LE DROIT PARK HISTORIC DISTRICT

Night game in the old Griffith Stadium as seen from Le Droit Park

Le Droit Park Historic District

42.6 acre site roughly bounded by Rhode Island and Florida Avenues, NW, on the south, Howard University on the west, Elm Street on the north, and 2nd Street, NW on the east. Includes approximately 100 buildings c. 1873-1910. Included in the D.C. Inventory of Historic Sites and listed in the National Register of Historic Places.

- Early example of a planned, architecturally unified suburban subdivision.
- Important concentration of houses designed by noted local architect James McGill in the style of A. J. Downing.
- Home of many educators at Howard University and other prominent African American Washingtonians.
- Site of early efforts to achieve equal housing in a segregated, white neighborhood.
- Includes the Mary Church Terrell House, 326 T Street, NW, a National Historic Landmark.

Restoring or renovating your Le Droit Park home? Call the D.C. Historic Preservation Division. An historic preservation professional is assigned to assist you with technical information. 202-727-7360

THE LE DROIT PARK HISTORICAL SOCIETY, founded in 1977, has been the leader in initiatives to preserve the special ambience and historic character which make Le Droit Park an exciting place to live. The Society has successfully resisted attempts by Howard University to encroach upon the historic district for campus expansion. In 1982 the Society figured prominently in the restoration of the Anna J. Cooper Memorial Circle by the D.C. Government. The Society has also appeared often before the D.C. Historic Preservation Review Board to assist residents seeking approval of alterations which will preserve and enhance the historic character of Le Droit Park. Mrs. Theresa Brown has been president of the Society since its founding.

SUGGESTED READING:

Fitzpatrick, Sandra & Goodwin, Maria R. *The Guide to Black Washington: Places and Events of Historical and Cultural Significance in the Nation's Capitol*. New York: Hippocrene Books, 1993.

Terrell, Mary Church. *A Colored Woman in a White World*. Washington, D.C.: Tansell, Inc., 1940.

Washington History magazine, a publication of the Historical Society of Washington, D.C., 1307 New Hampshire Avenue, NW.

Hutchinson, Louise Daniel. *Anna J. Cooper: A Voice from the South*. Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institute Press, 1981.

On the cover: ***"Ball Park"*** Painted by Le Droit resident and artist Hilda Wilkinson Brown. Courtesy Horace Ward, Bethesda, Maryland

Architectural renderings, throughout this publication, from *Le Droit Park Illustrated* and *John H. McGill's Architectural Advertiser*, courtesy of the Historical Society of Washington, D.C.

" 'Tis town, yet country too."

The suburban residential community, packaged by a developer promising a unique lifestyle to prospective home-buyers, has long been a staple of the Washington real estate market. Rural land is purchased, subdivided, and laid out in streets. Model homes are built and a prospectus published. Although the land is farther out than previous urban development and has therefore been purchased more cheaply, convenience of transportation to work, shopping, schools, recreation, and cultural amenities are touted. Assurances are given that the community will be prestigious and advantageous in every way to purchasers. A fence is built with an elaborate entrance and appearance on the approach street. It defines the community and reassures home purchasers that their real estate investment will be secure and the developer's vision will become their reality. This development format can be discovered anew today in outlying rural Virginia and Maryland counties in the National Capital Region.

In 1873, Le Droit Park, one of the earliest and most historically significant of such communities, was created on Boundary Street (Florida Avenue) between Second and Seventh Streets, NW, in what was then rural Washington County, District of Columbia. To the north the site was adjacent to the newly established Howard University. Amzi L. Barber, one of the founders of Howard, married the daughter of the successful real estate broker, Le Droit Langdon. Resigning his post at Howard in 1873, he went into business with his brother-in-law, Andrew Langdon, establishing the real

estate development firm of A. L. Barber & Co. Four tracts of land were assembled, combined, surveyed, subdivided, and named Le Droit Park. Two of the tracts had been used as private residential grounds, one as a pasture and the last as a public common. Although the university had been chartered to serve African Americans, and many Howard professors were African American, homes in the new development were to be sold to whites only.

The Langdon House
(demolished)

This was the perfect setting for a community of substantial dwellings designed after the popular rural landscape ideal set forth by Andrew Jackson Downing in his 1850 volume of sketches and plans, *The Architecture of Country Houses*. Washington architect and developer James H. McGill was selected to design the Le Droit Park community. His sketches and floor plans in the Downing manner were published in an 1877 development prospectus, "Le Droit Park Illustrated," and in a larger 1879 publication, "Architectural Advertiser." The style of the houses was described as:

"of as varied exterior character as architectural skill will devise--no two being alike--and are noted for the convenience and completeness of this internal arrangement. All have open halls and stairways, liberal sized rooms, pantries, china closets, bedroom closets, bath rooms, cellars, and are supplied with ranges, bells, gas, water and sewerage. Bay windows, piazzas, balconies, conservatories, are built on most of them, and all are tastefully finished alike on all sides, so that the outlook from each is cheerful and agreeable."

The prospectus noted that *"no cheap structures will under any circumstances be permitted, and none will be encouraged but such as will enhance both the value of the adjoining property and the comfort of its occupants."*

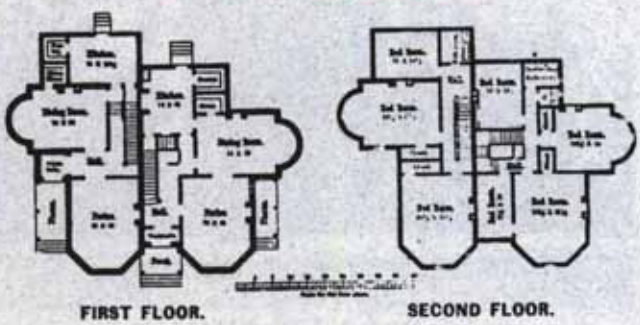
The prospectus linked the new community aesthetically with Franklin Park, the U. S. Capitol grounds, and the Soldiers' Home. These locations of agreeable public resort were landscaped in the romantic manner popularized by Downing and Frederick Law Olmsted. Olmsted, designer of Central Park in New York City, was then at work on the Capitol terraces and grounds. Franklin Park, center of one of the most fashionable residential neighborhoods in the city, had, with the departure of Union troops, recently been landscaped in the same style. The southern gates of the Soldiers' Home, with its extensive rural grounds, were then much closer to Le Droit Park, and the prospectus anticipated that extension of Harewood Avenue to those gates would bring many visitors through the Le Droit Park community. Nine blocks to the east on Boundary Street, Olmsted, Vaux & Co. were designing the campus of the Columbia Institution for the Deaf, Dumb, and Blind (now Gallaudet College) in the romantic rural landscape style.

Then as now, location and ease of commuting to the workplace were of primary consideration to the prospective purchasers of suburban properties. The developers' prospectus noted that Le Droit Park was

"only twelve squares from the Post Office, fifteen squares from the Capitol and seventeen squares from the Treasury--a twenty minutes' walk at a moderate pace. While, outside the city limits, it is nearer the Post Office than one-half the ground actually within the city boundaries;--it is nearer the Post Office than the greater part of 'Capitol Hill,' or 'South Washington,' or 'The West End.'"

In addition, Le Droit Park was at a hub of the rapidly developing public transportation system.

Residence of Gen. Wm. Birney and Mr. Arthur Birney.
1901-03 Harewood Avenue, NW



"The Ninth street line of the Metropolitan railroad and the Seventh street line of the Washington and Georgetown road run their cars directly to the Western angle of the Park, being less than one square to the Sixth street entrance. The new Belt line now run their cars around the corner of Fourth and P streets, within three squares, and by their charter are allowed to reach the Park. In addition to these street car lines another line is proposed to run from the center of the city through the middle of Le Droit Park, and out to the Soldiers' Home."

By January, 1877, forty-one residences and two stables had been completed at a cost of approximately $200,000. Eight of these, erected at a cost of $4000 to $12,000 each, were on the north, and two occupied the south side of Maple Avenue. Ten houses on the north and ten on the south side of Spruce Street were erected at a cost of $3500 each. Two houses on the north side of Elm Street cost $3000 each. Four houses on the east side and five on the west side of Harewood Avenue were erected at a cost of $4000 to $10,000 each. In addition, the developers had prepared the site by erecting a handsome brick and iron fence along the front of the subdivision and a high board fence along the rear. All interior fences were removed and the lots combined to form a "continuous green sward." Streets were graded, graveled and guttered with stone and brick. Brick sidewalks were provided and sewer, water, and gas mains laid. Ornamental shade trees and hedges were extensively planted. These site improvements cost $54,000. The Le Droit Park houses were marketed to businessmen and professionals:

"A residence that can be pleasantly occupied by his family during the entire year is best suited for the merchant, professional man or government clerk. One that has sufficient open ground around it, and is so constructed as to admit a free circulation of pure air, so as to be cool and comfortable during the summer months, and yet located convenient enough to his place of business, and surrounded by suitable improvements, to make it desirable for occupancy during the winter. One that is far enough away from the noise and bustle of commercial activity to secure quiet and moderate seclusion, yet near enough to enjoy the luxuries of city conveniences as well as the society of friendly neighbors."

Le Droit Park street scene

During the Civil War, President Abraham Lincoln had come this way in search of just this quality of life, spending his summers at Anderson House on the grounds of the Soldiers' Home. Here, in 1862, he wrote the draft of the Emancipation Proclamation.

By 1887, some 64 houses had been built. The promised bucolic, village-like atmosphere was created. Many years later residents wistfully recalled that Le Droit Park had been known as the flower garden of Washington. Prominent residents included James H. McGill, architect of the subdivision; General William Birney; Arthur Birney, professor of law at Howard; General William Wade Dudley; Benjamin Butterworth, congressman from Ohio and later Commissioner of Patents; E. B. Barnum, Washington representative of the New York clothing house of Devlin & Co.; and Henry Gannett, geologist, father of American map-making, and president of the Cosmos Club.

The 1877 prospectus enthusiastically declared that Le Droit Park "lies in the direct line of the natural growth of the city, and is the nearest, the cheapest and the best suburban property in the District of Columbia." This happy situation became a disadvantage as the natural growth of the city encroached upon the idyllic village. Howard Town, an African American community whose residents included many Howard University professors, was located along the northern boundary of Le Droit Park. The board fence separating Le Droit Park from Howard Town became a focus of dissension. Residents of Howard Town were impatient with the inconvenience being forced to go around, instead of through, this sequestered white community. Impatience turned to resentment over racial segregation. Climbing the fence to cut through Le Droit Park was followed by legal actions to have the fence removed. Finally, in July of 1888, the fence was torn down by protesting African Americans. Although it was quickly rebuilt, the point had been made. By 1891 the fence was abandoned. Traffic flowed through Le Droit Park as the village was assimilated into the city. Streets were renamed to correspond to the city streets, row-houses were built on undeveloped lots, and the illusion of a romantic, rural community hidden in the midst of the city was lost.

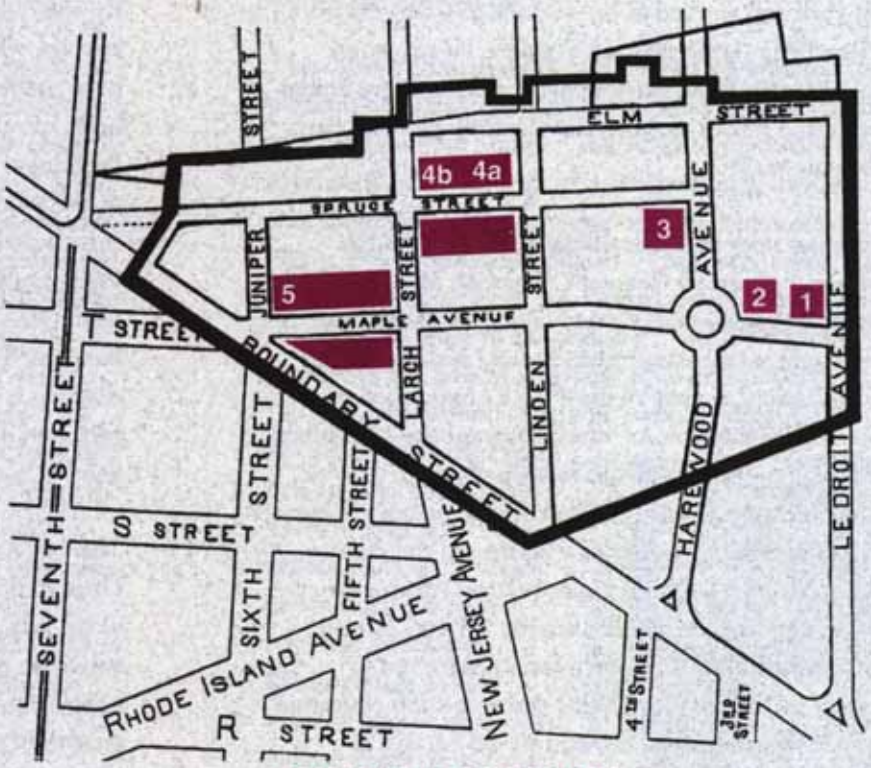
3 1922 Harewood Avenue, NW

Residence of Mr. David McClelland
301 Boundary Street, NW (demolished)

Residence of Mr. James H. McGill
1915 Harewood Avenue, NW (demolished)

4a 405 Spruce Street, NW

4b 419 Spruce Street, NW



MAP OF LE DROIT PARK

Historic District boundaries superimposed on 1877 map of Le Droit Park, published in *Le Droit Park Illustrated.* Rhode Island Avenue has since been extended through Le Droit Park. Harewood Avenue was closed north of Le Droit Park for expansion of Howard University campus. Boundary Street is now called Florida Avenue. *Original map courtesy: The Historical Society of Washington, D. C.*

5 1901 Juniper Street, NW
(East unit demolished)

1 201 T Street (Maple Avenue). The home of Anna J. Cooper and the Frelinghuysen University.

2 3rd and T Streets (Harewood and Maple Avenues) on Anna Cooper Circle. Double house constructed for General William Birney and Mr. Arthur Birney.

4 400 block of U Street (Spruce - indicated in color on map above). The only block which includes all of the original McGill houses with no subsequent construction.

5 500 block of T Street (Maple Avenue - indicated in color on map above). Several very handsome McGill houses remain.

Model home examples from *Le Droit Park Illustrated* and *James H. McGill's Architectural Advertiser*.

"Old Elks Home" Originally the home of David McClelland. View from Third Street. Demolished to make way for the Safeway store. Coutesy Lilian Thomas Burwell, Hilda Wilkinson Brown Collection.

"It was 1934 when Hilda and her husband Schley Brown came to live in this house were he could open his medical practice and she could be closer to Miner Teachers' College where she was, in essence, the art department. They loved this LeDroit Park neighborhood. Nine years earlier the Elks had bought the mansion across the street from the estate of David McClelland after the old man died. The mansion had been the gateway to LeDroit Park and the home of the family whose orchards extended well toward the northern boundary of the Park at Elm Street. Marjory Webb Vernon, who still lives in the house her parents bought on Third Street, remembers the fruit trees and fenceless yards that still spread on behind the rowhouse she grew up in after the land was subdivided. The magnificent magnolia tree still stood there strong.

Hilda Brown looked across 'her' street on evenings and weekends and painted a memory for us of what was left of the McClelland property. The Sundays of bands playing on the lawn while children walked and romped are not shown in the semi-abstract painting, but the mood of dignity and early evening calm is captured there. One's mind can easily people the building with bridge clubs and teas, the sunset lawn with parties lit by Japanese lanterns. Geneva Perry, one of the musicians who once played there, recalls the importance of that Old Elks Home as a central core of community. Today she takes her morning constitutional jogs past the site of the Elks home, now a Safeway store, as she returns to her house on T Street, a block down from the circle on Third. She takes heart in the memories stirred by the painting and the renewed interest in the area."

Le Droit Park was full of such distinguished and energetic citizens. Anna J. Cooper, for instance, who also lived on T Street, had been born in slavery. One of the first African American women to graduate from Oberlin College, Cooper earned a Ph.D. at the Sorbonne in Paris at the age of 67. Lillian Burwell remembers her not only as "a leading author and educator, but also a warm and friendly neighbor who greeted and encouraged every child she saw passing by." Cooper lived a full and productive life until her death in 1964 at the age of 105.

The designation of Le Droit Park as an Historic District is a recognition of the vitality of the community's history and its important place in African American cultural life. Today, visitors and residents who experience the neighborhood's beauty and traditions also come to appreciate its unique contribution to the city and the nation.

PROMINENT AFRICAN AMERICANS WHO LIVED IN LE DROIT INCLUDE:

EDWARD BROOKE. (1919-) **1938 3rd Street, NW.** U.S. Senator. Educated at Dunbar High School, Howard University, Boston University law School, 1st African American elected to state-wide office in Massachusetts (attorney general, 1962). U.S. Senator, Massachusetts 1963-79. Brooke grew up in this house, his family moving to Brookland when he was a student at Howard. His father, Edward Brooke II, was an attorney with the Veterans Administration for 50 years.

RALPH BUNCHE. (1904-1971) Statesman. Son of a Detroit barber, Bunch grew up in poverty. B.A. in international relations from U.C.L.A., Phi Beta Kappa. Harvard Ph.D. Taught at Howard from 1928 and established its political science department. First African American to hold important State Department post (during World War II), helped draw up United Nations Charters. Held high United Nations office, was key negotiator in 1948 Arab-Israeli war. Awarded Nobel Peace Prize 1950.

ANNA J. COOPER. (1858-1964) **201 T Street, NW.** Educator. Born a slave, Cooper was one of first black female graduates of Oberlin College (1884) MA also Oberlin, Ph.D. Sorbonne 1924. Dissertation, "The Attitude of France in Regard to Slavery [American] During the Revolution." Taught Latin at M Street and Dunbar High Schools (40 years), principal of M Street (1901-06), president of Frelinghuysen University (founded 1906) offering adult education classes to working African Americans unable to attend school during the day. Classes held at her LeDroit Park home for many years.

BENJAMIN O. DAVIS. (1877-1970) General. First African American to become a general in the regular army, promoted in 1940 by President Roosevelt to brigadier general. Began service in Spanish-American War, 1898. Later served in all-black Ninth Cavalry. Many awards including Distinguished Service Medal, Bronze Star.

OSCAR DE PRIEST. (1871-1951) **419 U Street, NW.** Legislator. First African American alderman elected to Chicago City Council (1915); first African American elected to congress in the twentieth century (1928, 3rd District Illinois).

PAUL LAURENCE DUNBAR. (1872-1906) **321 U Street, NW.** Poet. First internationally acclaimed African American poet. Published first book of poetry 1892. *Majors and Minors* acclaimed by *Harper's Weekly*. *Lyrics of Lowly Life* introduced by critic William Dean Howells (1896). Dunbar's reputation has continued to grow since his early death, and he is now one of America's most beloved poets. Author of poem, "I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings."

CHRISTIAN FLEETWOOD. (1840-1914) **319 U Street, NW.** Army officer. Educated secretly by a Baltimore doctor. One of first African Americans to be awarded Congressional Medal of Honor. 4th Regiment, US Colored Volunteer Infantry. Medal awarded for heroism at Battle of Chafin's Farm near Richmond, 1864. Employed as clerk, Freedmen's Savings & Trust Co. and War Department 30 years. Organized colored militia and National Guard units in D.C.

JULIA WEST HAMILTON. (1866-1958) **320 U Street, NW.** Civic leader. President, Phillis Wheatley YWCA 28 years, 1st woman president board of trustees Metropolitan AME Church (28 years), treasurer predominantly white Women's Relief Corps Auxiliary of the Grand Army of the Republic, National Association of Colored Women, and National Council of Negro Women.

ERNEST E. JUST. (1893-1941) **412 T Street, NW.** Educator and research scientist. Graduated Phi Beta Kappa, Dartmouth 1907. Graduate training, Woods Hole Marine Biological Laboratory. Howard University faculty, international reputation as a genetic biologist whose discoveries in embryological research were far in advance of his time.

FOUNTAIN PEYTON. (1861-1951) **330 T Street, NW.** Attorney. Howard Law School, graduated 1886. Peyton and Renfro. Listed in 1894 Union League Directory as one of only 16 African American attorneys practicing in D.C. House bought by civil rights leader Rev. Jesse Jackson in mid-1980s.

WILLIS RICHARDSON. **512 U Street, NW.** Dramatist. Educated M Street High School. Important dramatist of Harlem Renaissance, first African American to have serious play produced on a Broadway stage. *Chip Woman's Fortune* performed by The Ethiopian Art Players in Chicago, Washington, and New York. *The Broken Banjo* (1925) and *Bootblack Lover* (1926) both awarded prestigious Amy Spingarn Prize.

JOHN HENRY SMYTH. **414 U Street, NW.** Attorney and diplomat. Graduate of Howard University's first law school class in 1871. Named U.S. minister and consul to Liberia (1878-85) by Pres. Rutherford B. Hayes in recognition of work for Republican Party in 1876 election.

MARY CHURCH TERRELL. (1863-1954) **326 T Street, NW.** Distinguished educator, suffragette, and civil rights activist. Educated Antioch Model School and Oberlin College. MA Oberlin 1888. Achieved national prominence as first president of National Association of Colored Women (1897), first African American citizen to serve on D.C. School Board (1895-1919), member of Committee of Forty (founders of NAACP 1909), instrumental in bringing 1953 Supreme Court suit outlawing segregation in public places. House designated National Historic Landmark 5/15/75.

ROBERT TERRELL. (1857-1925) **326 T Street, NW.** Educator, attorney, jurist. Educated Groton Academy, Harvard University, magna cum laude 1884. Law degree from Howard University. Principal, M Street High School. Appointed to Washington Board of Trade in 1890s. First African American judge on D.C. Municipal Court. House designated National Historic Landmark 5/15/75.

JAMES E. WALKER. (1874-1918) **502-504 T Street, NW.** Educator. Graduate M Street High School, Miner Teachers' College. Teacher, principal, administrator, D.C. Public Schools for 24 years. Joined First Separate Battalion (colored) of the National Guard in 1896; commander, 1912. Unit was the first activated before entry into World War I. Died of illness contracted in line of duty, buried in Arlington Cemetery, 1918.

BENETTA BULLOCK WASHINGTON. (1918-1991) **408 T Street, NW.** Educator. Daughter of Rev. George O. Bullock, influential pastor of Third Baptist Church. Educated Dunbar High School, Howard University. Principal of Cardozo High School, Director of U.S. Womens' Job Corps, wife of Mayor Walter Washington.

WALTER WASHINGTON. (1915-) **408 T Street, NW.** Civic leader. Howard graduate, active in New Negro Alliance. Head of National Capital Housing Authority. First mayor of the District of Columbia elected under home rule in 1975.

GARNET C. WILKINSON. (1874-1969) **406 U Street, NW.** Educator. Graduate M Street High School, Oberlin College (1902), Howard Law School. Principal of Armstrong, 1st Principal of Dunbar, 1st Assistant Superintendent in charge of colored schools for 30 years.

"Langston" by Hilda Wilkinson Brown. Known as the poet laureate and dean of African American poetry, Langston Hughes (1902-67) frequented Le Droit Park intellectual circles from 1924 to 1926. His first volume of poetry, *The Weary Blues*, was published in 1926. Hughes was the nephew of John Mercer Langston, dean of the Howard Law School. Courtesy Howard University Gallery of Art.

LE DROIT PARK HISTORIC DISTRICT
by
TANYA EDWARDS BEAUCHAMP

A Heritage Tourism Project of
THE GEORGETOWN HERITAGE TRUST
Betty Jane Johnson Gerber, President

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Theresa Brown, President

THE HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF WASHINGTON, D.C.

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Marion Barry, Jr., Mayor
Hampton Cross, D.C. State Historic Preservation Officer

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"Third & Rhode Island, Le Droit Park" by Hilda Wilkinson Brown

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