

Exploring Congress Heights



Congress Heights School (DCHPO)

Congress Heights is a diverse and unique neighborhood nestled on the hills off the coast of the Anacostia River. This community has a history interwoven into the American fabric beginning with the Native Americans who welcomed Colonial explorers, to the segregated covenants overturned through the triumphs of integration. This brochure will help you gain more of an understanding about the Congress Heights Community loved and respected by its residents both past and present.

Congress Heights Community Boundaries

Starting at Mississippi Avenue, SE, and 13th Street, SE, to Alabama Avenue, SE, the west along Alabama Avenue, SE, to the southwestern boundary of the St. Elizabeth's campus, to Lebaum Street, SE, to Interstate 295, then southwest along Interstate 295 to 4th Street, SE, then back to Mississippi Avenue, SE. (DCOP)



Housing built in Congress Heights during WWII for government employees. (Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division)

Congress Heights Community Association
Anacostia Coordinating Council
A DC Community Heritage Project

Congress Heights Community Timeline

1608 First contact of original residents, Nacotchtank Indians, with Europeans, just north of what is now Giesboro Point, Congress Heights, on the Potomac River.

1630s European colonists began to formalize claims to land ownership in area now called Congress Heights.

1735 Thomas Addison Jr. built a plantation near Giesboro Point area.

1776 The census showed that there were seven white males, eight white females, and ninety-six “Negroes” living on the Giesboro Tract.

1813 Tobias Henson, an enslaved African American, bought his freedom and thereafter bought the freedom of many of his relatives. He also purchased land along Hamilton Road (now Alabama Avenue).

1852-55 St. Elizabeths Hospital opened for the mentally ill. During the Civil War, it served as a hospital and a cemetery for soldiers.

1861 Camp Stoneman or Giesboro Depot was established as the largest cavalry depot in the country with corrals and stables for over 30,000 horses.

1862 George Washington Young, who bought the 624 acres belonging to Thomas Addison Jr., was the largest slave owner in the District of Columbia. In this year, with the enactment of compensated emancipation, he received \$17,771.85 for the 69 people he held in bondage.

1873 Railway line, Washington and Potomac Branch of the B&O Railroad, laid from Benning through Old Anacostia, the bottom of St. Elizabeths, around Giesboro Point to Shepherd’s Point in Maryland.

1878 Young’s heirs sold his estate and it became a popular river resort enjoyed by whites and blacks. It was known in stages as City View, Capitol View, and Buena Vista until the mansion burned in 1888.

1890 Arthur E. Randle, born in Mississippi, invested in this section of Washington, laid out the streets, and

called it Congress Heights. Restrictive covenants were attached to deeds, prohibiting the sale of land or buildings to African Americans.

1897 The current Congress Heights Public School replaced the one-room Giesboro School for white children that had been on the site.



*Congress Heights Drama Club
(Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division)*

1903 The firehouse at 3203 Nichols Avenue (now Martin Luther King, Jr. Avenue), Engine Company 25, constructed – one of two brick buildings in Congress Heights at the time.

1907 The Congress Heights Civic Association was formed.

1908 A branch of the Firth-Sterling Steel Company, later the Washington Steel and Ordnance Company, opened at the foot of Portland Street (now Malcolm X Avenue) and became the largest employer of Congress Heights residents, ahead of the Navy Yard and St. Elizabeths, until it closed in the 1920s.

1911 The streetcar line opened to Congress Heights where it operated until 1938 when it was replaced by bus service.

1914 Congress Heights’ longest operating business, Liff’s Market, 600 Alabama, took over Herson’s Market, which had opened in 1912.

1917 The Navy opened the Anacostia Naval Air Stations on the original Giesboro tract, leading to the establishment of Bolling Field the following year. Camp Simms, where the DC National Guard trained, had been set up in 1904 on part of the Henson property near

Stanton Road.

1920s Local resident and developer Max Simon established a department store on Nichols Avenue, (now Martin Luther King Jr. Avenue). He started as a vegetable vendor and ended up a multimillionaire.

1937 Development of housing provided the opportunity for African American architects to design buildings. For example, Lewis Giles, Sr. designed several buildings in the area, including two at 570 Lebaum Street, and 542 Mellon Street. R.C. Archer, Jr. designed two at 515 and 532 Lebaum Street.

1939 The Congress Theater opened for white audiences at 2929 Martin Luther King, Jr. The owner, Lloyd Wineland, lived at 625 Raleigh Place. The movie house served as a landmark and community center until the 1970s when it closed.



Congress Theater, 1964, Coursey Collection, (www.cinematour.com)

1939-1946 World War II leads to a population explosion in Congress Heights due to employment at military facilities.

1949 The Frederick Douglass Bridge (South Capitol Street) was completed, connecting Congress Heights to downtown Washington.

1958 Zoning changes in Congress Heights set aside the majority of residential land for multifamily dwellings, resulting in a severe decline in owner-occupied and single family housing.

1961 Ballou Senior High School opened. The marching band became nationally renowned.

1966 The number of white families rapidly declined after integration of schools in 1954. More African Americans moved to Congress Heights, previously closed to them due to segregation.

1969 Congress Heights Baptist Church, a white congregation, sold its building to the historic Rehoboth Baptist Church.

1970 The historic Congress Heights School closed due to deterioration and reduced capacity to accommodate new residents.

1981 Congress Heights held its first annual Congress Heights Day Parade and Festival.



Congress Heights Youth Uncovering Cultural Resources (DCHPO)

1983-89 New businesses came to Congress Heights- for example, McDonalds, Popeye's, Safeway, Rite Aid, and the Players Lounge.

2001 The last Washington stop on Metro's Green Line opened at Alabama Avenue, almost 20 years after its scheduled opening. Southeast Tennis and Learning Center, founded by Cora Masters Barry, also opened.

2007 Grand opening of the Shops at Park Village, part of the economic rebirth plan for the neighborhood

Congress Heights Sites:

1. Henson's Farm

During the early nineteenth century, African Americans living in the District of Columbia were able to arrange their own freedom if enslaved or the freedom of an enslaved loved one or friend. Tobias Henson purchased his freedom in 1813 and almost immediately began making payments on a 24-acre tract initially known as "The Ridge." He was also able to buy the freedom of several relatives including his wife Elizabeth and daughters, Mary and Matlinda. Henson subdivided his farm and gave one-acre plots to his relatives. The community of Stantontown grew up along what is now Stanton Road at the intersection of Hamilton Road (now Alabama Avenue) where most of Henson's descendants lived and prospered. Land was sold for the construction of Camp Simms but the remaining Henson

property was taken through eminent domain in the 1940s. Several of his descendants still live in Congress Heights today.

2. St. Elizabeths Hospital

From 1848 to 1852, Dorothea Dix, social reformer, lobbied the U. S. Congress to establish a national psychiatric hospital. In its Civil and Diplomatic Appropriation Act of 1852, Congress authorized the purchase of a site in Washington to erect, furnish, and “fit up” an asylum for the insane of the District of Columbia and for the U.S. “Army and the Navy.” The most “salubrious and commanding location” for the institution was Thomas and Emily Blagden’s farm overlooking the Anacostia River. Divided by Martin Luther King, Jr. Avenue, the east campus is 118 acres and west campus soon to be home of Homeland Security is 182 acres.

3. Old Congress Heights School

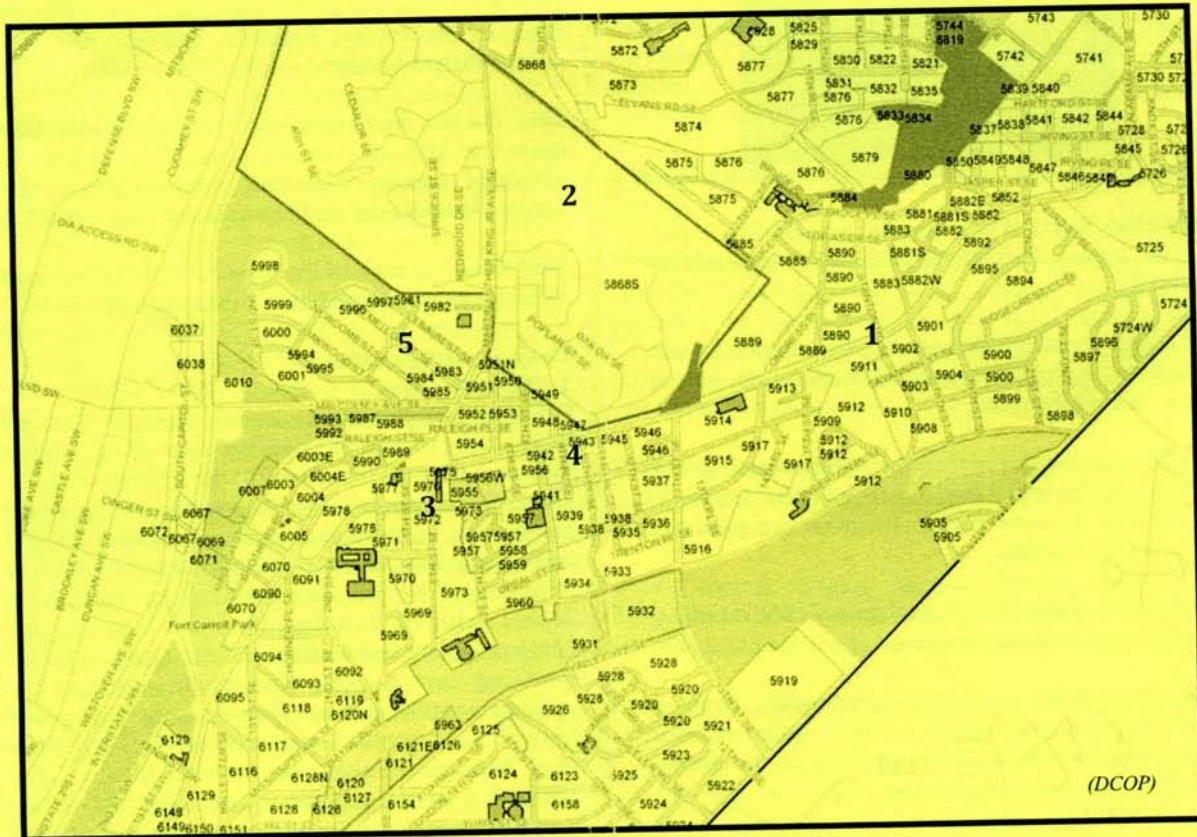
In 1881 children who lived on the farms in the area of

Congress Heights attended a one-room frame schoolhouse called “Giesboro” School. It was torn down in 1897 and replaced with a new eight-room brick school building. Additions in 1913 to accommodate the increasing enrollment were designed by Municipal Architect Snowden Ashford in the Elizabethan style he favored for school buildings. The Old Congress Heights School closed in 1970 due to deterioration. Between 1999 and 2009, the school ground was the site of the Ward 8 Farmer’s Market Cooperative.

4. First Post Office

In 1893, Annie Langley was contracted to be postmistress. The U.S. Post Office Department entered into a series of contracts for community residents to serve as their neighbors’ postmaster to conduct post office business. The building at 3127 Martin Luther King, Jr. Avenue served as the Congress Heights post office in the early 20th Century.

5. Home Designed by Lewis W. Giles, Sr.



The homes at 534 Newcomb and 617 Mellon Streets serve as models of talent among the early African American architects in Washington. Lewis W. Giles, Sr. combined slate, brick, glass, and metal casement windows to create stately features for these unique homes. He had a reputation for creating such accurate drawings that he had little trouble getting approval from the city's permit division. Giles designed over 1000 buildings – churches, apartment buildings, stores and houses – over his sixty year career.



534 Newcomb Street, SE, designed by Lewis W. Giles, Sr. (DCHPO)



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