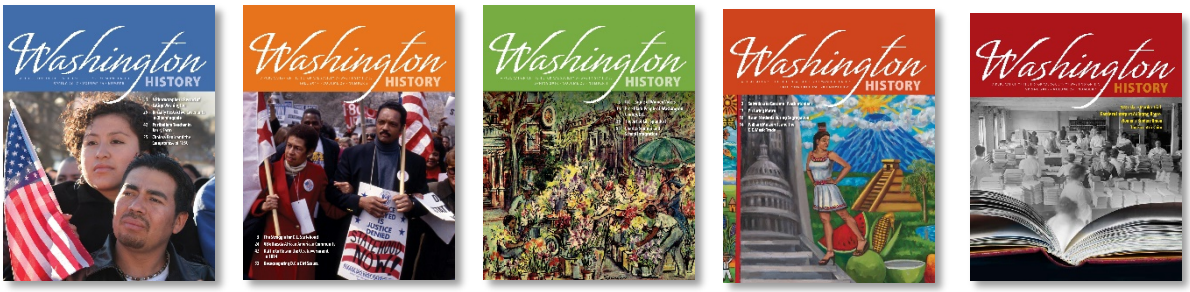
Washington History in the Classroom

 It has been chosen to complement the DC Public Schools curriculum during this time of sheltering at home in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.



"***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*.**"

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

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.

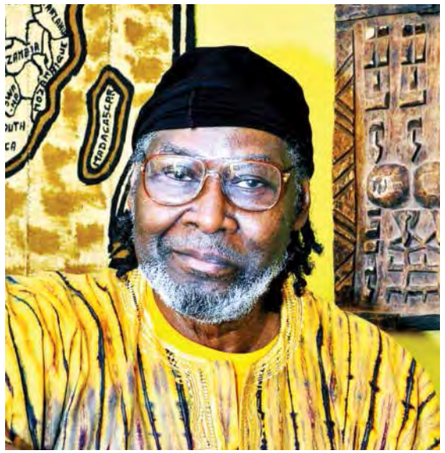
Primary Voices

Picturing Metro

A Look Back at the Photographs of Phil Portlock

BY JOHN DEFERRARI

Constructing the first legs of the vast Metrorail system was a Herculean task that took decades to complete. Begun with a groundbreaking ceremony in December 1969, the enormous project reached a peak of activity in the mid-1970s—the first stops on the Red Line opened in March 1976—and continued tearing up city streets and shaking up buildings well into the 1980s and beyond. The Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority (WMATA), Metro's parent, wanted to document its efforts, and its needs meshed with the aspirations of an up-and-coming, self-taught photographer named Phil Portlock, who found his dream job in 1975 as one of Metro's two staff photographers. Portlock would spend the next quarter century taking photographs for Metro. "I got paid to do something that I love doing," Portlock says. "I was truly blessed."



Portrait of the photographer by Pat Sloan.

A native Washingtonian with a deep attachment to his hometown, Portlock was born at the old Garfield Hospital just north of Florida Avenue NW in 1941, the second of four children. "At an early age, I can remember being curious about the world around me," Portlock recalls. "On trips to the National Zoo, I would return home and immediately try to draw pictures of the animals I had just seen." His first exposure to professional photography was on a trip to the Scurlock Studio on U Street NW for family photos when he was about five years old. At the time, he had no idea of how

An eerie glow fills the just-completed Navy Yard station tunnel in 1990. A water line runs along the right side and the emergency walkway is at left. Photographer Phil Portlock, who spent 28 years documenting the construction of the Metrorail system and WMATA activities, was there. This album of his work looks back at the challenges and the joys of using film and various lighting in often difficult conditions to photograph the birth of Metro. *All photographs, unless otherwise noted, are by Phil Portlock and appear courtesy, Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority.*

important the Scurlock Studio was for African American portrait photography, nor did he realize the central role photography would play in his own life.

When he graduated from Dunbar High School in 1959, Portlock's parents gave him a Voitlander 35mm range-finder camera as a graduation gift. It was his first camera, and Portlock was soon taking lots of pictures. He left Washington to attend Iowa State University but returned in 1965 to work as an administrative assistant at the National Education Association on 16th Street NW. It was at the NEA that Portlock got his first exposure to professional photography when, after lunching with the association's photographers one day, they hired him as an evening darkroom assistant. It was tiring work. From 8:30 a.m. to 5 p.m. he carried out his regular duties as an administrative assistant, then stayed on from 6 p.m. until midnight in the photo division's darkroom developing photos and making prints. He did not mind the long hours, he says; he enjoyed working in the darkroom and learned a lot about photographic processing.

He also took it upon himself to learn as much as he could from the great visual masters, spending hours in local museums and art galleries viewing and studying the composition and lighting of great painters. He scanned magazines, newspapers, and books to study the works of prominent photographers, including Gordon Parks, Dorothea Lange, Maurice Sorrell, and Moneta Sleet, Jr. The NEA soon started giving Portlock local photo assignments, including shooting the opening day of the braille "Touch and See" nature trail at the National Arboretum in 1968, an event that gave him the chance to try his hand at nature photography. He would return to the Arboretum time and again to photograph flowers, streams, fall foliage, winter snow, spring azaleas, fish, birds, and squirrels.

"Hundreds of people had seen the burning and the looting [that followed Dr. King's assassination on April 4, 1968], but I wanted to show something that still had some humanity. I was on Seventh Street at Georgia Avenue, an area that was hit pretty hard, and I saw a couple of nuns standing there. And there was a black man and his child. I was struck that here we had these people mingling together. To me, personally, this said there was still hope."

Earlier that same year—on Thursday, April 4, 1968—the tragic news of the assassination of the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., shocked the nation and the African American community in particular. "I couldn't believe it had happened," Portlock says. "I had just seen him less than a week before" at an event at the National Cathedral, where Dr. King spoke movingly about his plans for the upcoming Poor People's Campaign. Portlock had not tried to take pictures at the cathedral, but he knew he needed to photograph the disturbances that were raging across the city on the night of April 4 as African American residents "lashed out." Though his parents refused to allow him to leave the house for two days, for fear he might be injured or arrested, he finally hit the streets on Saturday, April 6. "In a state of sadness and shock," as he puts it, he photographed what he saw and talked to people he met along the way. "It was important to me to be there," he explains. "I knew my camera could be used to document and record history."

The events of April 1968 marked a turning point for Portlock, who went on to attend many civil rights protests, both as a photographer and a participant. When the Poor People's Campaign came to Washington that May and set up camps in West Potomac Park, Portlock and co-workers at the NEA established a "freedom school" in the NEA auditorium for approximately 50 children. While their parents lobbied Congress for poverty relief, the children attended school at the NEA and received free lunches. The program continued for nearly six weeks, until federal and local law enforcement officers forced the protesters to abandon their encampment.

After leaving the NEA late in 1968, Portlock spent the next couple of years freelancing as he mastered new aspects of his chosen vocation. In addition to his share of weddings and receptions, he took on new, unusual challenges. The Capital Ballet Company, the nation's first predominantly African American professional ballet troupe, hired him as their photographer. The job "really taught me about how to do lighting," Portlock says. Using a standard flashbulb of the day was out of the question because it would be too distracting to the dancers, so "I had to learn how to take advantage of the available light and capture the dancers at the exact moment when the grace of their movements was most dramatic." He came away with skills that would prove invaluable when he later moved on to photographing subway construction, but he also gained an unexpected appreciation for ballet. "Those dancers were some of the finest athletes," he marvels.

Other freelance work included theatrical productions at Howard University and the Catholic University of America, a few basketball games for the *Washington Star,* and a multimedia presentation for the 3M Company titled "The Many Moods of Health." In 1971 Portlock was hired by the administrative services branch of the Federal National Mortgage Association, where he served part-time as a photographer for several years.

In February 1975 he came across a want ad for an audio-visual information specialist at WMATA. The ad said nothing about photography, but Portlock decided to apply for it anyway. Metro Director of Community Services Cody Pfanstiehl called Portlock in for an interview and asked that he bring a portfolio of his photographs. Portlock brought his pictures of construction work at the National Cathedral. It turned out that Metro only had one photographer to document the construction of the Metro system. With construction ramping up, Pfanstiel needed another photographer and offered Portlock the job. He jumped at the opportunity.

"During one of the protests against the Vietnam War, I was down on Independence Avenue. Some of us had just been chased by the police with tear gas. I got away from the crowd and paused, the gas in my eyes and nose, and I looked up and saw these faces in the façade of a building. I thought, 'This is different. They're protesting but they're not protesting.'" [Note: pictured is the Lyndon B. Johnson Department of Education Building at 4th St. and Maryland Ave. SW. The honeycomb concrete grilles in the photo have since been removed from the building.]

It turned out to be the perfect job. All of his previous self-taught experience, notes Portlock, seemed to have been leading him up to this. On his first day in March 1975—just one year before the initial Red Line segment would open—Metro photographer Paul Myatt showed Portlock around their photography lab. "I had never seen so much equipment—cameras, lenses, light meters, tripods—it was amazing." After meeting Jackson Graham, the no-nonsense retired general who headed Metro, Portlock was issued a hard hat and given his marching orders: photograph construction progress throughout the system, and make sure he always noted the site name, number, location, and date.

Gathering two cameras, two lenses, filters, flash, and tripod, Portlock walked over to the nearby Judiciary Square station, descended to the Red Line tunnel, and begin walking through the concrete-lined passage toward the Dupont Circle station, which was then nearing completion. As he reached Gallery Place at about Seventh and G Streets NW, he encountered a large gray rat, one of thousands that had been dislodged from their previously quiet subterranean existence by Metro construction. He attempted to scare the creature away by flailing his tripod, but the rat just stood on its hind legs and glared at him. "I thought about running away, but I realized that I was carrying too much equipment," Portlock recalls. "So I stood still and made a loud noise, which finally caused the rat to retreat." After he finally reached the Dupont Circle station, Portlock set up his tripod, attached the camera, and took the first of what would be hundreds of construction photos of the Metrorail system.

The work could be very physically demanding, involving strenuous climbing around muddy, noisy construction sites; descending into gloomy, cavernous tunnels; hanging out of helicopters to get dramatic aerial shots; and leaning over gaping holes to capture the view into the dark, rocky abyss below. Avoiding injury from the heavy machinery in use—including the enormous "Mole" that chewed its way through the solid bedrock beneath Connecticut and Wisconsin Avenues—was another part of both the thrill and the challenge. On one occasion, engineers suddenly appeared to rescue Portlock from a portion of a tunnel that was about to fill with thick dust from a large drilling machine. He had been blissfully unaware of the imminent danger.

His supervisor, Paul Myatt, "an old Navy photographer" according to Portlock, proved to be an excellent mentor, teaching him how to use a light meter to get clear photos in Metro's dark tunnels. With only two photographers and literally miles of construction site, the two rarely worked together. Myatt always trusted Portlock to get his work done, and Portlock did not let him down. Even General Graham went out of his way to support and encourage him, asking him one day to present a construction progress report based on his photos at an upcoming Metro Board meeting. Taken aback, Portlock worried that he would flub the high-profile presentation, but Graham sat down with him until 7 p.m. the night before the meeting to allow him to rehearse. Portlock did fine and was invited back to subsequent meetings.

From 1975 until the early 1980s, Portlock's primary assignment was to shoot construction progress photos. After that his assignments grew more diverse, adding WMATA meetings and events and staff portraits. But he continued to photograph construction progress as well and was named chief photographer in 1989. He retired from Metro in 2003, just as digital photography was beginning to make inroads into the profession. That year Portlock was one of some 200 employees who all took an early retirement offer, which Metro offered to trim costs. Recalling the many seasoned engineers and rail experts who bowed out with him, Portlock wonders today whether Metro realized at the time how much of its brain trust it was losing.

"We did a lot of aerial photography. This was taken during our busy time, when we would go up with the planners to survey planned routes. This is one of our planners, Henry Cord (at center). He directed us to the areas to photograph. Paul Myatt is on the left, and I am on the right. We had just returned to Gaithersburg Air Park."

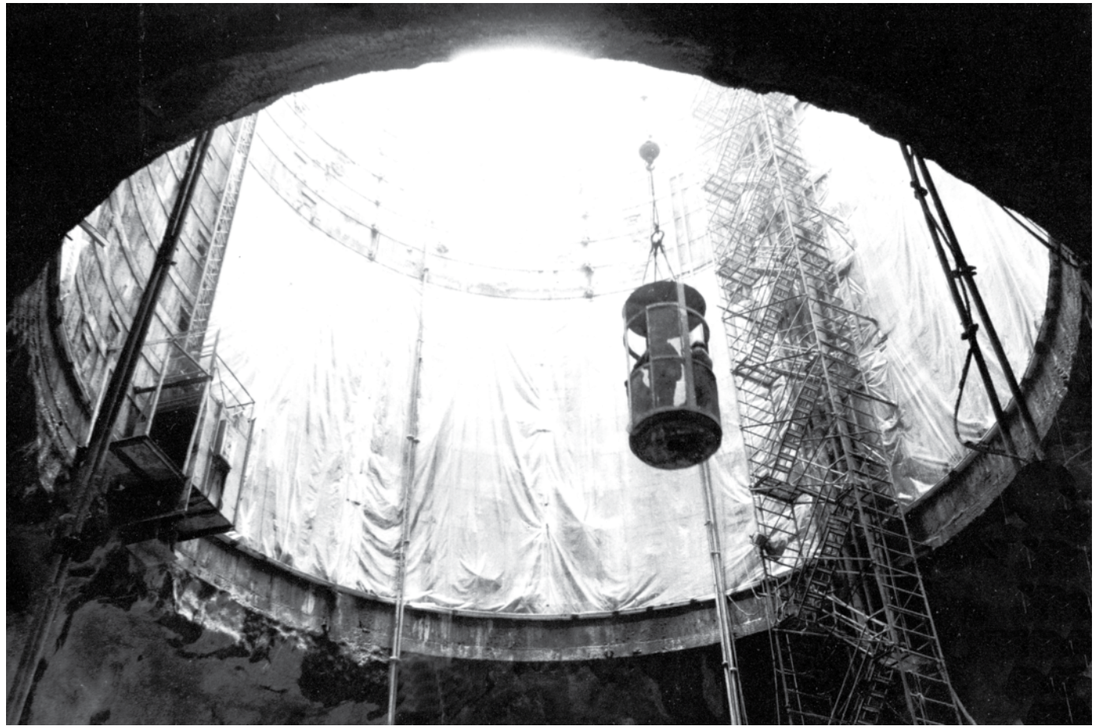
Portlock still works on film and photographic presentations, although now he focuses on social justice issues. After he and his wife Pat traveled to South Africa in 2004, Portlock created *From Despair to Hope: A History of South Africa,* a documentary film that has been shown at area churches and libraries. Since then he has produced a dozen additional documentaries, including such D.C.-themed works as *F Street: The Place on the Ridge* and *The Dunbar Legacy: Passing the Torch of Excellence,* a paean to his legendary alma mater. Having just turned 75, Portlock considers himself fortunate to have had the opportunity to develop and master his passion, the art of photography, and to have contributed to documenting the growth of Metro, an essential component of the rich history of the District of Columbia.

Editor's Note: Washington History *Review Editor John DeFerrari interviewed former WMATA photographer Phil Portlock about his path to a photography career and the adventures of photographing the initial development and construction of the Metro system. This essay is based on the interview and additional information provided by the photographer. The photo captions are Portlock's words, edited for length.*

"This aerial view shows 14th Street NW in the vicinity of the planned Columbia Heights Metro station. We did aerial surveys of proposed lines to see what land and buildings [would be affected]. We did this in the cold of the winter. The doors would have to be off, we would have to lean out, and the helicopter would bank to the side to give us a full view straight ahead. And we couldn't use gloves, because with them on you couldn't tell when you had tripped the shutter. Let me tell you it was hard, and it wore us out. When we finally landed I had no voice from yelling to the helicopter pilot over the noise of the engine. And we only had one strip of masking tape on our safety belt; I didn't want to be harnessed in, because with the full harness we couldn't lean out."

Above: "This is a construction vent shaft at the Friendship Heights station on Wisconsin Avenue. It allowed for ventilation of gases trapped below the surface and also was used to lower equipment down to the work area. There is a ladder on the side. Sometimes you would have to climb down almost 100 feet to reach the work area. I shot this from the edge of the shaft, poking my camera over the edge and just shooting down, opening up the camera's aperture to get as much light as possible from the darkness of the shaft."

"They called this machine 'the Mole.' It had diamond-tipped cutting blades, and it would cut right through solid rock, particularly under Connecticut Avenue and Wisconsin Avenue. At the other end of the Mole was a conveyor belt that would dump the crushed rock into 'mud' cars for transport out of the tunnels. It was like a mining operation."



Above: "Shafts like this one at Wheaton were designed to transport both people and equipment down to the tunnels. There's a big crane at the top with a cable to raise and lower the 'basket' that you see here, which could only hold one person at a time. If you wanted to walk down, you could take the stairs located in the scaffolding along the side—that was a rickety structure! It could be tricky at times."

"This shows wood lagging in a tunnel. After the Mole has gone through, you've got a whole lot of rock on the sides. Wood lagging is put in place to keep the rock from falling so that construction activity can take place safely. Eventually the lagging is removed and replaced with permanent concrete walls."

"This scene at 13th and U Streets in front of the Lincoln Theatre and Ben's Chili Bowl features a type of construction called 'cut and cover.' This technique was used to dig tunnels in places where it wasn't feasible to drill with the Mole because the earth was soft and the vibrations could damage nearby buildings. So they would cut the tunnel out from the surface and then cover it with wood lagging so that traffic could move overhead while work was going on underneath. Metro had a difficult relationship with the businesses there because the work really disrupted them. Many small businesses on U Street were severely impacted during construction."

Below: "One of the mud cars or 'tubs' used to remove debris is seen here at the Navy Yard station work site in 1987, when tunnel digging was underway. Once they were filled with tunnel debris, the tubs would be wheeled to a spot like this underneath a vent shaft. The cables would lift the tubs up out of the shaft and dump the debris into trucks waiting on the surface."

"Down in the tunnels was the coolest place in the summertime. I loved going down there on hot days! It was very messy though, and there was a lot of noise. This shows the Bethesda station after excavation is complete and just before they put in the shielding and covered the walls with concrete coffers. These are the bare rock walls before the coffers were poured in place."

Below: This is another example of cut-and-cover construction taking place at the Cleveland Park station on Connecticut Avenue. This is the entrance on the east side, where the escalator bank will be installed."

"This is another example of cut-and-cover tunnel construction, near the Courthouse station in Arlington, Virginia. You can see the metal supports that shored up the walls after the tunnel was dug out. You can see how close they came to the nearby homes, too. Cut-and-cover was the least disruptive technique—the least likely to cause damage to homes—and it was cheaper too. The result would be a box-shaped tunnel, as opposed to the round tunnels dug by the Mole."

"This is out East Capitol Street past Addison Road at Morgan Boulevard, and it shows the 'open cut' method of construction for sections of track that ran on the surface. The platform and everything is laid out in the open. You can see where some of the station pylons will be and the landscaping around the sides."

"This prefabricated steel tunnel segment is being loaded on a barge on the Susquehanna River at Port Deposit, Maryland, in March 1977. The segment will accommodate one set of tracks. Two laid side by side make the complete tunnel. This one was floated down the river to the Washington Channel and then lowered into place."

"Here you see work on the Yellow Line tunnel that crosses the Washington Channel. We're looking toward the city from East Potomac Park. Pre-fabricated steel tunnel segments have already been dropped in place in the channel, and you can see the entrance to the underwater tunnel segments being constructed."

"Concrete is poured into this metal form to create a massive pier in the water to support the Yellow Line bridge over the Potomac River. This particular pier was at the end of the bridge at East Potomac Park, where I was standing. The worker who looks like he's stepping off the side of the form is being held securely in place by a safety belt."

"We're looking east toward downtown Washington over the Yellow Line's Potomac bridge supporting piers. In order to get this shot, I climbed up a rickety wooden ladder onto the next pier, which you can't see, carrying some 20 pounds of equipment. It wasn't easy, but it was something I was determined to get."

Right: "This photo of the Dupont Circle station is one of the first I ever took at a construction site. I had just walked through the tunnel all the way from Judiciary Square. These are pre-cast concrete coffers that were brought in and put in place to form the station walls. That was the first time this technique had been used."

"This is an escalator shaft as seen from below at Bethesda station. That day I really liked the lighting. I was able to silhouette everything nicely. I don't know who the people standing there were, but they looked good in the shot. Maybe they were construction inspectors."

"These two welders are smoothing a weld on a section of track near the Cleveland Park station in April 1980."

"Tiling work is underway on the mezzanine floor at Ballston station in April 1979. Tiling is one of the finishing touches. Shots like these sometimes were difficult to make because you'd have different kinds of light: incandescent lighting as well as light coming from outdoors. We had to filter the lighting to try to get the most naturalistic shot. It was a challenge; there was no digital viewfinder on the camera to let you check how well you did. You never knew for sure until the film came back from processing."

"I've always loved this picture. This is L'Enfant Plaza, a transfer station with two levels. Light fills the upper level, and in the lower center of the photo is the escalator bank down to the lower level, giving you a sense that there's something below. The lighting here is all from work lights, and the effect is beautiful."

Below: "This is my co-worker, Larry Levine, at the Forest Glen station in November 1982. I saw Larry standing there with his tripod and pictured this great view with him silhouetted against the tunnel and the reflection in the water in front. We had to take pictures using tripods and long exposures because of the low light in the tunnels."

"Workers here are finishing up welding the bulkhead at the end of the Orange Line tunnel at Ballston, in April 1979. For some years Ballston was the temporary end of the Orange Line that was planned to extend all the way to Vienna. The bulkhead closed off the tunnel until work on the extension was started."

"Here's Opening Day of the first Red Line segment in March 1976. The opening ceremonies took place at the Rhode Island Avenue station. That was quite a day. It was like we were on a trip to the moon, that's how excited people were."