



Washington History in the Classroom

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“Washington History magazine is an essential teaching tool,” says Bill Stevens, a D.C. public charter school teacher. “In the 19 years I’ve been teaching D.C. history to high school students, my scholars have used *Washington History* to investigate their neighborhoods, compete in National History Day, and write plays based on historical characters. They’ve grappled with concepts such as compensated emancipation, the 1919 riots, school integration, and the evolution of the built environment of Washington, D.C. **I could not teach courses on Washington, D.C. history without *Washington History*.**”

Washington History is the only scholarly journal devoted exclusively to the history of our nation’s capital. It succeeds the *Records of the Columbia Historical Society*, first published in 1897. *Washington History* is filled with scholarly articles, reviews, and a rich array of images and is written and edited by distinguished historians and journalists. **Washington History** authors explore D.C. from the earliest days of the city to 20 years ago, covering neighborhoods, heroes and she-roes, businesses, health, arts and culture, architecture, immigration, city planning, and compelling issues that unite us and divide us.

The full runs of *Washington History* (1989-present) and its predecessor publication the *Records of the Columbia Historical Society* (1897-1988) are available through JSTOR, an online archive to which many institutions subscribe. It’s easy to [set up a personal JSTOR account](#), which allows for free online reading of six articles per month in any of their journals, or join the Historical Society at the [Membership Plus](#) level for unlimited free access to our publications.



Bill Stevens engages with his SEED Public Charter School students in the Historical Society’s Kiplinger Research Library, 2016.



Uniformed servicemen wait to board the trolley at the corner of 13th and D sts., N.E., in the summer of 1949. Amateur photographer John P. Wymer devoted four years of weekends to roaming the city with his camera, capturing a series of portraits of a Washington undergoing dramatic physical and social changes. His survey is the basis for The Historical Society's current exhibit, "Black and White and Red, White, and Blue." All photographs are from HSW unless otherwise noted.

Washington in Mid-Century

Wymer's Photo Survey, 1948-1952

by Sarah S. Amsler

Every city and town, even the Petrograd of Peter the Great or the most "management dominated" company coal town, belongs in the final analysis to the people who live and work there. . . . For in a democracy no man remains long dominant, and many men and ideas shape its policies. This was nowhere more evident than in Washington, which was the sounding board for the conflicting opinions and an arena for the contending ideas and philosophies which sought to gain the favor of the American people.

—John P. Wymer, 1952¹

With this perspective in mind, amateur photographer and Washington, D.C., resident John Philip Wymer set out in 1948 to "convey some impression of how Washington looked to its inhabitants around 1950." While many photographers aimed to record post-World War II activities in the city, Wymer had a different vision. Far more interested in subtle changes to Washington's landscape and culture than in spectacular occurrences, he made "no attempt . . . to record the great events of

these years, whether they be of national or local interest," according to notes that accompanied the photographs he donated to The Historical Society in 1977. Instead, he focused on catching a "fleeting glimpse" of the city in the wake of demobilization from World War II: a city in the midst of a population explosion and city planning campaign, and on the eve of urban redevelopment and school desegregation. His remarkable collection of 3,972 black and white photographs reveals the socially complex nature of the city not through human subjects, but through a record of Washington's architectural and historical landscape, which served as the setting for human activity.²

Throughout the four years that Wymer wandered the city streets armed with his Pentax camera and tripod, the city was plagued with growing pains. "There were many residents," he wrote, "not yet past middle age, who in a generation had seen the city change from a leisurely town of less than 400,000, essentially Southern in its traditions and customs, to a bustling metropolis of nearly a million within the city and 250,000 more in a ring of closely built suburbs." After the war, Washingto-

Notes begin on page 92.



Born in Utah in 1904, John Wymer grew up in California, where this portrait of the young statistician was made circa 1916. Courtesy, Deanna Harrison.

nians wrestled with crises of housing shortages, school crowding, unemployment, and inadequate transportation. These concerns, which had been at the forefront of New Deal city planning, were compounded during the post-war period by heightened attention to racial desegregation as many white and African-American Washingtonians demanded the same social justice at home for which they had fought overseas.³

Many of the postwar changes in housing, education, and transportation altered the city's physical landscape. The establishment of the Redevelopment Land Agency in 1946 and the passage of the

This Sunday morning view of Fourth and O sts., S.W., captures the canopy of trees and modest housing that characterized most of this working-class neighborhood in 1951 just before "redevelopers" razed the area.

National Housing Act in 1949 had set in motion an urban redevelopment process under which many neighborhoods and businesses, particularly in Southwest, were to be razed to make room for new roads and housing. Wymer often captured—just ahead of the wrecking ball—the actual complexity of many supposedly blighted neighborhoods slated for redevelopment. He also recorded the early stages of suburbanization on the city's periphery during a period when many communities were changing in racial and class composition, with upper- and middle-class whites moving to new suburbs and many African-Americans moving to formerly all-white neighborhoods. His pictures document the streetcar tracks that were soon removed to facilitate new bus routes. They capture the wartime temporary government buildings still dotting the downtown landscape, reminders of the recent past and symbols of an unpredictable future.⁴

In addition to providing extensive architectural evidence, the albums in which Wymer arranged his survey contain his observations of who, where, and what Washington was in 1950. For some Washingtonians, the post-war years were a time of growth and upward mobility. For others they were a period of anxiety and displacement, and for most a time of great social adjustment. By reflecting these changes, Wymer's photographs provide food for thought about the city's current conditions. Indeed, while many of the homes, businesses, churches, parks, and commercial buildings he photographed changed or were demolished in the years following his project, others survive intact. Thanks to Wymer, those who lived through



the 1940s and 1950s can visually walk down their memory lanes, while those born decades later have a rare opportunity to see how Washington once looked. His pictures, true to his intention, provide both “reminders of the earlier character of the city—tree-lined streets, numerous parks, a large colored population”—and evidence of fundamental change.⁵

John Wymer was no stranger to the city’s “earlier character” or the changes brought by the New Deal, World War II, and post-war activity. Born in Nephi, Utah, in 1904, Wymer was raised in California and graduated from the University of California at Berkeley with a master’s degree in math and statistics. In 1935 he moved to Northwest Washington to work for the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. As chief of the Benchmark Section, Division of Employment, he researched the status of hours and earnings throughout the nation, and published works on the history of industrial employment.⁶

Wymer’s chosen profession reflected the methodical nature of his personality, according to his cousin Deanna Harrison. She, along with others who knew him, remembered his intelligence, sensitivity, and most of all, kindness. While Wymer chose never to have children due to a life-long, undiagnosed palsy-like condition, he reveled in the company of young people. Later in life, with his flowing white hair and beard, he enjoyed being mistaken for Santa Claus. Co-worker and close friend Joseph James remembered that Wymer was “as unique as a person could be” and considered him a mentor who taught him much in addition to statistics. James, an African American who worked with Wymer from the time the former was 19 years old in 1947 until Wymer’s retirement in 1967, credited Wymer with being “ahead of his time” where race was concerned. “Color meant nothing” to Wymer, said James. Wymer “was interested in the total person,” echoed Harrison.⁷

A frequent world traveler, Wymer

claimed he had “never seen a city more beautiful” than Washington. Over time he explored as much of Washington as possible. To document this city, the self-taught photographer spent nearly every weekend for four years walking and riding buses through every section of town, photographing houses, schools, streets, monuments, and parks. He told very few people about his weekend activities, but those who knew were aware that the project gave him “hours of pleasure.” It was so important to him, in fact, that whenever he traveled, he entrusted his albums to James for safekeeping.

Wymer retired from the Bureau of Labor Statistics in 1967 and remained active in the Washington community. His friend and fellow Cleveland Park Book Club member Sherwood Smith remembered that he participated in local politics until his death in 1995. An avid reader and critic, Wymer surrounded himself with an extensive library of science, history, philosophy, and literature. He was an enthusiastic and discerning theater-goer who sometimes subscribed to as many as six venues a season. Though he joined late in life, Wymer was very active in the Church of Latter Day Saints.

After his photo survey was completed in 1952, Wymer explored Washington as it continued to change, testing each new development in public transportation, trying new restaurants, and staying abreast of the changing landscape. He enjoyed walking so much, in fact, that he insisted on strolling home from a neighborhood restaurant the night he died of a heart



Wymer poses by his car, circa 1948. At this time he had lived in Washington for 13 years, and preferred exploring it on foot. Courtesy, DH.

attack in 1995. “It’s only a few blocks,” he told his cousin Kelly Wing, who had offered to drive. To the end, he never passed up an opportunity to walk the streets of Washington.⁸

While John Wymer did not attempt to “get pictures in the human interest or special event categories on any systematic basis,” he was interested in creating more than just a catalogue of urban architecture. Wymer’s Washington is the people’s Washington; a visual documentary of the city beyond the monuments. In his 24 photograph albums are the homes, offices, stores, and churches of the “200,000 government workers—minor officials, administrators, clerks, professionals, laborers, and mechanics—the thousands of members of the armed ser-

vices below the rank of major general or rear admiral, the tens of thousands who purveyed the goods and services for the city, and the wives and children of all these people." His unposed pictures often reveal the essence of daily life, such as riders waiting at a Capital Transit bus stop and worshippers gathered on the streets after Sunday church. This is the landscape to which people went home once the V-J Day parades, theater performances, hot summer swims, desegregation meetings, and long workdays were over.⁹

What distinguishes Wymer's collection is his statistically oriented approach. Before embarking on his weekend walks, he divided the city into 57, 6,000-square-foot areas and randomly photographed one sample block from every 50 that represented the area's residential character. In addition to the structures and spaces in the sample blocks, he took pictures of "every object of interest." Each of the nearly 4,000 images is labeled with a number corresponding to its negative and a typewritten street address or explanation.

Wymer also created hand-drawn maps and typewritten descriptions of each of his 57 areas—no small feat for a man whose "tremors" often made it challenging even to sign a check. These descriptions cover the condition of houses, race and economic classes of the residents, public and private facilities, federal activities, recent changes, and predictions for changes to come. His concern for making a detached and objective record is shown in his frank and candid descriptions, and while he did not attempt independent verification of his observations, his record nonetheless is useful and even anticipates many of today's political and historical concerns.

While Wymer does not list the ideas he believed were being "contested" in Washington at the time of his survey, his descriptions offer insight into Washington's mid-century vocabulary. In his area summaries, he refers to the "suburbs,

slums, suburban slums, and thinly settled" residential areas. He observes that "down-at-the-heels" people often lived among the upper- and middle-classes. He notes the religious influences, quality of educational institutions, and lack of indoor plumbing, electricity, and public transportation. He observes areas of "urban blight," post-war development and modernization, "redevelopment," and changing demographics. He orients himself in the city not by interstate exits and Metro stops, which had yet to be developed, but by streets and traditional neighborhood names.

Wymer's notes do not explain why he believed it would "be of interest to those who examine these books to know where and in what manner of houses the two races lived in mid-century Washington," but his interest reflected both his political liberalism and awareness of the struggle for civil rights. In noting the racial makeup of each neighborhood, his descriptions, again, reflect his era. For example, he describes the changing racial composition of Brookland, commenting that "since most of the new owners are fairly prosperous, this change in racial composition of the population has not led to the deterioration of the neighborhood. It is, in fact, regarded by members of both races as one of the better Negro neighborhoods in the city."¹⁰

Since Wymer donated his survey in 1977, it has been used constantly by scholars and researchers. His hope that his images would be of great interest to future historians has been realized, for what he called his "labor of love" records an important period in local and national history.¹¹

Sarah S. Amsler, an M.A. candidate in sociology at George Mason University, recently served as assistant curator for the exhibit, "Black and White and Red, White and Blue," at The Historical Society of Washington, D.C. The Wymer Photograph Collection is unrestricted and available for public use in the Society's Research Library.

The city Wymer surveyed still had many rural and semi-rural pockets. This view of 51st St., S.E. (right), could just as easily have been rural West Virginia. The view looking east on Pennsylvania Ave., S.E., at the Sousa Bridge, shows a modest commercial strip and a heavily wooded vista.





Wymer's Washington comprised fine, early twentieth-century middle-class rowhouses, such as these (below) on Tilden St., N.W., as well as these squat alley dwellings behind Lucretia Mott School at 2201 4th St., N.W., where poor whites and African Americans often made do without electricity or plumbing.





The end of World War II meant a slow alleviation of the housing shortage. These temporary buildings (above) had been constructed as wartime housing for African Americans at H and 21st sts., N.E. New construction of brick duplexes is moving quickly on Texas Ave., S.E.





Washington's merchants still operate out of street-front buildings, but the trend toward accommodating the customer in her car, begun before the war, is picking up steam. This block of 12th St., N.E., at Monroe St. (above) in Brookland, is part of the old school, while the shiny new Park and Shop center at Brentwood Gardens epitomizes the new approach. 

