Strivers' Section Historic District

WASHINGTON DC

Map of Washington City by A. Boschke (1857).
Courtesy of the Library of Congress, Geography and Map Division.

Strivers' Section Historic District

The Strivers' Section Historic District, located between 16th and 19th Streets, and T Street and Florida Avenue in northwest Washington, is a compact residential enclave of rowhouses and small apartment buildings. The neighborhood was developed in the mid- to late 19th century when the District of Columbia began to expand beyond the pre-Civil War boundaries of "Old Downtown" into what was then the rural outposts of the nation's capital.

The name, "Strivers' Section" derives from a wide-spread colloquialism used in the 1920s to depict residential areas which were becoming home to an expanding African-American population. Once derisive, the term was applied, in particular, to the 1700 block of U Street where African Americans, who were purchasing residences from white owners, were described as "striving to get beyond members of their own race." This unfavorable criticism attached to the term, however, was rejected at the time by the well-known social historian William Henry Jones in his book, *The Housing of Negroes in Washington* (1929). In this work, Jones hailed the "Negro pioneers" who expanded beyond segregated areas of the city into new ones, and thereby bestowed a new, positive meaning to the term "Strivers."

Despite the 1920s image of the Strivers' Section Historic District as a white area being transformed into an African-American one, the reality is that the neighborhood has historically always been a mixed-race area. Undeveloped until the fourth quarter of the 19th century, the Strivers' Section Historic District saw rapid growth and development between 1890 and 1910, in which all segments of society—working-class and professional, and African American and white—were equally well represented.

The area that would become the Strivers' Section Historic District was farmland throughout the 18th and 19th centuries. Despite being included within the boundaries of the federal city as laid out by Pierre L'Enfant in 1791, the area remained a rural and wooded preserve until the middle of the 19th century. By 1852, it was platted to include its current configuration of eleven squares, subdivided with streets, alleys and large building lots; however, none of these improvements existed except on paper. Only a scattering of small houses, or shanties, probably serving as domestic quarters for tenant farmers, occupied the landscape.

Oak Lawn, circa 1873 (identified as "Willard's" on the inside cover), occupied the site of the present-day Hilton Hotel. Originally built circa 1820, Oak Lawn was remodeled in 1873 into this extravagant four-story, Second Empire-style house. Long a Washington landmark, the building was razed in 1952; a year later, its celebrated 400 year-old "Treaty Oak," reputed to have been the site in the late 17th century of several treaties between the first English settlers in the area and the local Indian tribes, was also leveled by developers. *Courtesy of the D.C. Public Library, Washingtoniana Division.*

Just beyond the district on the outside edge of the city, a large estate known as Widow's Mite in the early 19th century, and later as Oak Lawn, commanded the higher elevation of the area and enjoyed majestic views of the nascent city. Below Oak Lawn was Holmead's Burying Ground (or, Western Burial Ground), established by the city in 1798 as one of two public cemeteries. Holmead's operated as a cemetery until 1884, at which point the bodies were removed and the square sold by the City Commissioners for private development.

Camp of the 7th Regiment, New York, on 14th Street, 1861, near Strivers' Section. *Courtesy of the Library of Congress, Geography and Map Division.*

The first significant developments to affect the neighborhood's future growth—temporary military housing and transportation improvements—occurred during the Civil War. At that time, as the city's burgeoning population was straining available resources, several military camps were established near the city boundaries, and in the area around Strivers' Section. Camp Barker, located on 14th Street between T and U Streets, NW was one of three major military camps that were set up as havens for incoming African Americans. These housing camps later became refugee settlements and endured as neighborhoods after the Civil War.

At the same time the city was establishing temporary housing to accommodate the swelling population, it also began its first major step towards improving it's infrastructure through the development of a horse-drawn streetcar system. The city's first implemented streetcar route, operated by the Washington and Georgetown Company, opened in 1862 and ran along 14th Street from New York Avenue to Boundary Street.

The location of Strivers' Section on prime, undeveloped territory in proximity to the 14th Street streetcar line held great appeal to the city's countless land speculators. By 1873-1874, the land, which had once been held by a single prominent merchant, was now owned by at least a dozen different individuals, each banking on the northerly growth of the flourishing, post-Civil War city. These speculators were both long-time land owners and entrepreneurs hoping to encourage the growth of the area by, first, reconfiguring the squares by cutting through streets and/or alleys to make new ones, then subdividing the land into buildable lots, and finally, improving them with rows of dwellings.

Henry A. Willard, who re-subdivided Square 151 in 1868, was one of several land speculators in Strivers' Section. (Willard Street, which bisects the square, was named after him.) Willard, a prominent Washingtonian who had gained notoriety for his opening of the City Hotel (later, Willard Hotel) in 1847, was keenly interested in the development of Washington and was appointed, under Alexander (Boss) Shepherd and the Territorial Government (1871-1874), vice president of the Board of Public Works. *Courtesy of the Historical Society of Washington, D.C.*

Current-day photo of 1700 block of T Street, built 1873-1874. This row of modest-sized Italianate-style dwellings, along with a group on Seaton Place, survive as the oldest buildings in the Strivers' Section Historic District.

These speculators, as a group, achieved almost instant success. They built over 150 houses in the two-year period between 1873 and 1875 and transformed the once rural and isolated territory into a viable residential community. The men responsible for this transformation were among hundreds of nameless others whose small-time speculation helped to shape the growth of the city.

The first dwellings in Strivers' Section, built in the 1870s, ranged from modest one- and two-story frame structures to more substantial two-, three-, and even four-story brick dwellings. The frame structures, many of which have since been replaced, were valued anywhere from between $50 to $1,000 by the city's tax assessors. The brick houses, some of which were executed in the avant-garde Second Empire style, such as those at the corners of 17th and U Streets and 17th and V Streets, were appraised at as much as $3,000.

The area's convenient location to major transportation routes, together with its proximity to Howard University—the nation's leading African-American University—combined to attract members of Washington's African-American elite. Since its earliest development in the 1870s, the area has been associated with several prominent African Americans.

The most important of these is Frederick Douglass, former slave, orator and abolitionist, who is often called the father of the Civil Rights Movement. In 1877, Douglass bought the southern three dwellings of the grand, Second Empire-style row at the corner of 17th and U Streets, NW. His son, Lewis Douglass, moved into the middle of the three houses at 2002 17th Street, and lived there until his death in 1908. In addition to providing his son a home, Frederick Douglass rented out one of the other houses to family friend, James E. Storum. Storum, an educator and entrepreneur, founded the Capital Savings Bank and was closely associated with the Industrial Building and Savings. He eventually purchased the house at 2004 17th Street from Douglass, and lived there well into the 20th century.

Current-day photo of Second Empire-style row at 17th and V Streets, NW built 1874-1875.

Lewis Douglass, son of abolitionist Frederick Douglass, was a printer with the U.S. Government and a publishing partner with his father of the *New National Era* newspaper from 1869 to 1872. Lewis lived at 2002 17th Street, NW from 1877 until his death in 1908.
Courtesy of the National Park Service, Frederick Douglass National Historic Site.

Frederick Douglass purchased three houses at 2000-2004 17th Street, NW in 1877 as a financial investment. Income from these properties, supplemented by lectures and royalties, enabled the famous abolitionist to live comfortably at his estate in Anacostia for the last 20 years of his life.
Courtesy of the National Park Service, Frederick Douglass National Historic Site.

Current-day photograph of 2000 and 2002 17th Street, NW. While living at 2002 17th Street, Lewis Douglass dealt in real estate, and later became president of the Industrial Building and Savings, the first banking institution in Washington owned and operated by African Americans.

This streetcar ran from the Potomac River Steamboat wharves up 7th Street, NW, along U Street to 18th Street, NW, across Rock Creek on the Calvert Street bridge, and then north on Connecticut Avenue to the Zoological Park (National Zoo). *Courtesy Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Collection.*

Calvin Brent, a well-known African-American architect lived, for one year, adjacent to Lewis Douglass in the Romanesque Revival-style home of his bride, Aurelia Brown, at 1700 V Street, NW. In that year, Brent designed and had built the house at 1704 V Street, NW as rental property. U Street was also home to several well-established African Americans including Dutton Ferguson, a nationally noted leader in the 1930s who was known locally for challenging segregation on U Street, and Arthur Curtis, an ophthalmologist and his wife, Helen, who had also been the center of a court case involving racial covenants. James C. Dancy, editor, realtor, and D.C. Recorder of Deeds from 1904-10 lived in Strivers', as did Joseph Lealand Johnson, a Howard University faculty member. Langston Hughes, the famous poet, lived just outside the historic district when he and his mother rented rooms above a laundry on the north side of the 1700 block of S Street.

The historic district was not restricted to the notable and affluent. The row of small, two-story Italianate-style brick dwellings on the south side of T Street, east of 18th Street, was occupied by working-class African-American families since their construction in the early 1870s, as were the houses on Seaton Place. Other pockets of working-class residents were located throughout the larger area.

A significant catalyst for future development came in 1893 with the arrival of the electric streetcar. In that year, the Rock Creek Railway Company (later Capital Traction), which offered streetcar service from 18th and U Streets, NW north to the new suburb of Chevy Chase, extended its line east along U Street to 7th Street, NW, cutting through the Strivers' neighborhood.

This section of the Rock Creek Railway line provided a direct link to the streetcar system's two north-south routes, along 7th and 14th Streets. Stimulated by the streetcar, and in spite of a temporary lull in development surrounding the Economic Panic of 1893, speculative development in the Strivers' Section boomed between 1893 and 1907. This boom not only created the long blocks of Queen Anne/Edwardian rowhouses that characterize the neighborhood today, but it also began to alter the socio-cultural composition of the area. What had been developing as a strong predominantly African-American community, was now open to middle-class white expansion. The same factors that encouraged African-American migration to the area—convenient transportation, changing settlement patterns provoked by increased population, the prospect of a new house and distance from the over-crowded downtown—also appealed to the city's white population.

The 1700 block of U Street, NW, 1949. Constructed in 1902, this long row of houses on the north side of U Street was designed by architect Nicholas T. Haller, a prolific designer in D.C. *Courtesy of the Historical Society of Washington, D.C.*

The Howard and Baltimore Apartments at 1615 and 1617 Swann Street, NW, designed by George S. Cooper, 1903. These small apartments illustrate the neighborhood's move away from the late 19th-century rowhouse to the apartment building.

The architecture of this second wave of development in Strivers reflected the impending change. Substantial three- and four-story brick houses were constructed for a solidly middle class audience. Located along T, U, and V Streets, as well as Willard Street, and Florida Avenue, these rowhouses were designed by some of the city's most notable and prolific turn-of-the-century architects, including George S. Cooper, Nicholas T. Haller, Louis D. Meline, Thomas Haislip and Nicholas R. Grimm. During this period, over half of the area's 429 buildings were constructed, leaving only random groupings of lots on which significant future developments could take place.

After the turn-of-the-century, as the area became increasingly developed, small apartment buildings and rowhouse flats became popular. Architecturally indistinguishable from the large rowhouses that preceded them, and often tucked into vacant lots between them, the flats of Strivers' Section offered domestic quarters for two or more families, in what was becoming an increasingly populated city.

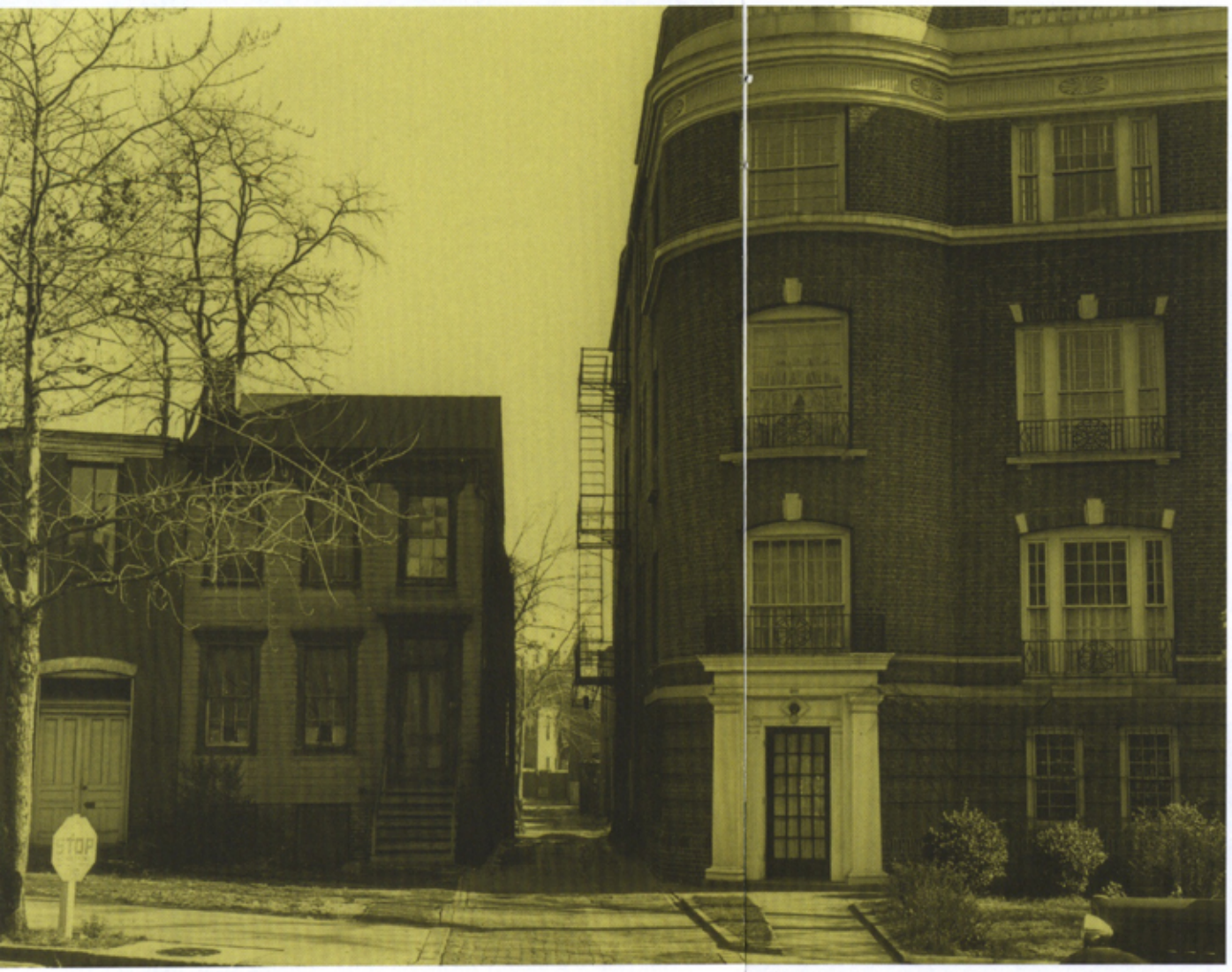
On the few remaining contiguous lots in the area, builders erected small, three-story apartment buildings. Several larger, multi-storied apartment buildings were also constructed in the area, though generally on large and prominent corner lots that defined the district's edge.

Current-day photo of 1733 T Street, NW, 1905.

By 1900, after the initial surge of building activity had transformed the Strivers' area from a remotely developed grouping of speculative houses to complete and uninterrupted rows of in-town residences, the area was home to an equal number of African Americans and whites.

Although the overall community included members of both races, they generally occupied segregated clusters of dwellings and rarely mixed socially. African American residents could be found along Swann, and T Streets, and at the east end of Seaton Place. Whites resided on Willard Street and New Hampshire Avenue, and at the west end of Seaton Place. The cluster of dwellings at 17th and U Streets—still occupied by the Douglass and Storum families—helped to create a community of African Americans around 17th Street and Seaton Place, that included doctors, teachers, government workers and laborers. Another community of African Americans, primarily members of the working-class, were located in the modest, two-story dwellings on T Street, NW. Although these residents were mostly laborers, all of them owned the dwellings in which they lived.

Albemarle Apartments, 1830 17th Street, NW, 1900, Thomas Franklin Schneider, architect.



1901 and 1905 19th Street, NW, 1935. This historic photograph of a modest, 19th-century frame dwelling (left), next to a stylish Beaux Arts apartment building (constructed in 1917), clearly illustrates the diverse socio-economic composition of the Strivers' neighborhood in the 1910s and 1920s. In 1920, the U.S. Census indicates that the apartment building was home to two white Army officers and their families; the frame dwelling (demolished) was the residence of an African-American laborer and his family.
Carl Mydans, FSA photographer. Courtesy Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division.

After 1900, as the formerly undeveloped land became densely built, both races continued to move into the area in increased numbers. However, as residential segregation intensified in the city during the 1910s and 20s, racial separation and intolerance reigned. The Strivers' area thus found itself in the middle of two opposing trends—that between an established wealthy Dupont Circle that was predominantly white, and a rising African-American business and entertainment district whose center was around 14th and U Streets, NW.

During this period and by 1920, subtle shifts in the area's population occurred: the formerly mixed-race Seaton Place became exclusively African American, while all of Willard Street, and much of T Street became all white. U Street was in the beginning stages of its own transformation from a white-owned and occupied street to an African American one.

After 1920, following two decades of gradual changes, the racial balance in the Strivers' area dramatically shifted to a largely African American one. This shift was clearly brought on by the flourishing African-American U Street corridor. Although this community was concentrated between 7th and 17th Streets, its influence extended along U Street as far west as 19th Street. Several rows of formerly white-owned and occupied residences in the neighborhood were purchased by solidly middle-class, professional African Americans, thus conferring the name "Strivers' Section" to the area. According to social historian William Henry Jones, certain streets in the district, including Willard Street, Seaton Place, S and T Streets, "figured largely in the recent expansions of the Negro population," while U and R Streets, between 16th and 18th Streets, were identified as "Strivers' Section" or the "Community of Negro aristocracy."

During this time, white enclaves in the area sought to protect themselves from African-American expansion. In 1920, at the southern edge of the district, a group of white residents in the 1700 block of S Street drew up a restrictive covenant binding the signers to neither sell nor rent to African Americans. This particular covenant, which was violated shortly after being prepared, became the focus of a court case, Corrigan v. Buckley, involving the legality of racial covenants. In 1923, the D.C. Supreme Court ruled in the case that covenants were legally enforceable. This decision was later upheld by both the Court of Appeals of the District of Columbia in 1924, and the U.S. Supreme Court in 1926. It was not until 1948 that racial covenants were ruled unenforceable by the U.S. Supreme Court.

In spite of, and in many ways due to this racial segregation, the U Street corridor and surrounding communities, including Strivers' Section thrived. In the 1940s, Strivers' Section was home to established African-American professionals, including Howard University faculty members, attorneys, doctors, business owners, and government workers. Behind these affluent streets, however, there still lingered the neglected, low-income, African-American residences of the neighborhood, particularly on Seaton Place. Despite the area's escalating status, Seaton Place never emerged from its poverty. In the early 1940s, the street and its residents became the focus of several photographs taken by Gordon Parks, a photographer for the Farm Security Administration (FSA). In his photography of urban America, Parks sought to expose the evils of racism and poverty by showing the people who suffered the most under it.

Current-day photograph of 1738 V Street, NW, built in 1891 as one of five attached dwellings.

After restrictive covenants were overturned by the U.S. Supreme Court in 1948, many of the more established African Americans of Strivers' Section moved beyond this densely developed community to newer and less crowded neighborhoods. During the 1950s, the greater U Street corridor suffered a serious cultural decline. Increased density, overcrowding and poverty began to plague the once well-off area. In 1968, the riots that followed the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. devastated much of the social and economic infrastructure of an area that had once been the pride of the city's African-American community.

Despite urban renewal efforts in the area which, as proposed, would have eliminated part of the area's historic fabric, the Strivers' Section Historic District survives remarkably intact. The Third District Police Headquarters building, welcomed by the neighborhood in 1974, is the most significant modern development, having replaced historic buildings on the site.

Seaton Place, NW, 1942.
Gordon Parks, FSA photographer, courtesy Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division.

Peanut Vendor on Seaton Place, NW, 1942. *Gordon Parks, FSA photographer, courtesy Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division.*

Engine Company #9, circa 1921. Built in 1893 at 1624 U Street, NW, this firehouse was recently renovated and converted into condominiums and offices.
Photo courtesy of Jackson H. Gerhart.

including an old stable for milk wagon horses associated with Chestnut Farms Dairy.

More recent developments, such as the arrival of Metro's Green Line, and the renovation of historic buildings have helped to reinvigorate the neighborhood. In 1983, the Strivers' Section Historic District was officially recognized as a local historic district, and, in 1985, was listed on the National Register of Historic Places. Overwhelmingly residential, the district includes approximately 430 buildings, constructed between 1875 and 1946. Today, the Strivers' Section Historic District is an increasingly vibrant community that attracts a diverse population.

THE STRIVERS' SECTION HISTORIC DISTRICT
BY KIMBERLY PROTHRO WILLIAMS

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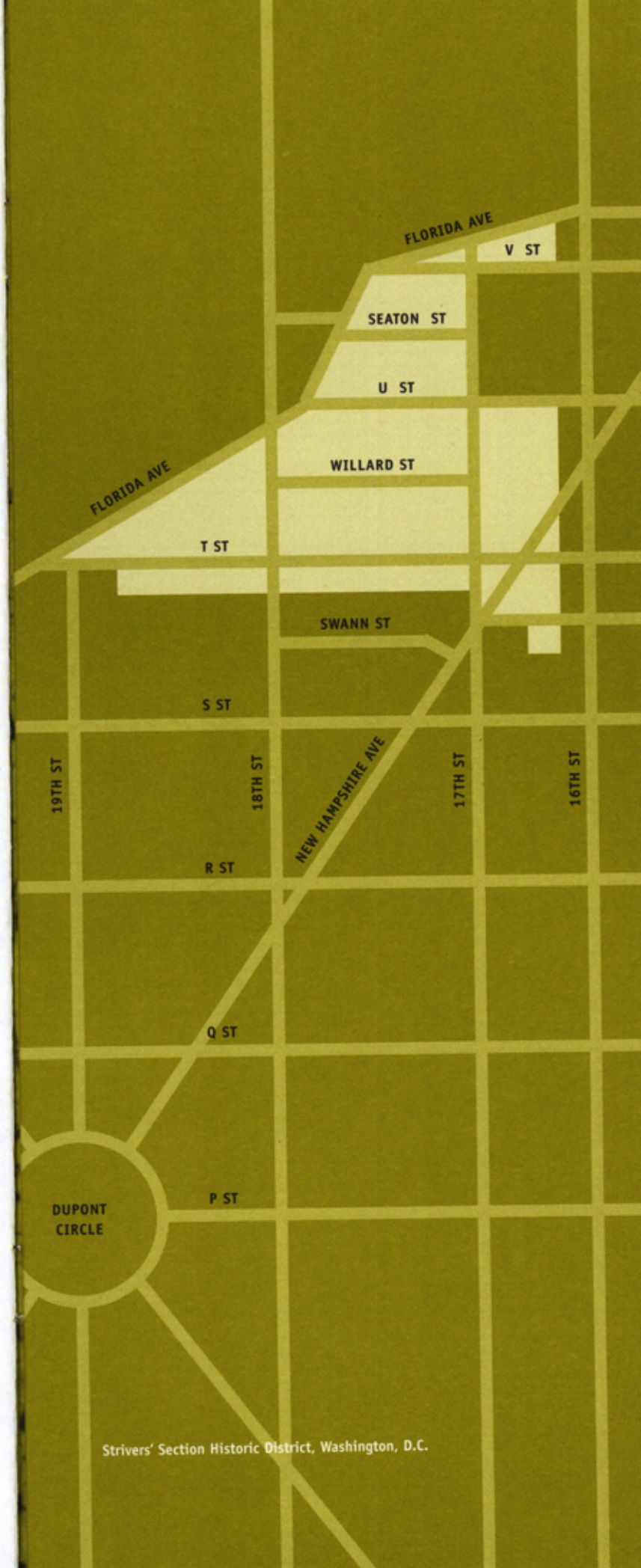

Strivers' Section Historic District, Washington, D.C.

The 1700 block of U Street, NW, 1951.

Courtesy of the Historical Society of Washington, D.C.