

Five Reasons to Tour Anacostia

by Russ Norfleet



1. Green Space and Views

About a mile east of the Anacostia River is a 200 to 300-foot high ridge that runs parallel to the river. The ridge is mostly forested. Union forts were constructed on the high points to protect Washington, DC from Confederate invasion during the Civil War. A trail runs along the ridge line with magnificent views of the metro area. Adjacent to Our Lady of Perpetual Help Roman Catholic Church is the location of Fort Stanton. The view of the monumental core of Washington, DC from here is hard to beat. It is like looking down on the city from a mountaintop.

Anacostia Park is 1,200 acres of green space along both sides of the Anacostia River. The park has open and wooded areas; recreation fields and facilities; trails for walking, running, and roller blading; wildlife; historic sites; and river views and access. Anacostia Park includes Kenilworth Aquatic Gardens, which has beautiful water lilies and lotuses, and Kenilworth marsh, with a boardwalk across wetlands.

The preservation of the fort locations and the creation of Anacostia Park were recommendations in the 1901 McMillian Commission Plan.

2. Small Town Charm

In 1854, Uniontown, the first planned suburb of Washington was laid out. Development languished until the 1880s when streetcars started crossing the Anacostia River. This spurred the construction of many modest, one- and two-story dwellings in a variety of architectural styles, (Italianate, Cottage, Washington Row, and a few Queen Anne) marketed to the white working class. In the rural areas were farms and small communities of whites and blacks.

In 1866, the Bureau of Refugees, Freedman, and Abandoned Lands, a government agency created to assist the formerly enslaved, bought and developed Barry's Farm southeast of Uniontown into a community where blacks could build and own their own homes.

By the turn of the 20th century, a thriving commercial district had developed along today's Martin

Luther King, Jr. Avenue and Good Hope Road.

The Anacostia Historic District was created in 1978 to protect the area's unique architecture and small-town charm. A walk along the Anacostia Heritage Trail through the historic district will increase your understanding of the neighborhood's history, culture, and architecture.

3. African American History

In 1791, when the area became part of the District of Columbia, blacks comprised about 25% of the population. Most were slaves, but some were free farmers, artisans and craftsman. When slavery was abolished in the District of Columbia on April 16, 1862, many of the newly emancipated slaves sought work and protection from the Union Army at the forts that circled the city, while others joined existing black settlements. By 1869, 500 African American families owned homes in Barry's Farm. In 1871, the first public school for African Americans opened in Barry's Farm.

In 1877, Frederick Douglass, the runaway slave, abolitionist, suffragist, author, newspaper editor, and statesman, purchased the house built by John Van Hook, one of the original developers of Uniontown. Located on a hill overlooking Anacostia, Cedar Hill has a spectacular view of the United States Capitol. Douglass was active in national and community affairs and worked diligently to protect the interests of the freedmen, many of whom were his neighbors. Three of his sons lived in Barry's Farm. The house, its furnishings, and artifacts are preserved so authentically by the National Park Service that you may expect Frederick Douglass to step forth and greet you on your tour.

In 1941, just before the U.S. entered World War II, Dr. Frederick Douglass Patterson, president of Tuskegee Institute (now Tuskegee University), and a former resident of Anacostia, asked First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt, a member of the board of the Rosenwald Foundation, to visit Tuskegee with other board members. They did and were asked to make a grant to Tuskegee to create an airfield and training program for black pilots. The grant was awarded and the first African American military flying unit was established, which came to be known as the Tuskegee Airmen. Patterson later founded the United Negro College Fund and the College Endowment Program. In 1987, he received the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the country's highest civilian honor from President Reagan.

Residents of Anacostia and Hillside played a key role in the desegregation of schools in Washington, DC and the nation. The Consolidated Parents Group (CPG) was formed to challenge the overcrowded and deteriorated condition of schools serving black students. In 1950, a group of 25 black students tried to enroll in recently built and underutilized whites only Sousa Junior High School, but were turned away. The resulting lawsuit, *Bolling v. Sharpe*, became a companion case to the *Brown v. Board of Education* Supreme Court decision in 1954 that desegregated schools across the nation.

4. The "A Right To The City" Exhibit at the Smithsonian Anacostia Community Museum

Description of the exhibit from the museum web page:

How Washingtonians have shaped and reshaped their neighborhoods in extraordinary ways. After a half-century of population decline and disinvestment, Washington, DC, today is home to a rapidly growing population, rising rents and home prices, major new development projects, but also deepening inequality. A Right to the City explores more than five decades of neighborhood change in the nation's capital as well as the rich history of organizing and civic engagement that accompanied it. Highlighting six

neighborhoods across the city—Adams Morgan, Anacostia, Brookland, Chinatown, Shaw, and Southwest—the exhibition tells the story of how ordinary Washingtonians have helped shape and reshape their neighborhoods in extraordinary ways: through the fight for quality public education, for healthy and green communities, for equitable development and transit, and for a genuinely democratic approach to city planning.

5. An Evolving Neighborhood

See how change is playing out in Anacostia.

Historically, investment in Anacostia has lagged behind other city neighborhoods, but it is happening now at a quickening pace.

The business district was designated as a DC Main Street in 2002 and funding was provided for commercial façade and streetscape improvements. DC's Department of Housing and Community Development moved its offices to Anacostia in 2009.

Government programs were put into place to encourage rehabilitation and development in the area. Some new housing and mixed-use projects have been constructed and some existing housing and commercial buildings have been rehabilitated.

Busboys and Poets opened its restaurant, bar, bookstore, and events venue on Martin Luther King, Jr. Avenue in March 2019. Maplevue Flats, a mixed-use project with 114 affordable apartments and 14,000 square foot of retail, was completed in 2019.

The US Coast Guard relocated its headquarters to St. Elizabeths West Campus in 2013. Homeland Security is in the process of relocating its headquarters to the property.

St. Elizabeths East Campus is being redeveloped as a mixed-use neighborhood of retail, office, housing, open space, and cultural amenities. The Entertainment and Sports Arena opened last year. It is the home of the reigning Women's National Basketball champion Washington Mystics, a practice facility for the Washington Wizards, and a location for concerts, boxing matches, esports tournaments and more. The first occupants are moving into the Residences at St. Elizabeths, an apartment complex with 252 units, 80% of which are affordable.

In Anacostia, like other lower-income DC neighborhoods, market forces (strong job market and strong demand for housing) are overwhelming the city's ability to ensure an adequate supply of affordable housing for existing and new residents. DC is putting into place programs to ensure more equitable and inclusive development and economic opportunity for all, including the provision of housing for a variety of income groups and household types in all neighborhoods.

In general, affordable units for purposes of receiving DC governmental assistance are units priced for households making at or less than 50% of the Area Median Income (AMI) and for people making at or less than 80% of AMI. The 2019 AMI for the Washington, DC area is \$121,300.

Anacostia residents' vision is a safe, walkable, and attractive neighborhood with restored historic buildings and compatible, well-designed new housing and mixed-use projects. They want a revitalized neighborhood with an array of places to live, work, worship, and play; a voice in the decisions that shape their neighborhood and future; and to participate in and benefit from Washington's economic growth.

An example of this more equitable and inclusive development concept is 11th Street Bridge Park, a project of the nonprofit organization, Building Bridges Across the River (BBAR). BBAR is working on building an elevated park across the Anacostia River on the piers of the old 11th Street Bridge.

The mission of BBAR is to improve the quality of life for children and adults who reside east of the Anacostia River by providing leadership, management and financial oversight of the Town Hall Education Arts Recreation Campus (THEARC), 11th Street Bridge Park, THEARC Farm, THEARC Theater, and Skyland Workforce Center. Through these projects, BBAR uses a multi-prong approach to address the social, health, environmental and economic disparities that exist in Anacostia and other



communities in Ward 8. With the support of community stakeholders, elected officials, and an engaged board of directors, BBAR gets things done.

11th Street Bridge Park will increase connectivity between those living on both sides of the Anacostia River. Bound by the Washington Navy Yard on the west and Anacostia Park on the east, the park will be a destination for some, a pedestrian and bicycle route for others, and a symbol of a connected city. The park will include outdoor performance spaces, playgrounds, urban agriculture, an Environmental Education Center, public art, and kayak and canoe launches.

BBAR has raised about 80% of the \$139 million in public and private funding necessary to transform the remains of the old bridge into a park and make investments in Ward 8, such as for affordable housing and job training. The intent is that the park be a prime example of how, through a community-driven-vetting process, the public and private sectors in Washington, DC can create world-class public space and share the benefits of urban development in a fairer and more inclusive way.

Reference Sources:

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