beyond the monuments. It will present a look into those who built and maintain the nation's capital while living a full and rich life. So we welcome you to Washington, D.C. We open our doors and welcome you into our home.

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