“A Brief History of Lakeland: African Americans in College Park, MD,” Maxine Gross, Lakeland Community Heritage Project (LCHP), Violette Sharps-Jones, LCHP, and Cameron Thurston, LCHP

Lakeland, the historic African American community of College Park, was formed around 1890 on the doorstep of the Maryland Agricultural College, not the University of Maryland, in northern Prince George’s County. Located less than 10 miles from Washington, DC, the community began when the area was largely rural and overwhelmingly populated by European Americans; by 1910, it had transformed to 87% Black residents. Lakeland is one of several small, African American communities along the US Route 1 corridor between Washington, DC and Laurel, Maryland. With Lakeland’s central geographic location and easy access to train and trolley transportation, it became a natural gathering place for African American social and recreational activities, and it thrived until its self-contained uniqueness was undermined by urban renewal program and social change. The story of Lakeland is the tale of a community that was established and flourished in a segregated society and developed its own built environment, institutions and traditions, including the area’s only high school for African Americans, built in 1928. Urban renewal destroyed two thirds of Lakeland’s buildings using eminent domain and relocated those households; nonetheless, the remaining core of the community lives on. In 2007, the Lakeland Community Heritage Project, Inc., was formed to preserve Lakeland’s history and the stories of its people through photographic archives and oral histories. That record is being shared through educational programs, outreach activities, Images of America: Lakeland: African Americans in College Park (2009) and a developing digital archive. Activities are carried out through volunteer efforts and partnerships including those with the University of Maryland, College Park, Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission, and others.

“Lakeland’s Legacy: The Value of Black Land and Community in College Park, MD,” Courtnie Thurston, Morgan State University

This presentation begins with a look at urban renewal and its impact on Lakeland’s built environment and residents and the roles that race and racism played in that process. It places Lakeland in the broader scholarship in African American migration and community formation with particular emphasis on Lakelanders’ capacity for homeownership and community-building. The Lakeland case study contributes a rich analysis of Blacks’ efforts to confront economic, social, and political inequality during and after segregation on a local level by literally building houses, community institutions, and a self-sufficient neighborhood of a particular kind. Understanding how Lakelanders established community while they developed, transmitted, or lost this land is crucial to expanding the historiography of Black land ownership and knowledge of African American generational wealth. After the neighborhood was violated by urban renewal, Lakelanders developed resilient series of heritage practices as a form of resistance, talking back, and asserting the community’s dignity, value, and historical importance – for themselves as well as interested scholars and the public. I will look at three examples of heritage practices: a mapping project of individual buildings in the community, a study of the evolution of community networks, and the Lakeland Digital Archive (which will be explored in more detail in the third presentation). The paper is based on research in a broad range of traditional primary sources and utilizes digital art and research tools.

“The Lakeland Digital Archive: Technology for a Community-Engaged Approach to Sharing History and Heritage,” Trevor Muñoz, Maryland Institute for Technology in the Humanities (MITH), UMD, Stephanie Sapienza, MITH, and Edward Hugh Summers, MITH

The Lakeland Digital Archive (LDA) was started in 2009. MITH joined the project in 2017, offering our experience with digital preservation and agreeing to house and secure the LDA on MITH’s servers. Our role is to help make available the results of years of research by community members and UMD students documenting historic Lakeland before and after segregation. We do this through a community-engaged process in which we work closely with LCHP and current and former Lakeland residents to inventory, organize, and augment metadata for items in the digital collection, crowdsourcing identification and context
for understanding the subjects and resources in the collection. The process of evaluating, designing, developing, and maintaining projects that share history and heritage through digital technologies can be daunting and complex. MITH is currently working on co-designing with LCHP an online presentation of their material; this process, our progress to date, and the challenges of the task will form the center of gravity of this presentation. We will demonstrate how our current work applies “minimal computing” principles to Lakeland’s project of cultural heritage preservation. Minimal computing approaches can serve heritage communities like Lakeland especially well by making digital archives cheaper to operate and maintain, easier to preserve, easier for communities to control their own stories, and more accessible offline and on personal devices. We will showcase our design-in-progress and articulate its potential as a model other historic communities might use to share their heritage through digital technologies.

February 9, 2021 @ 7PM EST | Historic Preservation: Placemaking and Displacement

Chair:

“Wah Luck House and the Changing Demographics of Chinatown,” Deane Madsen, Freelance Architectural Journalist

Despite the Chinese characters accompanying chain restaurant logos in Washington, D.C.’s Chinatown, the actual character of the neighborhood has undergone a rapid decline of Chinese residents, from 3,000 in 1970 to fewer than 300 today. Within the shifting demographic landscape, the Wah Luck House sits at a prime intersection of historic preservation and development opportunity.

Designed by Taiwanese-American architect Alfred H. Liu of AEPA, the Wah Luck House is a ten-story, 153-unit building at the corner of 6th Street and H Street NW, just a block away from the Chinatown gate. Originally intended for low-income, elderly Chinese residents, the building faces increasing development pressure for its half-acre site in the heart of downtown.

This paper will explore the changing demographics of Chinatown, and will analyze how the neighborhood’s market has eclipsed its cultural identity. It will also investigate the Wah Luck House itself, a pre-fabricated concrete structure that was erected in just 22 days, and will soon undergo major renovations. The Wah Luck House is now home to approximately half of Chinatown’s remaining Chinese residents, but a recent sale of the building—and a brewing Section 8 housing controversy at nearby Museum Square—have raised major questions about the future of Wah Luck House and that of Chinatown as well.

“Living Off the Grid: Generations of a Racial Enclave in LeDroit Park,” Christine Henry, University of Mary Washington

My research examines the process of placemaking in LeDroit Park, a residential Washington, DC neighborhood, over its 140-year history. Analyzing the entwined physical and social evolution of the small community within the context of the Nation’s Capital, my analysis provides insight into two distinct periods of integration—one at the turn of the 20th century, and the second at the turn of the 21st century—and the challenges and tensions that ongoing process has produced.

Initially planned and designed in 1873 as a gated suburb, LeDroit Park was intended as a retreat for middle and upper-class European Americans. With a mixture of romantic revival houses set on grassy plots surrounded by a gated fence, the physical design was intentionally inwardly focused and exclusionary. Within two decades of its founding, LeDroit Park was incorporated into the District, the surrounding fence was demolished, and the neighborhood was racially integrated. Due to increasingly stringent segregation laws and customs in the city, this period of integration lasted less than twenty years, and LeDroit Park developed into an elite African American enclave, a character that would define it until the 21st century.

Grounded in this history, my paper focuses on the most recent evolution of the neighborhood, beginning with the designation of the historic district in 1974. After a stalemate that lasted decades, the neighborhood began another period of transformation, both racial and socio-economic. As was the case around the city, well-heeled professionals moved into the neighborhood in the early 2000s and renovated larger structures. But this transformation also included the renovation of two small-scale apartment buildings into affordable housing, new construction of over twenty single-family row houses sold through a non-profit housing organization, and the sale of the renovated Howard University owned-houses as work-
force housing. This economic diversity was accompanied by a change in the racial character, per the 2000 Census, the tract including LeDroit Park was over 90% African American but by the 2010 Census the population was 79% African American. The new diversity in the neighborhood has resulted in a renewed spirit of community engagement, yet tensions over culture have surfaced as well.


Prior to its widespread adoption in the late 1970s, gentrification was commonly described in the United States as “displacement” and according to the Preservation News, the term referred to what happened when a neighborhood changed “from poor to Episcopalian.”

As preservation minded community groups in Alexandria, Virginia contemplated the impacts that large scale urban renewal projects might have on its Old and Historic District (established 1946), African American citizens grew increasingly distrustful of city officials and other community leaders because of “token steps designed to forestall and pacify, rather than to remedy existing problems” in areas on the periphery of Old Town. By the late 1960s the portfolio of restorable residences within the Old and Historic District was exhausted and city planners saw a proposed boundary expansion as a way to enhance the city’s tax base at no cost to the taxpayer. The planner Russell Wright was engaged to study an ensemble of buildings and grade them in terms of their contribution to the city’s architectural character.

Just after the survey was completed the city exploded in an episode of urban violence in the aftermath of the murder of an African American high school student. While many of the disturbances focused on local business establishments, at least one act of political violence targeted a historic property—the boyhood home of Confederate General Robert E. Lee—as a “symbol of Black protest.” The violence impacted not only the city’s political culture but also transformed its approach to historic preservation. In June 1974, Alexandria received a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts to study “neighborhood conservation” in order to combat gentrification beyond the traditional borders of Old Town, an area that would be designated as the Parker-Gray Historic District in 1984. Deeply seated within the tradition of southern Jim Crow segregation and white supremacy, historic preservation’s practice in the Washington, DC metropolitan area cannot be divorced from the crisis of confidence that occurred in the decade after enactment of the National Historic Preservation Act.

February 15, 2021 @ 7PM EST | DC Area Politics: from Urban Renewal to Gentrification

Chair: Derek Hyra, American University

“Equitable Development (in)Action: Reimagining Downtown in the Washington, DC Suburbs,” Willow S. Lung-Amam, University of Maryland

The U.S. suburbs have long been a site of social struggle. While not well-documented in the literature, suburbia is an important space upon which marginalized groups have registered claims to equal rights, citizenship, and a more just distribution of metropolitan resources. For much of the twentieth century, these battles were largely fought over access to housing, schools, jobs, and the promised suburban “good life.” In the past few decades, however, the tenor of these debates has changed. With the unprecedented movement of racial and ethnic minorities, immigrants, and the poor to the urban periphery, and rising trends in suburban redevelopment and “retrofitting,” the battles taking shape are about far more “urban” issues, including gentrification.

This paper looks at the battles won and lost during early debates over redevelopment in the Washington, DC suburbs. In a case study of downtown Silver Spring, Maryland, it examines the impact of two decades of redevelopment policies and politics on minority and immigrant communities, including African immigrants and African Americans who were among the early pioneers of suburban racial integration. Using in-depth interviews with key political leaders, planners, and local activists, archival research, and secondary data on housing and small businesses, the paper shows that county-led redevelopment had significant short- and long-term impacts on commercial and residential affordability. At the same time, it spurred local activists and organizations to mobilize around an equitable development agenda. However, activism and policy responses were too little and too late to effectively stem the tide of displacement. As an increasing number of U.S. suburbs face rising levels of poverty and redevelopment pressures, the paper concludes with
lessons learned by activists and county leaders on the challenges and possibilities of equitable suburban development. These include the need to build grassroots capacity, diverse coalitions, political support, and policy tools in suburbs to produce shared prosperity and just growth.

“From Urban Renewal to Urban Development: How the 1976 Bicentennial Changed the Nation’s Capital,” Lauren Pearlman, University of Florida

The 1976 Bicentennial Celebration profoundly changed Washington, D.C. This paper examines some of the deeply divisive civic projects contested during the Bicentennial planning period (1966-1976), including the development of a new mixed-income town in Southwest D.C., the renovation of a former military post located in Northeast D.C., and the construction of a major convention center in the heart of downtown D.C. During the early 1970s, the Washington metropolitan area reached three million residents, rendering it the seventh largest and fastest growing region in the nation. Yet development proponents had trouble converting tourist dollars into badly needed infrastructure for the city. As preparations for the 1976 Bicentennial commenced, white boosters believed they had found the perfect justification to redevelop downtown Washington. As they would discover, they had an ally in the city’s black municipal leaders, who sided with the federal government and white developers in favor of the development of the city’s core. But the memory of earlier attempts at urban renewal shaped debates over urban development.

This paper examines the ways a new coalition of business and political elites used the nation’s two hundredth birthday to usher in the redevelopment of the city center. Their success in directing funds and attention to the city’s downtown core at the expense of surrounding black neighborhoods and commercial districts reveals the power of civic pride to steamroll dissent. This can be seen most clearly in Washington, D.C., a city that lacked democratically elected city leadership since its 1790 founding until the passage of Home Rule in 1973. But it was not all their doing. Under the Richard Nixon administration, the government’s willingness to use federal assistance to address social problems drastically diminished. This, combined with the political turmoil of the era, forced a reconfiguration of the Bicentennial. Thus the Bicentennial became a battle not only over urban development but also over the leadership and direction of the city.

“Urban Renewal as Racial Conquest: The Ellen Wilson Dwellings on Capitol Hill,” Johanna Bockman, George Mason University

In 1941, the Ellen Wilson Dwellings opened as one of Washington, DC’s first public housing projects and one of the first white-segregated projects. In this proposed paper, I examine how the Ellen Wilson Dwellings became a white-segregated public housing, focusing on the period from 1915 to 1941. This paper is part of a chapter of my current book project titled Just One Block: Race, Radical Politics, and Displacement in Washington, DC. The “block” referred to in the title is the block between I and G Streets, SE, and 6th and 7th Streets, SE. African Americans experienced at least three mass displacements from the block, so the block is an instructive case study for understanding the causes and consequences of mass displacement. I also explore a variety of spatial imaginaries and globalizations crossing and battling through the block, including geographies of white domination and African American geographies of liberation as theorized by Katherine McKittrick.

The creation of the Ellen Wilson Dwellings, as well as restoration projects located on the block, were part of a larger attempt by federal officials and real estate industry leaders to “reclaim” the city from African Americans for white elites. They created the white spatial imaginary of “Capitol Hill” as part of a global white movement, a form of racial conquest. The Ellen Wilson Dwellings originated in an earlier project to memorialize Ellen Wilson and her support of slum clearance and segregation in the federal government by creating a housing project in her name. This memorial project was organized by national leaders of the Daughters of the Revolution, and the restoration projects were led by the former chief counsel of the Ku Klux Klan. These racial projects worked to erase African Americans from these spaces, and African Americans fought continually against their erasure.

February 23, 2021 @ 7 PM EST | Reading Buildings and Places

Chair: Richard Longstreth, George Washington University

Prominent houses of worship are a key form of symbolic capital for religious groups and their racial or ethnic communities. Throughout Washington, D.C.’s history, religious groups have competed for “visibility and clout” by claiming what Thomas Tweed in *America’s Church: The National Shrine and Catholic Presence in the Nation’s Capital* has termed “civic space.” Since for most of Washington’s history each religious congregation was associated with a single ethnicity or race, these houses of worship materialized symbolic capital for not only religions, but for racial and ethnic groups. This is particularly the case for minority communities.

In order to highlight the various relationships houses of worship in D.C draw between architecture and ethnicity, this paper will examine three buildings in three distinct locations: Metropolitan African Methodist Episcopal Church (Samuel T.G. Morsell, 1881–86), 1518 M St. NW; the National Gurdwara (now Sikh Gurdwara DC) (2002–06), 3801 Massachusetts Ave NW near Washington National Cathedral; and the Ukrainian Catholic National Shrine of the Holy Family (Myroslav D. Nimciv, 1979–99), 4800 Harewood Rd NE, near the Catholic University of America. Each of these are examples of “national churches,” a diverse collection of Washington-area institutions that appealed for financial support from throughout the nation in order to erect houses of worship that would prominently represent their religious traditions in the nation’s capital.

The physical form of the Ukrainian church with its longitudinal plan surmounted by three domes visibly signals its ethnic identity. In contrast, Metropolitan A.M.E.’s design is typical for urban Protestant churches in the 1880s, and zoning and financial restrictions resulted in a fairly non-descript building for the Gurdwara. Yet the prominent location of Metropolitan in downtown and of the Gurdwara on Embassy Row increases their symbolic capital for African Americans and Punjabi Sikhs. Thus, they play important roles in negotiating the status of their racial groups in the nation’s capital and the nation. This presentation will draw on archival materials as well as the design and ritual use of these buildings to show how ethnic identity is expressed and ethnic power developed in the nation’s capital.

“Shantytown Palimpsest: Race, Place, and the Bonus Army in Anacostia,” Jessica Larson, The Graduate Center, CUNY

For two months in 1932, around 20,000 veterans and their families occupied Washington, D.C. in demand of benefits promised to them following World War I. Termed the “Bonus Army,” these veterans constructed at least eight shantytown settlements in highly visible locations throughout the city, with the most significant site located in the long racially contested area of Anacostia. In spite of their status as “Hoovervilles,” the organization and implementation of these settlements had been remarkably systematic. As articulated by the leaders of the movement, the vision was to create settlements—albeit ephemeral ones—that reflected an ideal of American community. Possibly most astonishing, however, was the official abolition of Jim Crow; this decision must further be analyzed alongside the spatial divisions enforced by segregation in Anacostia, as well as the neighborhood’s 19th-century history as a shantytown erected by escaped slaves and freedmen.

This paper will consider the spatial decisions of the Bonus Army in relation to questions of self-determination through alternative and precarious means of housing. While the camps were pragmatic responses to a need for shelter, their designs, siting, and defense evince a conscious desire to both replicate familiar community organization as well as deliberately declare ownership over public space. Further, the camps’ production and growth, from something ephemeral and unplanned to a community with a semi-rational design, should be read within the racial and class auspices that have long directed Washington’s allocation and use of land. The architectural choices made by the Bonus Army gave physical form to the frustrations of marginalized Americans at a moment when the future of federal policy towards disenfranchised sectors of the population was uncertain.

Mapping Spatial Violence: Dispossession, Public Housing and “New Communities,” Sarah Jane Shoenfeld, Prologue DC

This paper draws on research undertaken in the past several years related to the dispossession and forced mobility of Black Washingtonians. Historic maps and maps created with historic data illustrate segregated
settlement patterns dating to the 1820s and the eastward migration of Black District residents over time. As of the mid-19th century, white residents lived closest to the federal core, while Black residents lived along the margins of downtown and on the blocks surrounding a fetid canal in Southwest DC.

In the early 20th century, racialized housing policies uprooted longstanding rural Black communities, pushing families that had lived on city’s outskirts into the aging urban core. At the same time, blight discourse framed the removal of Black residents from desirable sections of the city as “slum clearance.” Established Black settlements close to downtown, in proximity to employment and schools, were pushed to isolated and undeveloped sections of far northeast and southeast DC. Restrictive deed covenants used race to assign greater value to and incentivize investment in new white-restricted subdivisions on land where Black people had lived.

Narratives used to justify the upheaval and dispersal of black communities were deployed in service of clearing formerly rural areas for new development and for removing Black residents from downtown. In recent decades, “concentrated poverty” has been blamed for the need to demolish public housing, and is used to support a continued municipal agenda of clearing space for new development. Among a few recent housing projects that my paper highlights is Barry Farm, which was built on land formerly owned by Black people and occupies what was once the most densely populated site of indigenous settlement in the area. It is one of numerous projects across the city where planned redevelopment has uprooted and dispersed longstanding Black communities.