Enclosed are excerpts from three of the most recent issues of Washington History. Please use the resources at www.dchistory.org/publications/Washington-History for copies of back issues.
From the Executive Director

The opening of the new Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture on the National Mall is an important milestone for history—for local Washington, D.C., as well as the nation. The Historical Society is proud to have been partners with the museum since 2014. In celebration of the D.C. history community’s newest arrival, I encourage you to view the YouTube video of Lonnie Bunch, the museum’s founding director, accepting the Historical Society’s 2016 Visionary Historian Award on May 26, presented by Mayor Muriel Bowser and Congresswoman Eleanor Holmes Norton (YouTube.com/DCHistoryChannel).

The progress we have made revitalizing our exhibits and programs is astounding. We have presented six new exhibits and related programs since the creation of the groundbreaking “For the Record” in the spring of 2015. We continue to plan exhibits that consider the past, present, and, yes, the future of the District. The Historical Society creates learning opportunities, student experiences, and programs for local residents both new and generations old. These are framed within themes such as “Building D.C.”—urban planning, architecture, and design in retrospect—and “1968”—when the assassination of the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. lit the fuse of social unrest. Your participation in creating these exhibits and programs and your responses to them will help shape your Historical Society’s future.

As the number one fan of Washington History, I would like to congratulate John DeFerrari on being named the magazine’s review editor. John is the scribe behind the widely read “Streets of Washington” blog, and he already has brought fresh insight to our editorial team. Welcome aboard!

Last but not least, I hope to see you at the historic Carnegie Library in the coming months for all the exciting programs and exhibits (details at DCHistory.org). I encourage you to volunteer and donate to the Historical Society of Washington, D.C., to support the important work of the only local nonprofit museum dedicated to collecting, preserving, and interpreting the history of Washington.

—John T. Suau

From the Editor

A 1 Washington History we seek out the novel, the unexpected, and the intriguing. Imagine, for example, that a seemingly sturdy, permanent building once might have been located in a different spot. In our latest “Teachable Moment” (page 49), Matthew Gilmore and Kim Prothro Williams explain that building moving happened often. Examining a 1928 “Permit to Move” application, they show how Washingtonians have long altered our built environment by simply picking up and moving buildings—often just a few feet, but sometimes a mile or more—that happen to be in the way. It’s quite amazing!

The articles and features in this issue offer a variety of fresh insights into our city’s past. Local scholar Antoinette J. Lee’s unexpected story of Asian and Asian American students attending white D.C. public schools during the Jim Crow era challenges the notion that segregation was a fixed, rigid system (page 14). Ana Patricia Rodríguez of the University of Maryland uses literature and music to expand our understanding of the Salvadoran community, which comprises more than one-third of the area’s Latino population (page 3). Historian Rachel Christian uncovers the life of William Metzerott, a German immigrant who built a thriving music business during and after the Civil War (page 54). In our “Person of Interest” feature, we meet Annie Stein, a radical daughter of Jewish immigrants who helped drive the movement to end segregation in city businesses (page 80). Asian students in white schools, Salvadoran artists, immigrant music entrepreneurs, radical labor organizers, . . . these Washingtonians have shaped the course of D.C. history in fascinating and sometimes surprising ways.

Come along as we go underground with photographer Phil Portlock, whose extraordinary and often eerie photos of the construction of the Metro offer a different perspective on our once-beloved but now beleaguered transit system (page 16). And our ongoing “Best of the Web” feature sifts through the digital media to find entertaining and informative online gems.

Washington History seeks to capture the vitality and complexity of our city’s past. As always, we encourage your contributions to the magazine—original research, suggestions for stories, feedback on what you have read in these pages. Constructive critiques are welcome, too!

—Chris Myers Asch

Becoming “Wachintonians”
Salvadorans in the Washington, D.C., Metropolitan Area

BY ANA PATRICIA RODRÍGUEZ

MEMBERS OF THE Central American Resource Center rally in front of the White House in support of Central American child migrants in August 2014. As Washington’s Salvadoran immigrant community has grown, individuals have developed a hybrid “Wachintonian” culture celebrated in song, poetry, and fiction. Unless noted, all photographs appear, courtesy, the author.

—Chris Myers Asch
Salvadorans, wrote the revolutionary poet Roque Dalton, are a resilient, “haeretico” (can-do-everything) people who, despite experiencing great repression, violence, and exclusion in their homeland and elsewhere, per- severe in and outside of their country. They also are the largest immigrant group in the Washington, D.C., metropolitan area. In 2013 the U.S. Census Bureau estimated that 21,276 Salvadorans resided in the District, representing 14 per- cent of D.C.’s Latino population and more than 3 percent of the city’s population overall. Yet few Washingtonians know their history or recognize their important demographic, cultural, and eco- nomic presence in the region.1

Often mislabeled “El Salvadorans”—generally, the preferred terms are Salvadoran, Salvador- eño/a, Salvadorian, or Salvadorean, without the article “El”—they fill every niche of the local labor market. They are students, teachers, professors, doctors, engineers, scientists, entrepreneurs, writ- ers, artists, performers, activists, and specialists in the nonprofit, construction, hospitality, health- care, homecare, daycare, and security industries, among many other fields. As their poems, short stories, music, and other creative works attest, Sal- vadorans have forged a sense of belonging, home, and cultural identity in the D.C. metropolitan area.

Salvadorans first began coming to the Wash- ington area in the late 19th century as part of Central American political and cultural delegations. From October 1889 to April 1890, for example, Dr. Jacinto Castellanos represented El Salvador at the first Pan-American Conference, also known as the First International Conference of American States and subsequently as the Summit of the Americas, which was held in Washing- ton. Later, the city also attracted artistic sojourners such as Salvadoran writers Salvador Salazar Arroyo (Salarrué) and Claribell Alegria, who lived in Washington respectively in the 1910s and 1940s. Best known for his 1913 Cuentos de Barrio and his 1945 Cuentos de Ojozas, Salarrué trained as a painter at the Corcoran School of Art between 1916 and 1919. Alegria, author of more than 40 books of poetry, short stories, and essays, earned a Bachelor of Arts in Philosophy and Let- ters at the George Washington University in 1948.2

Like their Central American counterparts, Sal- vadoran embassy personnel began to travel regu- larly and/or settle in the District of Columbia in the early 20th century. Early pioneras/os (pioneers) of D.C.’s resident Salvadoran community, how- ever, did not arrive in great numbers until the 1960s and 1970s, when U.S. and home country diplomats, government employees, and interna- tional agency personnel sponsored Central Ameri- can, including Salvadoran, female domestic workers and childcare providers. These midcentury migrants established a primarily Salvadoran enclave within the increasingly Latino neighbor- hoods of Mount Pleasant, Adams Morgan, and Columbia Heights in Northwest Washington, espe- cially along the Columbia Road and Mount Pleas- ant Street corridors. These areas offered relatively affordable housing, immigrant services and sup- port, and proximity to jobs in the city and nearby Maryland and Virginia suburbs. Women predomin- ated in the migration of the 1960s and 1970s, but the economic growth of the 1980s made more con- struction, hospitality, and service industry jobs available for both immigrant men and women. Salvadorans gravitated to jobs held or formerly held by African American, Latino, and other immi- grant workers.3

In the 1980s the local Salvadoran community grew significantly after a civil war erupted between El Salvador’s right-wing government and left- wing guerrillas organized as the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN). U.S. military aid to government forces prolonged the war, which lasted from 1979 to 1992. During the war El Salvador received $6 billion in U.S. military and economic aid, the third-largest beneficiary in the world. At its International Police Academy in northern Virginia, the U.S. Agency for Interna- tional Development trained Salvadoran Roberto D’Aubuisson, the founder of the Nationalist Republican Alliance (ARENA), the right-wing party of El Salvador. D’Aubuisson also founded and headed the brutal death squads responsible for countless disappearances and assassinations such as that of Archbishop Oscar A. Romero on March 24, 1980. By war’s end, more than 75,000 Salvadorans had died and more than 25 percent of the country’s population was displaced.4

As the war intensified, many Salvadorans fled to surrounding Central American countries, Mexico, Australia, Europe, and the United States, particu- larly to cities with existing Salvadoran communities such as Los Angeles, San Francisco, and Houston. As the site of much political activity and activism, Washington and its surrounding suburbs also drew a large number of Salvadorans, though they were rarely granted political asylum. Church-affiliated refugee centers, solidarity networks, and service providers soon opened offices in Adams Morgan, Mount Pleasant, and Columbia Heights, locations accessible to the newly arrived immigrants. Many Salvadorans also settled in northern Virginia, par- ticularly in Alexandria city and Arlington and Fairfax counties, forming enclaves, social networks, and hometown associations that linked their diasporic communities to El Salvador. With its established military and security industries, the area attracted immigrants precisely from countries where the United States intervened militarily, polit- ically, and economically in the 1980s.5

Many Salvadorans settled in the District’s eco- nomically depressed and racially stratified Mount Pleasant, Adams Morgan, and Columbia Heights neighborhoods, exacerbating racial tensions that erupted in May 1991 in the so-called Salvadoran- led Mount Pleasant Rebellion (also known as the Mount Pleasant Riots). The disturbances began when an African American female police officer shot a Salvadoran man, Daniel Enrique Gomez, who allegedly was drunk after the Cinco de Mayo (May 5) celebration in Adams Morgan. For three days, Latinos and African American youths con- fronted police, damaging buildings, looting stores and businesses, blocking traffic, and setting fire to police cars and buses. To stop the violence, Mayor Sharon Pratt Dixon declared a state of emergency and set a 7:00 p.m. curfew in Mount Pleasant, Adams Morgan, and Columbia Heights. One thou- sand police officers patrolled the largely poor Central American and African American neighbor- hoods, where residents had long experienced increasing racial tension, discrimination, police harassment, crime, and violence.6

In the aftermath of the riots, the U.S. Commis- sion on Civil Rights drafted its Mount Pleasant Report. The report found that Latinos experi- enced abuse at the hands of the D.C. Metropoli- tan Police Department as well as neglect by the D.C. government, which failed to recognize the growing Latino population and provide adequate social services. City officials responded by estab- lishing a Latino Civil Rights Task Force, headed by long-time D.C. resident Pedro Avilés, to study the situation and make recommendations for improved community relations. The city created

Latino community members march down 16th Street NW toward the Capitol to support immigration reform, March 21, 2010. Their banner reads, “No Human Being is Illegal.”

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Becoming “Washingtonians”
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A bilingual police unit and a number of social services agencies to serve Latinos. The D.C. area’s Salvadoran population continued to grow in the 1990s and early 2000s. After September 11, 2001, the newly created Department of Homeland Security generated new jobs for employees directly or peripherally attached to the area’s military and security sectors. Entwined and offshoot industries produced employment not only for highly-skilled attorneys, engineers, archit.

tects, and bureaucrats, but also for immigrants who worked in landscaping, construction, housekeeping, and childcare.

Throughout the D.C. metropolitan area, Salvadorans’ culture manifested itself in neighborhoods, businesses, churches, schools, community centers, public clinics, service providers, and cultural activities. Salvadorans participated in local Latino festivals and art scenes, and they popularized their cuisine, including the pupusa (cornmeal tortilla stuffed with cheese, beans, pork, and other items). Salvadorans became an important part of the local labor force, paying sales and income taxes as well as contributing more than $4 billion annually in remittances to the Salvadoran economy.9

In 2004 the D.C. Council and minimal representation in D.C. government committees and boards, including those of education, business, planning, parks, and other public services. In the suburbs of Virginia and Maryland, Salvadoran political representation also has remained limited, although delegates of Salvadoran heritage Ana Sol Gutiérrez and Victor Ramírez have served in the Maryland General Assembly.

Cultural critic Arturo Arias has argued that Central Americans, including Salvadorans, are “nearly invisible within the imaginary confines of what constitutes the multicultural landscape of the United States.” Although they became the largest immigrant group in the Washington metropolitan area in the 1980s, Salvadorans have remained peripheral in the national political representation, largely due to the distance of resettlement in Washington and the political violence in their homeland and speak to greater issues faced by Salvadorans in El Salvador and the United States. Artists such as musician Lilo González, photographer and Corcoran College of Art professor Miguel Hasbun, and writers Mario Bencastro, Mayamaría Cortez, Daniel Joya, José Vladamir Monge, Carlos Parada Ayala, and Grego Pineda, among others, have not only represented the history of Salvadorans but also documented their presence in the D.C. metropolitan area. Through their artistic and cultural productions, they have sought to represent the lives of Salvadoran “Wachintonians.”

Among the most notable Salvadorans to capture the process of how Salvadorans have made D.C. home and become “Wachintonians” is Quique Avilés, a longtime D.C. poet, performer, cultural activist, and graduate of the Duke Ellington School of the Arts. Avilés arrived from El Salvador in 1980 at the age of 15, along with others fleeing the civil war. He soon began to write, in English, Spanish, and Spanglish, about his own experiences and observations as a Salvadoran immigrant. He gave public performances with other artists and organized the “La Puerta del Mar” cultural festival, bringing his wry satire to bear on social issues such as racism, war, migration, identity, and gentrification. His performances have included Latino/an, Chaos Standing, Caminata: A Walk Through Immigrant America, and The Children of Latinidad, and he published a collection of poetry, The Immigrant Museum, in 2003.

In his poem “El Salvador Ai-A-Áncora,” Avilés comically explores the image of El Salvador from the distance of resettlement in Washington and parodies official country profiles that provide soul-less statistical information.14 Avilés turns the data into poetry, redrawing the geographical and cultural map of the country to include the diaspora and to point out the more poignant features of a country and people gravely affected by years of civil war and social violence.
Teachable Moment

The Winding Path to Freedom under the District of Columbia Emancipation Act of April 16, 1862

BY JOSEPH P. REIDY

Washingtonians properly observe April 16 as Emancipation Day, marking the anniversary of the day in 1862 when President Abraham Lincoln signed into law a bill outlawing slavery in the city and compensating slaveowners for the loss of their property. Though nearly 3,000 slaves eventually gained freedom under the law, enslaved people did not suddenly become free on April 16. Much could—and did—go wrong in the months following the passage of the law. This issue’s “Teachable Moment” examines a notable case that illustrates how convoluted and uncertain the journey to freedom could be.

The case involved a white man named Alexander McCormick, who claimed five African Americans as his slaves: Mary Thomas, about 50 years of age; her two daughters, Emeline Wedge, 25, and Alice Thomas, 15; and Emeline’s two children, Martha Ann Elizabeth, five, and George Washington, four. McCormick’s farm lay east of the Eastern Branch (as the Anacostia River was then known), straddling the border between the District of Columbia and Prince George’s County, Maryland, near Bladensburg. Much of the property was located on the District side of the line, including a stable, animal pens, and the farmhouse where McCormick, his wife, his servants, and several hired laborers apparently resided. Several cultivated fields, a pasture, and a spring were on the Maryland side.

When Congress passed the emancipation act, McCormick feared that he would be forced to give up his slaves because they lived in the District. So he devised an elaborate scheme to move them to the Maryland side of the farm beyond the reach of the new law. First he built a “quarter,” as several neighbors termed it, on the Maryland side for the women and children to occupy. He then turned his attention to their labor, trying to be sure that they worked only in the Maryland fields and pasture. Among other things, he ordered them to tend the cows in the Maryland pasture and then hand them off each day to one of the hired laborers at the District line for herding across the forbidden soil of Washington to the cowpen. McCormick instructed the women not to set foot on the Washington side of the line, not even to visit Emeline’s husband, George Wedge, a free man, who lived with his parents in the District nearby.

The law gave slaveowners 90 days to submit a claim for compensation to the three-man board of commissioners appointed to review all emancipation cases, but McCormick had no intention of submitting a claim. He was not alone; the commissioners soon realized that many masters were evading the law by leaving the city and taking their slaves with them. Without a master’s request for compensation, which in turn triggered the commissioners’ examination into the validity of the claim, no free papers could be issued. On July 12, 1862, Congress closed this legal loophole by passing a supplemental bill that permitted enslaved persons whose masters did not request compensation to petition the commissioners directly for free papers.

That is precisely what Mary Thomas, Emeline Wedge, and Alice Thomas did. Mary Thomas, who appears to have resisted McCormick’s attempt to move her with her daughters and grandchildren into the quarter in April, requested free papers on July 26, and the commissioners heard and approved her case the same day, uncontested by McCormick. When Emeline (on her own behalf and that of her children) and Alice later did the same, McCormick challenged their claims. The commissioners opened an investigation, and the following transcription is an excerpt of those proceedings. The original document was written in longhand by a clerk who sought to record the highlights of each witness’s testimony, which was at times punctuated by questions from the commissioners or other participants. Note that words crossed out in the original are omitted here without notation. Ellipses (…) designate where text from the original document has been deleted in the interest of space. Illegible or partly legible words are designated by brackets or bracketed question marks [?].
Emeline Wedge’s petition for free papers. Courtesy, National Archives and Records Administration

This 1862 map of the forts defending Washington shows McCormick’s property at the upper right, just east of the Anacostia River. The mapmaker spelled his name “Macommick.” E.G. Arnold map, courtesy, Library of Congress

This 1861 map of Prince George’s County, Maryland, shows the Maryland portion of McCormick’s farm to the east of the river. Simon J. Martenet map, courtesy, Library of Congress
1. This date is eight full months after passage of the emancipation act, during which time Alice Thomas, Emeline Wedge, and Wedge's children remained enslaved.

2. “Col” was a contraction for “colored,” commonly used in official documents, newspapers, city directories, and the like to identify people of African ancestry. Both the emancipation act and the supplemental act departed radically from convention by authorizing the commissioners to accept the testimony of black witnesses.

3. Emeline Wedge is establishing, contrary to McCormick’s assertions and those of several other subsequent witnesses, that she and her sister continued to live and work on the District side of the property after April 16, 1862.

4. The Sunday was April 13, 1862, and the Thursday, April 17. The testimony of Lewis Cook, below, identifies McCormick’s mother as Mrs. Matilda Young of Prince George’s County, Maryland.

5. The clerk clearly intended to refer to Emeline and Alice here. Alice’s full name was Alice Virginia.

6. Women of the farm, white and black, worked together to prepare harvested crops for market.

7. On December 22, McCormick reconsidered, and, after claiming that he had earlier misunderstood how the hearings were to be conducted, the commissioners allowed him to participate.

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Dec. 16, 1862

Alexander McCormick, owner

(Negroes asking for freedom.)

Emeline Wedge, sworn (col)

Knows Alice Virginia Thomas, was slave of Mr. Alexr. McCormick. Alice was in the District on the 16th of April last. Farm on the line but most of it is in District. Alice was sent in District by her master very frequently getting the cows, water. Cows have to be brought through part of the District to get home from pasture. Alice usually brings the cows. Mr. McCormick’s dwelling house is in District and Alice has been employed there a good deal of the time, since 16th April last, up there every morning, eats there often. Identifies the girl present as Alice.

Alice Virginia Thomas (sworn) col

Knows Emeline Wedge now present. Was Alex McCormick’s servant on 16th Apl last & he still claims her. Lives on Mr McC’s farm, and works most of the time on the farm and at the house in the District.

George Wedge (Colored) I know Alice Virginia Thomas. She belonged to Mr Alexr McCormick. 16 April last she was living in District at Mr McCormick’s house. on Sunday he took servants to his mothers and kept them there until Thursday during which time he built a small house on Maryland side— . . . Alice has been every day in District. She gets up cows every day and cowpen was in District and my wife two or three times a week. My mother was very ill (two months ago) children came every day to house to see my mother. Weather became bad and children staid . . . I have seen Alice & Virginia shelling beans at Mr McCormicks kitchen since 16th Apl Mrs McCormick by them. I sent to Mr McCormick by wife to let her come to see my mother and he permitted her to come.

Mr McCormick being notified came and said he came because he was summoned. that he wanted nothing to do with it here. He believed the law to be un Constitutional and he was willing to bide his time — did not wish to & did not hear the testimony & withdrew.

Dec 17, 1862

Witness

Emeline Wedge. My childs name is Martha Ann Elizabeth — 5 years old, is in District at her fathers — is claimed as Mr. McCormick’s slave. Have another child named George Washington — now about 4 years old — is with his father — also claimed as Mr. McCormick’s slave. Were moved, a few days before the Emancipation act passed, over the Maryland line — have been in the District frequently with their master’s consent since the 16th April last.

Dec 22

Lewis Cook Have been living for 9 months in Maryland with Mrs Matilda Young. I was there when Mr McCormick brought these servants there, on Sunday and until Thursday—4 days when Mr McCormick removed them. I assisted Mr McCormick in mean time to build house in Maryland for servants. Mr McCormick took servants there to live. & It was before act passed knew when
House is some 100 yards on Maryland line farm on both sides of District & Maryland line

_**James Fowler.**_ I do not know how long during summer I marketted for Mr McCormick, I marketted all produce of farm. In August they were at work in District but not by Mr McCormick’s order—cleaning hogs— Mr McCormick was not at home. I never knew Mr McCormick to require work of them in District. Mr & Mrs McCormick assisted me in gathering & marketting— . . . Barrell from which hogs were watered was in Maryland— water was carried from that barrel to hog pen by Ned Nevitt & Mr McCormick. . . .

Often seen house which Mr McCormick built were there every day . . .

I plastered the house, with Mr McCormick— I never heard Mr McCormick talk about it— They could, I could, live in the house. Stove in there. bed in there. bed downstairs. sometimes fire there. one of girls made fire—frame house. I did not see children there.

I am well acquainted with George Wedge’s character for truth & veracity, would not believe much in what he says.

**Dec. 30. Tuesday.**

_**John H. Owen (produced by Mr McCormick).**_

I went to live with Mr McCormick 12 May and lived until 23 August. While living with Mr McCormick I never knew Mr McC to allow the servants to come into Maryland. They never came in District line except of their own accord and it was against Mr McCormick’s order. When binding rye they were kept on Maryland side. When they came to about line Mr McCormick would stop them and tell them to go no further.

. . . I never knew them to be required or allowed to work at house or drive cows or milk them I never knew them to do so except of their own accord

I have heard Mr McC order children away from the house I never knew them to work the sweet potato crop near quarter worked by Mr McC & myself. Cowpen 100 or 150 yards from line. Sally King attended cows when I was living there then Mr King got cows up generally. I never knew Mr Mc to get them up. I have got them up. I have known cows to go up of own accord. Would go up of their own accord when driven in neighborhood of cowpen. Most of crop was on District side was not work enough on Maryland side for the girls. They were a good deal of time unemployed at quarter while we were at work. I never knew of them being ordered or desired to do anything on District side.

_William Wedge._ I live in District. round the road short 3/4 of a mile furthar of George Wedge. Little children have been to my house for two months. Wedges wife & sister have been at my house every night since children have been there. go back in morning. I have seen Lou driving cattle. have seen her at the marsh and at cowpen. Cant say marsh is in District have seen her drive cows to cowpen. Cant say how often, but frequently, have never seen her drive them out of cowpen. Cant say whether bars or not. it is not gated. have seen her put up bars when the cows went in.

Servants got to my house sometimes before candlelight sometimes just after sunset. go away when it was light.
On December 30, 1862, the commissioners completed their investigation and dismissed McCormick’s claim that the women had lived in Maryland since before passage of the act. They concluded that the house he had built for them “could scarcely be said to be inhabitable.” And, although McCormick may have objected to the women and children staying with the Wedges in the District, “he took no steps to have them removed.” Finally, at McCormick’s direction, the women carried “vegetables from the farm to Wedge’s... with directions for him to take them to market.” The commissioners found that the petitioners were “entitled to their freedom.” McCormick received no compensation.

Bested but unbowed, Alexander McCormick wrote to the commissioners, protesting “the effect & correctness” of their decision. He held firm to the conviction that the women were “his Slaves” who had “absconded from the State of Maryland.”

For more than eight months after the emancipation law took effect, Emeline Wedge, her sister Alice, and her children remained enslaved despite the clear intentions of Congress. They spent a full agricultural cycle, from spring planting through autumn harvesting, on the farm as their legal ordeal continued. Their courage, ingenuity, and persistence in challenging their master’s efforts to evade the law helped them at last achieve the freedom that the law promised and that they rightfully deserved.

Joseph P. Reidy, a professor of history and an associate provost of Howard University, is writing a book on the winding road to freedom during the Civil War era.

Source
The original petitions of Mary Thomas, Emeline Wedge and her children, and Alice Thomas are among the Records of the U.S. District and Other Courts in the District of Columbia, 1810–1993, Record Group 21, Records of the District Courts of the United States, 1685–1993, National Archives and Records Administration, National Archives Building, Washington, D.C.

For a full transcript of this petition, as well as copies of the original documents of the petitions, supporting documents, and notes from approximately 1,100 petitions that the commissioners reviewed in connection with the D.C. emancipation act, see the Website of the Civil War Washington project at the University of Nebraska—Lincoln (http://civilwardc.org/texts/petitions/).
Lily Spandorf painted the 900 block of G Street, NW, before ground was broken in July 1968 to build the new Central Public Library (today’s Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial Library). The brick buildings were developed as residences in the 1870s and by 1915 housed small businesses. For the Record: The Art of Lily Spandorf considers the watercolorist’s documentation of lost Washington and her career as an artist/journalist.

Photograph by Bill Lebovich

Designed by Mies van der Rohe and completed in 1972, the library was named to honor the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Photograph by Barbara Brennan, 2015

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Cityscape

For the Record

The Art of Lily Spandorf

BY JANE FREUNDEL LEVEY

Lily Spandorf, artist, journalist, and entrepreneur, created a unique record of Washington, D.C., from 1960 until her death in 2000 at age 85. Spandorf produced thousands of paintings and drawings of streetscapes, buildings, and news events. In 1988 a selection of her watercolors became an exhibition and book titled Lily Spandorf’s Washington Never More. This collection of city views lost to modern development proved to be her legacy, and those who know her name generally remember her as a preservationist in paint. Spandorf, though, described herself more broadly as an “artistic journalist,” because she initially made a living from hundreds of illustrations commissioned by the Evening Star, the Washington Post, and other newspapers and magazines around the country.

Spandorf’s Washington Never More paintings were exhibited three times between 1988 and 2008. In 2015 the collection’s steward, the Historical Society of Washington, D.C., collaborated with the new George Washington University Museum/The Textile Museum to reconsider Spandorf’s work in light of her career as a working artist. This new look at Spandorf’s life, work, and times drew from her personal records, now being catalogued at the Historical Society. The Spandorf files consist of scrapbooks, clippings, correspondence, souvenirs, sketches, and drawings—many of which lack dates or identification—that reveal a tenacious, savvy businesswoman. They also show how this determined immigrant artist quickly figured out how political Washington worked and how to work it. Titled “For the Record: The Art of Lily Spandorf,” the exhibition offered the first collected viewing of many celebrity portraits, commissions, and illustrations in addition to compelling scenes and cityscapes on the verge of irrevocable change.
Lily Spandorf painted the 900 block of G Street, NW, before ground was broken in July 1968 to build the new Central Public Library (today’s Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial Library). The brick buildings were developed as residences in the 1870s and by 1915 housed small businesses.1 “For the Record: The Art of Lily Spandorf” considers the watercolorist’s documentation of lost Washington and her career as an artist/journalist.

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iversity of Applied Arts). Known as Gabriele
Spandorf in Vienna, contemporary records show
that she later changed her name to Lily Gabriella
Spandorf. Few details of Spandorf’s early life exist.
While exhibiting her first show in Washington in
1960, she told a reporter that her father had been
a newspaperman and her mother a painter; she
routinely gave the same limited information in
subsequent interviews. She declined to talk about
her past as a Jewish woman under the Nazi occu-
pation of Austria in the late 1930s. According to
Spandorf’s friend and executor Marija Balanc,
Spandorf and her father escaped Austria at the
time of the Nazi invasion in 1938 and made their
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During World War II Spandorf continued her
art studies at London’s St. Martin’s School and
improved her English, though she retained an
Eastern European accent for life. She made her
home in London and found work right away as a
graphic artist and muralist, drawing advertising
vignettes for everyday products. She also spent
some time in Scotland, where she volunteered
with the American Red Cross, painting pictures
of visiting American soldiers to send back home.
Soon after the war ended, Spandorf traveled to
Italy to paint. There, as she explored village life in
Sicily and Sardinia as well as the ancient ruins of
Rome, she developed her signature, colorful style.
She also decided she preferred painting on the spot
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Spandorf’s watercolors of Italian life earned
good reviews in London, and the Italian Ministry
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boost British tourism to the island. Italy badly
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Istituto Italiano di Cultura introduced Spandorf and
her Italian scenes to audiences in New York City;
the following year the Italian Embassy brought
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Washington’s European pace and architectural fla-
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The artist was a master of the documentary
quick sketch and avoided working from photo-
graphs. Though she restlessly roamed the city, she
also could happily settle into a spot for a full day
of painting. “All she wanted to do was paint, paint,
paint,” recalled Marija Balanc. Spandorf described
her technique as “loose washes of color later
defined with line,” and she used gouache, water-
color, and ink. She also painted quickly. Judith
Martin of the Washington Post described her in 1966
as “the lickety-split painter who can make you a
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In Washington Spandorf preferred ordinary
scenes to landmark views, especially the low-rise,
brick, often turreted 19th-century streetscapes.
Within a few months of her arrival, she became
aware of how rapidly Washington was changing.
In June 1960 a reporter spoke with her as she painted
the “back courtyard scene of Barney Neighborhood
House” at 470 N Street, SW. She said she was paint-
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it should be preserved. But,” she went on, “since
the decision has been made to demolish it, I think I
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collections of the White House Historical Associa-
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and others.

Spandorf both cultivated her fellow members of
the media and seized opportunities to connect to
political Washington. She began on this path
shortly after the 1960 presidential election. John F.
Kennedy, Jr., the son of the president-elect and
Jacqueline Kennedy, had been born at Georgetown
University Hospital, and his baptism was scheduled
to take place at the hospital chapel. Serendipitously,
Spandorf was also at the hospital, where she was
being treated for a broken wrist (not her dominant
one) and got wind of the impending event. No
photographers were permitted. Spandorf quietly
arrived ahead of the family, sketched the empty,
flower-bedecked chapel, left, and called the
Evening Star. The newspaper published her exclusive image inside the “Society-Home” section and Spandorf
sent the original to the Kennedy family as a gift.

Spandorf showed scenes of rural Italy at the Salone Sicilia in Rome, 1956. Photograph by Publisfoto

For the Record: The Art of Lily Spandorf

Lily Spandorf’s career as a Washington journalist began with this sketch. Courtesy, DC Public Library © Washington Post
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