



## 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.*



*Walter Edward Washington (1915-2003) was the District of Columbia's first elected mayor (1975-1979) of the twentieth century and played an integral role in obtaining limited self-government for D.C. Courtesy, Prints and Photographs Department, Moorland-Spangarn Research Center, Howard University.*



## Walter Edward Washington (1915–2003): A Photo Tribute

*Donna M. Wells*

**W**alter Edward Washington holds a special place in recent D.C. history as the first elected mayor since Reconstruction. Since its founding, the District experienced a variety of governing bodies, the most enduring of which was an appointed board of commissioners that began in 1874 and ran the city for 93 years. In 1967, President Lyndon B. Johnson reorganized the city's government into a mayor-council format, with the mayor appointed by the president, following Senate confirmation. Walter Washington was the first appointee under President Johnson, a position he held for three terms. As the appointed mayor, Washington constantly lobbied for self-government. On December 24, 1973, President Richard M. Nixon signed leg-

islation that provided Washington, D.C., with a charter for self-government under an elected mayor and a 13-member council. District residents elected Washington in November 1974 and he was sworn in on January 2, 1975.

The great-grandson of a slave, Washington was born in Dawson, Georgia, on April 15, 1915, to Willie Mae and William L. Washington. His mother died when he was six and he moved with his father to Jamestown, New York, a small town with about 100 black residents, where his father was a factory worker. As a high school student, Washington excelled in sports and in music. His skills on the trumpet earned him the nickname Duke II, after noted Washingtonian, Duke Ellington. After completing his public school education in Jamestown, in 1934 he enrolled at Howard University in Washington, D.C., to study public administration and sociology.

Washington received his BA degree in 1938 and ten years later, his L.L.B., also from Howard. While a student, he showed leader-

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*Donna M. Wells is the Prints and Photographs Librarian at the Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University. Photos compiled by Donna M. Wells and Matthew Gilmore.*

ship skills and a growing interest in civil rights issues. As an undergraduate, he was a feature writer for the student newspaper and president of the Student Council during his senior year, the first student leader to be granted his own office. Also in his last year, he became president of the Collegiate Auxiliary chapter of the New Negro Alliance, a local civil rights organization that worked to obtain jobs for "Negro" workers. Washington organized and led a student delegation to participate in the organization's protest against People's Drug Store, now CVS, spending the entire summer of his third year demonstrating in front of their stores. While a student at Howard, he became interested in local politics. As early as the 1940s, he began working on the original Home Rule Committee.

While attending evening classes at Howard's law school in 1941, Washington married educator and social worker Bennetta Bullock who also received her BA (1937) and MA (1939) from Howard University. That same year he began working as a junior housing assistant for the city's Alley Dwelling Authority, renamed the National Capital Housing Authority (NCHA) in 1943. The Authority was designed to provide low-rent housing and to construct temporary housing for defense workers and military personnel during World War II. Washington held a number of administrative jobs while with NCHA, including housing manager from 1945 through 1950, as well as several executive positions until 1961, when President John F. Kennedy named him executive director. He was the first African American to hold that position.

Impressed by his success in developing the District's public housing program, in 1966 New York Mayor John V. Lindsey invited Washington to join his cabinet as chair of the New York Housing Authority. However, less than a year after taking the position, Washington returned to D.C. at President Johnson's invitation to assume his appointment as the first African-American mayor of a major American city.

Mayor Washington and his administration immediately encountered and began to address a long list of neglected urban problems including crime, deteriorating public buildings, unemployment, overcrowding, poverty, poorly equipped schools, and unresponsive local government agencies. First on the new mayor's agenda was to reestablish trust between the city's government and its citizens by appointing experts to study and address immediate needs. Washington recalled, "Almost immediately, I became known as 'the walking mayor,' because I'd get out and walk around the city. As I walked, I could feel the tension."<sup>1</sup>

Washington's leadership was tested by the 1968 street riots following the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., just five months after he took office. He has been celebrated for his decision to order National Guard troops not to shoot looters and rioters. Putting his appointment as mayor in jeopardy, he refused to employ federal marshals to quell the student uprising at Howard University as other colleges around the country did. After the riots, he envisioned D.C. as a phoenix, and his goal was to create a better way of life through reuniting, rebuilding, and revitalizing. To that end, Washington pursued a subway system, programs for city youths and senior citizens, construction of low- and middle-income housing, new schools, the construction of four branch libraries and a new retention center while mayor.

Washington's administration addressed the concerns of numerous institutions and communities. Demonstrating his strong negotiating skills, Mayor Washington supported and helped implement Congressman Charles Diggs's proposal to equalize financial support for the city's three public institutions of higher education by establishing the University of the District of Columbia in 1974. UDC remains the only public institution of higher education in the District of Columbia and the only urban land-grant institution in the nation. Washington also worked to integrate the city's police force, resulting in his

appointment of the first black police chief in Washington. In 1976, Walter Washington worked with the growing and increasingly active Latino community to create the city's first Office on Latino Affairs, appointing community activist Carlos Rosario as its director.

Washington also excelled at the extra responsibilities that being mayor of the nation's capital entailed. During his tenure, Washington hosted numerous ambassadors and visiting foreign dignitaries, an activity shared by all of his successors. For example, Mayor Washington presented Indira Ghandi, Prime Minister of India, with the key to the city in 1971 while visiting the White House. Mayor and Mrs. Washington also hosted foreign dignitaries in their home. Another shared federal-municipal responsibility Mayor Washington had was protecting the city. As mayor of the nation's capital, Washington oversaw the policing of the more than 2,000 protests that took place in the late 1960s at the height of antiwar activism against Vietnam.<sup>2</sup> The *Washington Post* reported that in 1969 alone, as many as 182 demonstrations occurred in the city. Of that total, 152 were related to national protests, requiring local police to become involved in federal problems.

Washington's many accomplishments as mayor earned him the reputation of being an innovative public administrator with the unique ability to handle a wide variety of complicated urban problems, a fact his alma mater recognized on many occasions. Howard honored Washington with the Alumni Award for distinguished achievement in the field of Public Service in 1962, and in 1974 Washington received the Distinguished Service Award from the Howard University Law Alumni Association. That same year, he was awarded an honorary Doctor of Laws degree, adding to a long list of honorary degrees from institutions around the country including Fisk University (1968), George Washington University (1970), and Princeton University (1970).

Following his failed November reelection bid against Marion Barry, on December 12, 1978, Club One Hundred of the Metropolitan A.M.E. Church honored Washington's ten years of service to the city. Washington stated:

Of all the legacies which I could leave the people of Washington which I love so much, I leave a Washington rooted in love, compassion, brotherhood, and understanding . . . The record of service and leadership that I leave with the people of this city when I depart from the office of mayor next Tuesday is one of accomplishment and of achievement. It is a record that has been made possible by the providence of God and by people of all races, colors, creeds, nationalities and economic stations who came together to work to create a community in which all can take pride. It is a record of which I am most proud.<sup>3</sup>

After retiring from public office, Washington practiced law for two years in the D.C. office of Burns, Jackson, Miller, Summit, a New York-based law firm. However, he remained active in city life and advocated for the District's growth and development. He was instrumental in getting the National Museum of African Art placed on the National Mall in the 1980s and, as co-chairman of the City Museum Leadership Committee, helped to spearhead its long-awaited opening in 2003. The Greater Washington Board of Trade named him Man of the Year in 1983, an honor they award to persons who have demonstrated a long-standing commitment to total development of the city.

Washington's first wife Bennetta died in 1991. The couple had one daughter, Dr. Bennetta Jules-Rosette, an anthropologist and author. He married Mary Burke in 1994. Walter E. Washington died at Howard University Hospital on October 27, 2003, at the age of 88. In addition to his wife and daughter, his

survivors include two stepchildren, Tracy Nicholas Bledsoe and Scott Nicholas, four grandchildren, and a great-granddaughter.

Remembered as a distinguished statesman, a gentleman, a talented leader, and a devoted citizen, Washington helped to smooth the city's transition from federal control to limited autonomy. Local newspaper publisher Calvin Rolark best summarized Walter Washington's personal philosophy simply as, "If I can help someone along the way, then my living will not be in vain."<sup>4</sup>

## Notes

1. *Legends in the Law: A Conversation with Walter Washington*, *Bar Report* (Dec./Jan. 1996), available at DC Bar website, [http://www.dcbar.org/for\\_lawyers/resources/legends\\_in\\_the\\_law/washington.cfm](http://www.dcbar.org/for_lawyers/resources/legends_in_the_law/washington.cfm), accessed Apr. 27, 2004.

2. *Ibid.*

3. Club One Hundred of the Metropolitan A.M.E. Church, Program, Dec. 12, 1978. Milton Williams Collection, Moorland Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.

4. *Ibid.*



*After 101 years of appointed government in the District, Walter E. Washington was sworn in as the city's first elected mayor since Reconstruction in January of 1975 by Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall as Mrs. Washington looked on. Washington's tenure as mayor actually started in 1967 when President Lyndon B. Johnson reorganized the city's government into a mayor-council format, with the mayor appointed by the president. As the appointed mayor, Washington constantly lobbied for self-government, which finally came in the form of the Home Rule Act of 1973. All images are courtesy, Washington Star, DCPL, unless otherwise noted.*



On November 7, 1967, appointed Mayor Walter Washington addressed the first meeting of the District City Council, also nominated by President Johnson. Visible councilmembers include, from left to right: Haywood, Nevius, Fautroy, Hechinger, Shackleton, Thompson, Turner, and Yeldell.



Once in office, Mayor Washington worked to address a variety of existing and new urban problems. In 1968, he met with concerned Brookland residents protesting the city's land acquisition for the I-66 Freeway.



*Five months after Washington took office, the city erupted into riots in April 1968 following the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. In a fog of tear gas, a concerned mayor Washington conversed with Deputy Chief Jerry Wilson at the police command post at 14th and Euclid streets, N.W. Washington's decision to prohibit the National Guard from shooting looters was controversial at the time but later praised.*



*Newly appointed Mayor Washington with Deputy Mayor Fletcher, 1968. Fletcher was deputy assistant secretary of the Department of Housing and Urban Development when nominated by President Johnson to serve as the mayor's assistant.*



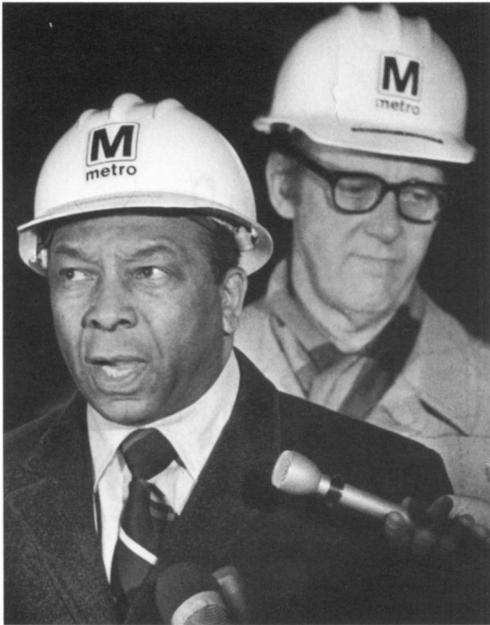
*Gilbert Hahn, of the Hahn shoe family, held office from 1969-1972 as the appointed City Council chairman. In June 1970, Hahn and Mayor Washington testified in favor of a constitutional amendment for District representation in Congress. This was one of many examples of Washington's lobbying for District self-government.*



*Known as the “walking mayor,” a campaign technique he learned from Mayor John Lindsey of New York, Washington often walked the city’s neighborhoods, listening to the problems of local residents and taking notes. In 1970, Washington demonstrated his commitment to social service programs, particularly for kids, by visiting the “New Thing” on 18th Street, N.W., in Adams Morgan.*



*The 1976 bicentennial was one of many occasions when Washington had both local and national responsibilities. Here he greeted the first group of District high school students who participated in the celebration on the steps of the Capitol.*



*One of Mayor Washington's main initiatives for revitalizing the city following the 1968 riots was the construction of a new subway system. Metro took 20 years of planning and five years of construction. In 1971, Metro's Chairman, Carlton R. Sickles, checked the construction at the Judiciary Square during a tour with the mayor.*



*The city's subway system began operating on April 2, 1975. Mayor Washington was one of the 160 passengers on the inaugural trip for political VIPS.*



After holding down the job of mayor for six years following his appointment by President Johnson in 1967, Mayor Washington announced his bid for election on May 11, 1974. In the first District mayoral election held in a century, Washington defeated his opponent, attorney Clifford L. Alexander.

The Washington campaign geared up for its first re-election contest against Marion Barry in 1978, as these campaign flyers and bumper stickers at his re-election headquarters demonstrate. Washington lost to Barry, but remained devoted to the city.



*Washington, who excelled in sports in high school, followed many sports as an adult. Here is spoke with tennis champion Arthur Ashe, who had just won the clay court title in the 1974 Washington Star-Mens Instructional Tennis Championship. Art Carter Papers, Manuscript Division, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.*



*On May 5, 1976, Howard University hosted a tribute, "Education for Freedom," honoring Mordecai W. Johnson on the fiftieth anniversary of his election as university president. From left to right: Delegate Walter Fauntroy, Johnson, then-university president James Cheek, and Walter Washington, an alumnus of and frequent honoree himself by Howard. . Howard University Archives, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.*



*D.C.'s current and former mayors gathered at a celebration honoring the city's first elected mayor, Walter Washington, on April 9, 2003. From left to right are Sharon Pratt Kelly, Walter Washington, current Mayor Anthony Williams, and Marion Barry. Courtesy, Lateef Mangum.*