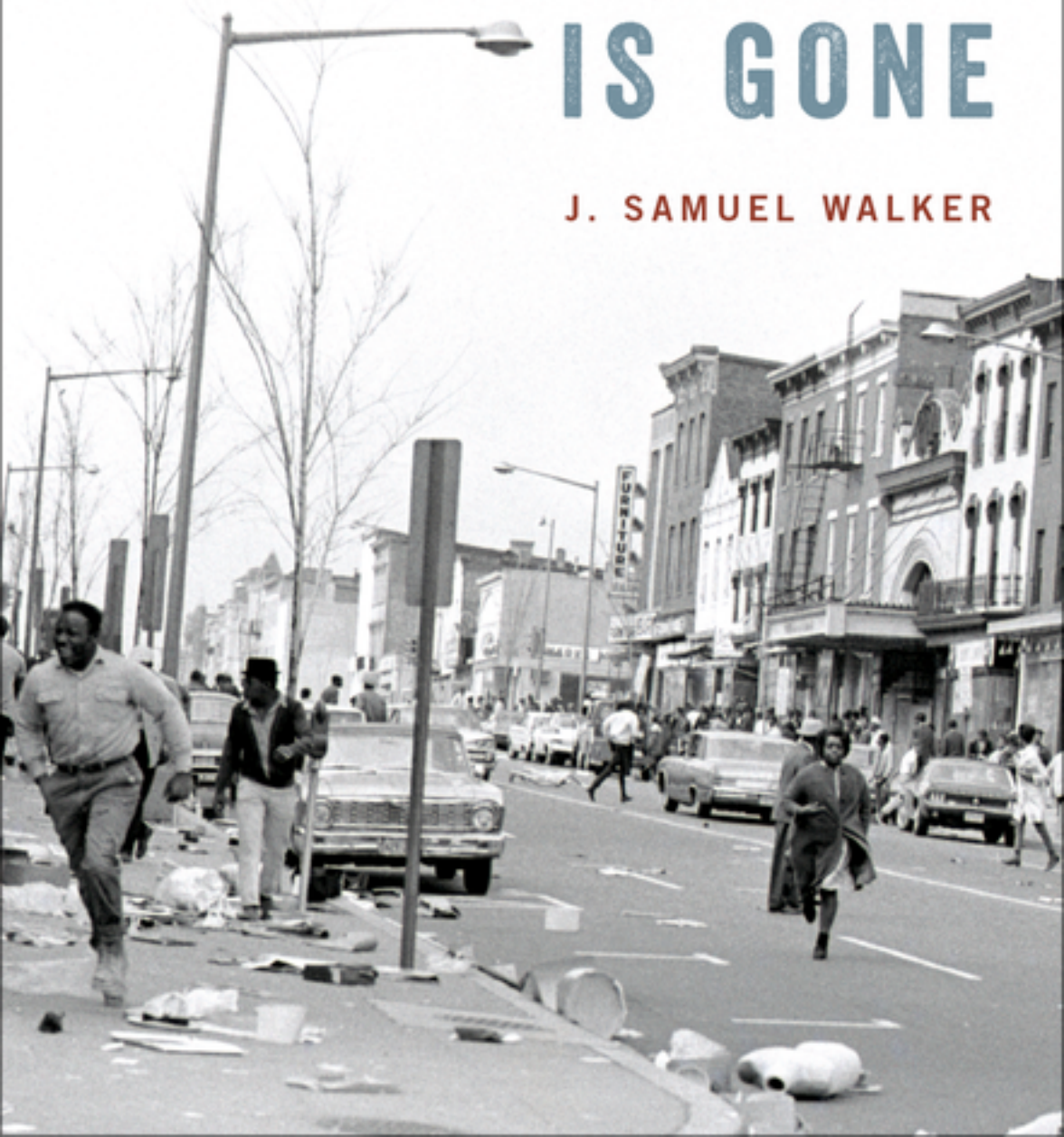


The Washington, DC Riots of 1968

# MOST OF 14<sup>TH</sup> STREET IS GONE

J. SAMUEL WALKER



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Oxford University Press is a department of the University of Oxford. It furthers the University's objective of excellence in research, scholarship, and education by publishing worldwide. Oxford is a registered trade mark of Oxford University Press in the UK and certain other countries.

Published in the United States of America by Oxford University Press  
198 Madison Avenue, New York, NY 10016, United States of America.

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Walker, J. Samuel, author.

Title: Most of 14th Street is gone : the Washington, DC riots of 1968 / J. Samuel Walker.

Description: New York, NY : Oxford University Press, 2018. |

Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2017034091 | ISBN 9780190844790 (hardback : alk. paper) | ISBN 9780190844813 (ebook)

Subjects: LCSH: Riots—Washington (D.C.)—History—20th century. | Washington (D.C.)—History—20th century. | African Americans—Washington (D.C.)—History—20th century. |

Poor People's Campaign.

Classification: LCC F200 .W235 2018 | DDC 975.3/041—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2017034091>

1 3 5 7 9 8 6 4 2

Printed by Sheridan Books, Inc., United States of America

This book is dedicated with love to my grandchildren, Charlotte and Jack



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## PREFACE

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I HAVE BEEN A RESIDENT of the Washington, DC suburbs for nearly five decades, but I knew little about the city's long and fascinating history until I started working on this book. I arrived in the area to attend graduate school at the University of Maryland in 1969, a year and a half after the riots that followed the death of Martin Luther King Jr. My only acquaintance with the 1968 disorders in Washington was the description my wife-to-be, Pat, provided of a bus trip that took her to the Greyhound bus station through the middle of the troubled areas on the worst day of the rioting. She was traveling from New Jersey to visit a college friend who lived in the Maryland suburbs, and as the bus drove through the city, she observed burning buildings and looters carrying goods from stores. Without any advance warning that the riots were raging, she was more than a little startled by what she saw. Her friend Ann waited at the bus station while Ann's father, doubtless with considerable anxiety, sat in his car some distance away because the streets were blocked. Pat, dragging her suitcase through the streets, did not feel frightened, though she did become increasingly uneasy. Eventually, she and Ann made their way safely to the car and to the suburbs.

Although the signs of the destruction the disorders left behind were still clearly evident in 1969, I paid little attention. In later years, I was aware of

the problems that existed in the burned-out areas, but I often drove downtown on 7th Street NW without knowing much about what had happened there after King's assassination. I began to think seriously about it only after I decided that the riots would be a good topic for a book. As I conducted my research, I found a story filled with controversy, tension, drama, and human interest.

I am greatly indebted to those who provided assistance along the way. Don Ritchie drew on his vast knowledge of American political history to steer me in fruitful directions. Pete Daniel and Blair Ruble offered much-valued encouragement. Archivists in every institution I visited were enormously helpful. Joellen ElBashir, curator of manuscripts at the Moorland-Spingarn Research Center at Howard University, responded to my requests in a prompt and informative manner. Anne McDonough, Laura Barry, and Jessica Smith of the Historical Society of Washington, DC, made the collections at the Kiplinger Library easily accessible. The staff at the National Archives is always a source of valuable information, and, with rare exceptions, offers friendly assistance. I am especially grateful to David Langbart for his sleuthing abilities and to Carly Docca for her rescue mission. Allen Fisher of the Lyndon B. Johnson Library shared his large supply of expertise to guide my research in the collections of the library. Ray Smock and Jody Brumage of the Robert C. Byrd Center for Congressional History and Education made a trip to Shepherdstown pleasant and productive. Moira Fitzgerald of the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Yale University and Aryn Glazier of the Dolph Briscoe Center for American History at the University of Texas at Austin provided much appreciated assistance in my search for good photographs. I am greatly indebted to Emery Pajer for his skills in drawing the maps that appear in this book.

I am deeply grateful to Nancy Toff, my editor at Oxford University Press. She showed an interest in this topic in an informal conversation when it was little more than a vague notion in my mind. Since then, she has shared my growing enthusiasm even as she gently pushed me to fully explore its various dimensions. The prompt information she provided about the status of my book proposal, despite a breakdown in email communication between New York and Italy, furnished the basis for an exceedingly pleasant celebratory dinner on the shores of Lake Como with friends and family.

The members of my family were, as always, wonderfully supportive. My grandchildren, Charlotte and Jack, will read this book eagerly, I'm sure, at least as far as the dedication page. They might be a little surprised to find the Washington riots of 1968 included in their bedtime reading.

# Introduction

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IN APRIL 2015, the city of Baltimore, Maryland, suffered an eruption of rioting and looting that was the worst urban violence it had experienced in forty-seven years. It came as a rude shock to city and state officials and to tourists who had enjoyed the downtown attractions of “Charm City” during the previous three decades. The opening of glittering Harborplace, the world-class National Aquarium, the impressive Maryland Science Center, and the much-admired Orioles Park at Camden Yards between 1976 and 1992 had transformed Baltimore. From an object of scorn that its own mayor described as burdened with a “poor image,” the city emerged as a must-see destination that drew millions of visitors every year.

The 2015 riots occurred a short distance but a world away from Harborplace. The immediate cause was the death of Freddie Gray, a twenty-five-year-old resident of a neighborhood scarred with empty row houses, closed factories, high crime rates, and other signs of urban distress. Gray was arrested and thrown into a police van without being strapped into a seat. He suffered a severe spinal cord injury while in custody and lapsed into a coma shortly after arriving at the police station. He died a few days later. Gray’s death led to a week of peaceful protests that focused on complaints about police brutality, which had been a disturbingly common problem in Baltimore for years. On the day of Gray’s funeral, the protests turned violent. The scores of people who participated threw rocks and bottles at police officers, burned squad cars, and looted and burned stores. Order was restored only after Mayor Stephanie Rawlings-Blake declared a curfew and Governor Larry Hogan sent in National Guard troops.

Amid a series of charges and countercharges about the causes of and response to the riots, it seemed clear that the underlying source of the violence was the conditions that prevailed in the affected areas of the city. "I think we, as a country, have to do some soul-searching," President Barack Obama declared. He pointed out that the Baltimore riots were a part of larger and wider currents. "This is not new. It's been going on the decades," he said. "And without making any excuses for criminal activities that take place, . . . you have impoverished communities that have been stripped away of opportunity." If urban decay was not new, however, serious rioting in major cities, with few exceptions, had been rare occurrences in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. The last time Baltimore had endured a severe outbreak of urban violence was in 1968.<sup>1</sup>

The Baltimore riot of 1968 was but one of many serious urban disturbances in the United States during the mid- and late 1960s. The worst of them occurred in New York City in 1964, in Los Angeles in 1965, and in Newark, New Jersey, and Detroit in 1967. In 1967 alone, disorders occurred in 164 cities, large and small, across the country. Although the visible effects in many cases were not extensive, the aggregate costs of the riots were disturbingly high: eighty-three deaths, 1,897 injuries, and property damage that ran into the tens of millions of dollars. The disorders also produced the unquantifiable hardships of dislocation of residents, disruption of communities, and fear of further and perhaps greater turmoil. The outbreaks of urban violence and destruction between 1964 and 1967 were distressing to President Lyndon B. Johnson and many other Americans, not only because of the deaths, injuries, and property damage they caused but also because of what they highlighted about the troubled state of race relations in America. "The summer of 1967 again brought racial disorders to American cities, and with them shock, fear and bewilderment to the nation," the Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders concluded in a study published in early 1968. "Discrimination and segregation have long permeated much of American life; they now threaten the future of every American."<sup>2</sup>

Shortly after the National Advisory Commission's report appeared, riots broke out in more than one hundred American cities following the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. in Memphis, Tennessee, on April 4, 1968. The most serious and most alarming of the 1968 disorders occurred in Washington, DC. The violence in Washington was particularly noteworthy for two reasons. On a local level, it stood out because of the deaths, injuries, and enormous destruction it caused. On the day after King's death, rioting

raged out of control in and around three of the city's major commercial strips. Before calm returned, thirteen people were dead, thousands were injured, and nearly eight thousand were arrested. The consequences of the immense property damage from the riots extended not only to store owners but also to residents of ghetto areas who lost their homes, belongings, and jobs.

Leonard Downie Jr., a managing editor with the *Washington Post*, underlined the impact of the disorders in the capital ten years after they occurred. "Left behind were hundreds of burned-out buildings, whole blocks that looked as though they had been bombed into oblivion, vital centers of commerce for black Washington that had been reduced to rubble, small businesses and lifetimes of investment by their owners that had been obliterated," he wrote. "Years were to pass before the rebuilding would substantially begin, before fears growing out of the riots would subside, before new living patterns would emerge for both black and white citizens of Washington."<sup>3</sup>

The second consideration that distinguished the Washington riots in 1968 and gave them national importance was that they took place in the capital city. Restoring order in the streets required the intervention of more than fifteen thousand National Guard and US Army troops. People across the country could open their local newspaper to see photos of armed soldiers guarding the Capitol Building against potential threats from American citizens. Richard Starnes, the Washington correspondent for the Scripps-Howard chain, suggested that local citizens were disheartened and deeply saddened by the unusual and disconcerting sight. "They are not watching armed men patrol the streets of some seedy banana republic," he remarked. "They are watching them patrol the capital of the United States."<sup>4</sup>

Despite the breadth and depth of much outstanding scholarship on the history of the capital city, the riots of April 1968 that traumatized Washington have not received the attention they merit.<sup>5</sup> What happened in the capital and in other cities in the United States at the same time deserves careful treatment. It had a major impact on the cities that sustained the costs as well as on government planning for the disquieting prospect of more outbreaks of a similar nature. It seems axiomatic that evaluating the roots of and the response to the 1968 riots is one essential step toward effectively addressing the urban woes that can lead to violence. The alternative is to face the prospect that, as author and television host Tavis Smiley put it in 2015, "protests and riots—uprisings—could become the new normal."<sup>6</sup>

In my approach to this topic, I attempt to answer the questions that I regard as most critical to understanding the causes and consequences of the 1968 riots in Washington. Some questions consider the events and circumstances that led up to the violence on the streets. What economic, social, and political conditions prevailed in Washington in the 1960s? How did the alarmingly explosive disorders that took place in the United States in 1967 influence national and local policies and preparations for dealing with further urban violence? Other questions relate to the outbreak and proceedings of the 1968 riots in Washington. What triggered them? Was the response well-considered and appropriate, and why did it stir bitter controversy? What were the costs of the riots and who were the primary victims? Who were the rioters and what were their motivations? How did the riots end? What lessons were learned? Finally, some questions bear on what happened in the wake of the Washington disorders. What efforts were made to rebuild the devastated areas and how successful were those efforts? Why did severe riots in the capital and in major cities around the nation become rare occurrences after April 1968?

In the title and throughout this book, I use the term “riot,” often in plural form because there were multiple “riots” in Washington in April 1968. I think the word most accurately describes the events I cover, and my usage is consistent with the definition found in dictionaries. The *Oxford Dictionary of English*, for example, defines a riot as a “violent disturbance of the peace by a crowd.”<sup>7</sup> Some scholars have suggested that the term should be avoided because it plays down the legitimate grievances of rioters and offers support for claims that urban disorders were aimless and unjustified. They prefer the terms “rebellion” or “uprising” to emphasize that rioters logically sought redress from the intolerable conditions they faced. I use the term “riot” in a descriptive, not a pejorative, way, and I do not use it as a code word to denigrate the severity of the problems that were day-to-day realities in the poor neighborhoods of the capital. What happened in Washington in 1968 fits very well with the dictionary definition and with common usage of the term “riot.” Further, words such as “rebellion” and “uprising” strongly imply that riot participants took to the streets with at least some vague political objective in mind. This attribute did not apply to any significant extent to the Washington riots. I use the words “disorders” and “disturbances” as synonyms for “riots,” and again, without any intention of understating the root causes of the violence and destruction of 1968.<sup>8</sup>

# I

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## The Other Washington

FROM THE TIME OF ITS FOUNDING, the city of Washington, DC, served as the focal point for America's great experiment in democracy. Over a period of 150 years, it grew from a shabby, muddy, and altogether unimpressive outpost to the beautiful monumental city that was familiar to most Americans from school trips, family vacations, books, photographs, films, and television programs. Tourists who visited the capital personally and citizens who enjoyed its sights vicariously could take pride in, or at least acknowledge, the Capitol dome and the rituals of representative government it symbolized, the majesty of the White House and the power it conveyed, and the towering columns of the Supreme Court building that perhaps suggested the imposing mysteries of judicial review. They could honor Presidents George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and Abraham Lincoln at their respective monuments; marvel at the wonders of the Smithsonian Institution, the Library of Congress, the National Archives, and other Washington cultural landmarks; and pay homage to the soldiers, sailors, and Marines who fought valiantly in America's wars.

This was the Washington, DC, that attracted millions of visitors from around the country and around the world. It was, wrote Russell Baker in the *New York Times* in 1963, "a showcase of the American experience" and the "heart of democracy."<sup>1</sup>

Washington was also a residential city that was much less familiar, even invisible, to short-term visitors. Residential Washington had a long, shadowy, and frequently contentious history. Baker found that "behind the



noble postcard façade that Washington shows the American tourist is a city racked by change, trouble, and danger.” The most enduring and perplexing problem that confronted the capital, which became more prominent in the 1950s and early 1960s, was racial inequality. In a city whose monuments celebrated freedom, democracy, and fairness of opportunity, the status of its black citizens and the battle for civil rights were particularly urgent and momentous. Haynes Johnson, an editor with Washington’s *Evening Star* who later received a Pulitzer Prize for his reporting on the struggle for racial justice, commented in 1963 that “what happens in the capital affects Negroes everywhere” and could not “be dismissed as of only local interest.” The reason, he argued, was that “Washington is the crucible of our democratic system,” and that “if democracy fails in Washington, it will fail in all of our cities.”<sup>2</sup>

In 1800, when the federal government moved from Philadelphia to its new home in Washington, the nation’s two most important public buildings were still under construction. The Capitol and the President’s House at the other end of Pennsylvania Avenue represented the prevailing high hopes that Washington would grow into a glittering centerpiece of America’s bold venture in popular government. But the capital city made painfully slow progress toward fulfilling the grand plans and elegant conceptions of its designer, Pierre L’Enfant.

Washington remained an insult to L’Enfant’s vision until after the Civil War. Instead of wide thoroughfares, it had muddy, unpaved, and unsafe streets. Instead of a National Mall graced with fine buildings, it had pigpens, rubbish heaps, and cattle grazing on the grounds of the unfinished Washington Monument. Instead of a scenic canal that served as a commercial link between the eastern and western parts of the city, it had a malodorous, open sewer that ran parallel to Pennsylvania Avenue. Instead of gardens, parks, and promenades, it had swamps, tree stumps, and untended vegetation. A reporter from Sacramento described the capital in 1864 as “ill-kept, noisome, and stinking” and suggested that “the man in the moon would hold his nose going over it.”<sup>3</sup>

Washington transformed itself into a city of distinctive splendor only gradually. The halting process of developing the capital received a major setback when British troops burned the Capitol, the President’s House, and other government buildings in 1814. The executive mansion, by then commonly referred to as the “White House,” had been rebuilt with a modified design by 1818. The damaged sections of the Capitol were repaired and improved, and the building was finally finished with a wooden dome

covered with copper in 1826. Congress agreed in 1850 to enlarge the Capitol to provide for the growing number of members from states recently admitted to the Union. Rising above the expanded House and Senate wings was a new cast-iron dome, completed in 1866, that became the most readily recognizable architectural structure in America.<sup>4</sup>

Meanwhile, other harbingers of monumental Washington appeared around the city. Support for a suitable memorial to George Washington gained momentum after 1833, when the Washington Monument Society decided to solicit donations from the American people. But the level of contributions was disappointing, and the monument stood as a partially completed eyesore until Congress stepped in to provide funding in 1876. A handsome addition to the mostly undeveloped National Mall was the Smithsonian Institution's turreted "Castle," which was completed in 1855. Other buildings that opened in the late nineteenth century earned places among Washington's monumental icons. They included the Pension Building (later the National Building Museum), the State, War, and Navy Building (later the Eisenhower Executive Office Building), and the Library of Congress.<sup>5</sup>

The most important enhancements to the city after the Civil War were often invisible or at least not obvious to casual visitors. Between 1871 and 1873, Alexander Shepherd, the vice president of the Board of Public Works for what was then the territorial government of the District of Columbia, took charge of providing desperately needed civic improvements. Shepherd, whose influence far exceeded his rather modest position and invited comparisons with machine bosses in other cities, was confident, determined, and brazenly inattentive to budgetary constraints. Under his leadership, streets in central Washington were graded, paved, and lighted. Sewers were built. The putrid city canal was filled in and paved over; it later became Constitution Avenue. Water mains were installed in parts of the city where they had never existed. Thousands of trees were planted. Those and other projects were completed in about three years, and the quality of design or construction on some streets and sewers was bad enough to soon require rebuilding. But Shepherd's achievements offered modern services that were new and welcome amenities in the city of Washington.<sup>6</sup>

The creation of monumental Washington was far from finished. It received new impetus in the early twentieth century. Senator James McMillan of Michigan, chairman of the Senate Committee on the District of Columbia and a longtime advocate of improving the city's infrastructure and public spaces, was instrumental in bringing about momentous changes.

They included enhancing the landscape of the Mall, extending it from the Capitol to the Potomac River, adding a reflecting pool, and constructing a memorial to President Lincoln at the far western end.<sup>7</sup>

Another critical step in the development of monumental Washington occurred in 1926, when Congress approved the expenditure of \$50 million for new federal buildings. Much of the money was used to clean up the area known as “Murder Bay,” located between Pennsylvania Avenue and the Mall east of 15th Street. Murder Bay had long been infamous for its gambling dens, brothels, saloons, and high crime rate; it also included mostly run-down residential sections. By the late 1930s, the area’s rude streets had been replaced by a line of far less interesting but far more reputable government buildings known collectively as the Federal Triangle. Other notable additions to the city’s monumental profile during the New Deal era included the Supreme Court building, the National Gallery of Art, and the Jefferson Memorial. By that time, the central core of the city was clearly defined by its museums, monuments, and other tourist attractions. Their common theme was to emphasize the accomplishments of American freedom and democratic government.<sup>8</sup>

The residential city of Washington did not aspire to such lofty goals, and its history was in many ways a rebuke to the ideals that the monumental city celebrated. It was home to a growing population that sought employment, decent shelter, safety, and perhaps even comfort. But large portions of the “other Washington” did not deliver those minimal objectives; they offered instead substandard housing, limited employment prospects, and, in the case of black citizens, rank discrimination. The gradual construction of the monumental core of the city displaced and isolated some residential areas, further accentuating the dividing lines between the two Washingtons. The attractions on the Mall became the leading and often exclusive destination for tourists, and for them much of the rest of the city remained obscure and vaguely sinister.

The permanent population of the capital expanded from 3,210 residents, including 623 slaves, in 1800 to 61,122, including 1,774 slaves, in 1860. The Civil War generated the first large-scale migration to the capital; by 1870, the population had nearly doubled to 109,199. The wartime surge occurred partly because of the arrival of troops, businessmen, contractors, laborers, and others to protect, feed, and minister to the needs of the city and to support the war effort. Although many did not remain after the war ended, some did.

The segment of the population that poured into Washington in the greatest numbers and that was the least welcome was made up of former

slaves. During the war, as many as forty thousand African Americans fled their owners and flocked to the capital city, especially after Congress abolished slavery in the District of Columbia in April 1862. Individuals, families, and sometimes large groups of slaves of all ages left Maryland and Virginia and headed for the capital. The migrants made their way to Washington in hopes of finding jobs and opportunities, and many of them stayed.<sup>9</sup>

The fugitives from slavery generally were desperately poor and uneducated, and the city lacked the resources and, for the most part, the will to offer much assistance. The mayor of Washington, Richard Wallach, announced in 1862 that the city would offer aid to local black citizens. But he complained that many of the recently arrived refugees were “idle, dissolute, and reckless,” and that imposing the “burden of supporting the multitude” on the city “would be an intolerable grievance.” Black leaders took sharp issue with the view that Wallach expressed and applauded migrants for their willingness to work, often in low-paying government jobs in hospitals, stables, fields, and streets. Nevertheless, despite relief efforts carried out by local citizens, especially churches, and the federal government, most former slaves who settled in Washington suffered wretched living conditions in camps, alleys, and shanties.<sup>10</sup>

The massive influx of people and the jumble of wartime activities left the city of Washington in shambles. Housing was scarce and expensive, and some areas, by any measure, were shameful slums. The superintendent of the police department graphically described the miseries of conditions in “Murder Bay” in 1865. “Here,” he observed, “crime, filth, and poverty seem to vie with each other in a career of degradation and death. Whole families . . . are crowded into mere apologies for shanties” where “their roofs afford but slight protection [and] from beneath a few rough boards used for floors, the miasmatic effluvia from the most disgustingly filthy and stagnant water . . . renders the atmosphere within these hovels stifling and sickening.” The capital had never had adequate water supplies, sewage treatment, garbage disposal, animal control, street lighting, police protection, or other public services that were commonly found in other cities. After the war, epidemics of violent crime and disease made already deplorable living conditions even worse.<sup>11</sup>

The primary reason that Washington was in such lamentable straits was the failure of Congress to provide sufficient funding for fundamental requirements. The US Constitution gave Congress exclusive jurisdiction over governing the District of Columbia, and through the years, the

legislative branch had been at best parsimonious and at worst neglectful in exercising its responsibilities. When Alexander Shepherd engineered the projects that took important strides toward making Washington into a modern city during the 1870s, he paid little heed to the costs. He believed that Congress would be so pleased with the improvements that it would agree to cover the bills. Congress, however, balked at paying all the steadily mounting expenses, and within a short time the District of Columbia's territorial government went bankrupt. One result was that in 1874, Congress created a new government, codified by the Organic Act of 1878, headed by three commissioners appointed by the president. But final control over District affairs remained in the hands of congressional committees in the House and Senate. Under this system, residents of Washington were denied the right to select their own leaders. Congress agreed to pay for one-half of the city's budget; the other one-half would come from tax assessments on local citizens. This arrangement remained in effect until 1973, when Congress granted partial home rule to the District of Columbia.<sup>12</sup>

Despite the financial woes that faced the new government, Shepherd's improvements made Washington a much more agreeable place to live. One local newspaper editorialized in 1873 that the "city of Washington, which was a disgrace to the country, has blossomed into a beauty and a loveliness so that it is to-day the most attractive city in the Union." As a residential community, the city prospered as never before. The basis of the local economy was, as always, federal employment, and the number of civilian jobs in government agencies more than doubled between 1871 and 1881. The 13,124 jobs in the federal government in 1881 represented nearly 20 percent of total employment in the city. But Washington's growth did not come from government expansion alone. Other recently arrived residents who represented a wide variety of professions, vocations, and crafts settled in the city. The total population of the city increased to 147,091 by 1880 and to 230,402 by 1890, more than twice the level of 1870.<sup>13</sup>

As the population of Washington expanded after the Civil War, some new and several distinctive neighborhoods developed within the city. Areas around Rock Creek, which meandered in a southwesterly direction between 16th Street and 27th Street in the northwestern quadrant of Washington, had long been a swampy wasteland in which poor black citizens lived in squalid conditions. The land was bought up by developers, who drained the swamps and built stately homes for affluent whites. The area's appeal was extended by the creation of Rock Creek Park in 1890. The port of Georgetown, often called a city despite its small size,