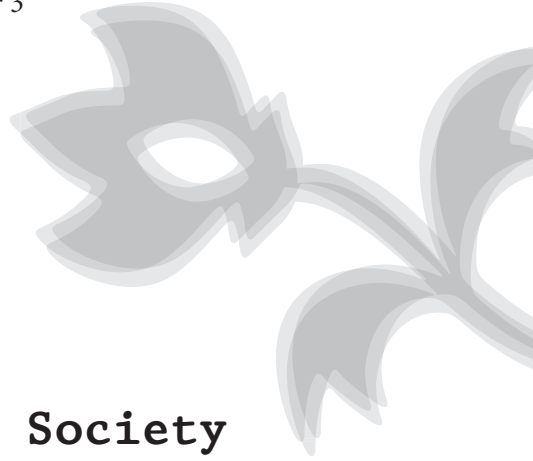


## Chapter 3



# Washington Society

I've never seen such a collection of black, brown, tan, beige, yellow, color-struck, bourgeois, bamafied, blue-veined . . . prim, high-minded . . . unfeeling, go-their-own-way, intellectual . . . hopelessly ineffectual . . . quiet and clean Negroes in my life as I have seen moving in confusing circles in and around Washington, D.C., all on U Street alone.

**Ralph Wiley**

*Why Black People Tend to Shout*

It is not unthinkable that rumors and legends relating to complexion and hair tests would have a vivid, active, and sustainable life in Washington, D.C. Perhaps with the exception of New Orleans, no city has documented more thoroughly the complexion preoccupations of African Americans, as represented in letters, club minutes, editorials, and photographic images. Above all, these preoccupations have been documented in the memories of District residents.



“As long as I have been colored,” wrote a young Langston Hughes from his home in Harlem, “I have heard of Washington society”: the “pink teas” (tea parties limited to fair-skinned women) and passing; magnificent homes and distinguished families; grand manners and mouths that uttered formal sentences in frightfully correct English. “Some nice mulatto friends of ours spoke of the wonderful society life among Negroes in Washington,” Hughes remembered. “And some darker friends of ours hinted at . . . the color line that was drawn there.”<sup>1</sup> Though a distinguished and accomplished man of letters in his own right, Hughes, the grandnephew of renowned Washington aristocrat John Langston, recognized the sharp divide among social classes and the importance of lineage in Washington City. He stated,

Negro society in Washington, they assured me, was the finest in the country, the richest, the most cultured, the most worthy. In no other city were there so many splendid homes, so many cars, so many A.B. degrees, or so many persons with “family backgrounds.” Descendants of distinguished Negroes were numerous, but there were also those who could do better and trace their ancestry back to George Washington and his colored concubines. “How lucky I am to have a congressman for grand-uncle,” I thought in the presence of these well-ancestored people.<sup>2</sup>

Hughes’s contemporary, fellow writer and Washington resident Paul Laurence Dunbar, described black Washingtonians as “earnest actors who have learned their parts well” and who imagined their social lives to be a very dignified and serious drama. In reality, these black residents, in their precise and methodical mimicry of white aristocracy, were, according to Dunbar, “taking part in a comedy of the period.”<sup>3</sup> Hughes himself mused, “Maybe I met only the snobs and the high yellows, and the lovers of fur coats and automobiles and fraternity pins. . . . Maybe those who said they were the best people had me fooled—perhaps they weren’t the best people—but they looked tremendously important.”<sup>4</sup>

In the early nineteenth century, Washington, D.C., despite its reputation as an economically stagnant city, became an appealing settling place for free blacks. Here slavery was not nearly as significant economically as it was in the southern states. And here, because free blacks outnumbered enslaved blacks and because the rules governing slavery were comparatively lenient, steady streams of free blacks began to make their way to the city seeking refuge.



As the number of free blacks filling the city increased, so did poverty and scarcity of housing and food. Prior to emancipation, families of free blacks and escaped slaves lived in cheaply built, one- or two-room structures facing alleys, part of a housing method known as the alley system. Black residents settled in slum areas below First Street that, because of poor sewer systems, were ravaged by disease and sickness. Others lived east of the Capitol along Rhode Island Avenue, a higher-lying but equally poor area. Inferior drainage, profound poverty, crime, and disease made the alleys prisons of affliction that were out of the sight of white Washingtonians. The names of the alleyways—Hog Alley, Coon’s Alley, Goat Alley, and Tin Can Alley—reflected the condition of life for many free blacks in Washington.<sup>5</sup> What is more, the alley system resulted in the complete and total isolation of poor blacks. With limited access to newspapers and high rates of illiteracy, they had little awareness of even the most significant events around the city. News was often limited to scandals and gossip reported by those who worked outside the immediate area. Thus, it is no surprise that the alleys were to become fertile ground for rumors and legends about the black elite.<sup>6</sup>

A short distance from the tenements housing free blacks, the city was functioning as a storehouse—a port city—from which enslaved blacks were auctioned and then transported south. The “slave pens” were out of the immediate sight of black residents, often located in the southernmost sections of the city; the largest was found at the corner of Eighth and B Streets in southwest Washington. Meanwhile, enslaved people living in the District were oftentimes permitted to visit and maintain relationships with free relatives in the city. Black households, therefore, served multiple needs: they were a safe resting place for the enslaved relatives who visited, a home for several generations of free or freed blacks, and a dwelling place for extended family. In short, black homes recentered families that had been destabilized through slavery. It was thus important that nine out of ten blacks in the District had their own homes, however humble, and did not take up residence with the whites who employed them.<sup>7</sup>

Barbershops became one of the most lucrative and well-patronized businesses for black and mulatto businessmen. But by 1840 two mulatto-owned barbershops in west Washington and Capitol Hill had been criticized for refusing to shave or cut the hair of darker-skinned black men, catering



to only the fairest of black men in the city and white men. Just as black Washington residents were tacitly nonsupportive of white businesses that refused to hire people of color, so was their distaste for such “race traitors” made known. Because the owners of these establishments considered themselves to be of a “separate caste,” the hostility of the black majority was not a significant deterrent, nor did it affect business.

On April 12, 1862, President Abraham Lincoln signed an act for release of persons of African descent from enslavement in the District, and slave owners were paid three hundred dollars as compensation for the loss of their slaves. By 1863 manumitted blacks in Washington owned and supported twenty-one churches, twenty schools, and thirty organizations, most of which had been established earlier by free people of mixed heritage in the District.

Black churches quickly began to develop a reputation for discrimination, especially Washington’s Fifteenth Street Presbyterian Church, where in the late 1880s parishioners decried the selection of a pastor whom they thought to be “too black” for the congregation of mulatto and fair-skinned blacks, this despite the fact that the church’s founder, John Cook, was a very dark-skinned black man. Even in light of growing tensions between blacks and mixed-race people, writer Paul Laurence Dunbar noted that the city had “great powers of attracting and holding its colored population; for, belong to whatever class or condition they may, they are always sure to find enough of that same class or condition to make their residence pleasant and congenial.”<sup>8</sup>

Meanwhile, rumors about the lives of wealthy blacks—certainly wealthy by alley-life standards—created a culture of parody among the poorer classes. Through the trading of illegal goods, poorer black residents participated in the culture of showiness and swankiness for which higher-class black Washington was developing a reputation. An occasional fur or diamond could be spotted in the alleys, and blacks in other cities would joke that hunger and joblessness were hardly deterrents to the showmanship of black Washingtonians. Educator Booker T. Washington commented that, unlike those in other cities, the children of even the most deprived laborers in the capital were conscious of the social mores of the upper class; pretense and masquerading consumed the energies of the lower classes. Washington also noted that it was common on any given Sunday evening to see well-dressed black residents strolling down Pennsylvania Avenue or riding in horse-drawn



carriages: in reality, most blacks in the city lived in extreme poverty and the haughtiness to which some of the lower class and many of the middle and upper classes were inclined was not an accurate portrayal of black life.<sup>9</sup> Social pressure and public exhibitionism across class lines grew at a rate that was more rapid in black Washington than in other cities.

A growing source of discontent between blacks and whites was the “passing” of fair-skinned black children into white Washington schools. In the early 1900s, the children of Dr. C. B. Purvis, a fair-skinned administrator at Freeman’s Hospital who was married to a white woman, sent his children to an all-white school, and black Washingtonians criticized this blatant hypocrisy: though black schools in the District were thought to be among the best in the country, they were still not good enough for children who could pass into segregated white schools. Soon afterward, the children of families who identified socially as black were also known to be passing at the Jefferson School in south Washington. From the perspective of the fair-skinned, status-minded parents, attending all-white colleges and universities was quickly becoming a calling card of the black elite, and attending a white preparatory school would secure entrance into Harvard, Yale, or Oberlin, the choice schools of the black elite.<sup>10</sup>

The rumor mill was fueled by the growing circulation of black newspapers with generous editorial columns. Started in 1882, the *Washington Bee* was so named to represent its propensity to be unvaryingly “sweet” to its friends and spitefully stinging to its enemies. Founded by W. Calvin Chase, a native Washingtonian, the *Bee* was uncompromising in its attacks on members of the “colored elite” and organizers of socially elite clubs and circles. While no member of the Washington elite escaped the reach of his pen, Chase was plagued by the contradictions of his own position. The son of wealthy black Washingtonians, he was raised in a three-story brick home at 1109 I Street, Northwest. The Chase family became members of the Fifteenth Street Presbyterian Church only three short years after its founding, and W. Calvin’s mother had a reputation for hosting teas and open houses for the most elite residents of black Washington. Through his wealth, his brief legal career, and his inclusion in the social elite, Chase had a voice in the black community even before he became an official (and sometimes feared) “recorder” of black life. Eventually Chase paid the price for his unabashedness, including



five libel suits over the course of his career and, at one point, a ninety-day jail sentence. While prominent Washingtonians could find their names, their clubs, and their affairs mentioned in the *Bee*, there was an unspoken understanding that—depending on the social climate of the moment—those who were Chase’s Sunday enemies could become his Monday friends. Changes in the tide were often believed to be the result of monetary exchanges.<sup>11</sup>

In the late 1880s, in the midst of the growing popularity of the black press, six of ten mulatto heads of households in the District could read, while only two of ten black household heads could boast of the same. The influx of freed slaves into the District in the 1880s reinforced patterns of poverty, and while a small number of ex-slaves further established themselves, the majority remained desperately poor. Well-educated aristocrats, with noticeable amounts of white blood, drew further and further away from the darker classes, distinguishing themselves (free people of color) from others (freed people of color).<sup>12</sup>

Three distinct social classes and living areas emerged in the city. A handful of wealthy blacks owned homes in the southeastern part of the District. Middle-class blacks, most of whom were employed as government clerks, formed a “second rank,” residing along Sixteenth Street between Scott Avenue and the White House. This broad and well-paved avenue running through the heart of the city was closed to the “third rank,” the poor black majority, who continued to live east of the Capitol.<sup>13</sup>

One of the most popular living areas for upper-middle-class educators, doctors, lawyers, and business owners was LeDroit Park, a quiet “suburban” enclave south of W Street between Second and Sixth Streets. Founded in 1873, LeDroit Park was a fifty-five-acre triangular village located on the northern end of Washington. It was an entirely white suburb occupying one of the most convenient and desirable locations in the city. It was within walking distance of shopping and the theater but fenced off from surrounding black communities. Directly north of LeDroit Park was an area known as Howardtown, a black residential area housing a combination of lower-income families and Howard University faculty and staff. Because of the proximity to Howardtown, LeDroit Park developers built a fence around the enclave and hired watchmen to keep outsiders from wandering inside. But life for the white residents of LeDroit Park began to change with the construction of row housing nearby; also, a rise in nearby commercial activity



increased noise and traffic. Moreover, more blacks began to move into the Howardtown section of the city, thus increasing the number of black residents living in close proximity to LeDroit Park.<sup>14</sup>

Although a high fence separated LeDroit Park from the rest of the city, there were several incidents of Howardtown residents cutting through the park to shorten the trip from residential to commercial areas. When the LeDroit villagers replaced the old fence with a barbed-wire fence, a battle between black and white residents ensued, and by the time it ended in 1891, foot traffic moved freely through the area. Two years later, Octavius A. Williams, a black barber in Washington, became the first black owner of a home in LeDroit Park; he was followed by Mary Church Terrell and her husband, Robert Terrell. Mary Church Terrell, daughter of mulatto ex-slaves who were hoteliers, and Robert Herberton Terrell, a Harvard-educated Latin teacher and later a judge in the District, had significant difficulty finding a house where “self-respecting people of any color would . . . care to live. [F]inding the kind [of house] we wanted which either the owners themselves or their agents would sell us was a horse of quite another color.”<sup>15</sup>

By 1900 LeDroit Park had amassed a small black community. Georgia Avenue, located just one block from LeDroit Park, became the location for a collection of black businesses, black churches, black clubs, and black newspapers. Howard University, Miner Normal School, Dunbar High School, and Armstrong Technical High School, all black educational institutions, were also located in this area.<sup>16</sup> This breath of fresh air, this emerging black locale, marked the first major challenge to the alley system of dwellings in the District. By the early 1900s, the area was flooded by the black elite: the black middle and upper-middle classes then began to expand, purchasing homes around Massachusetts Avenue and Sixteenth Street, a previously white area. According to Paul Laurence Dunbar, for whom Dunbar High School was named, “Here exists a society which is sufficient unto itself—a society which is satisfied with its own condition, and which is not asking for social intercourse with whites. Here are homes finely, beautifully and tastefully furnished.”<sup>17</sup> Though spoken with sarcasm and resentment, his words bore witness to the approaching reality of black Washington.

By 1917 LeDroit Park was an all-black neighborhood. As a black suburb, it maintained the same reputation it had as a white suburb—beautiful houses, well-manicured lawns and gardens, and immaculately clean streets.



By the 1940s LeDroit became the most fashionable address for black Washingtonians. The center of the park was eventually renamed for one of LeDroit's most illustrious black residents, Anna Julia Cooper.<sup>18</sup>

Black Washingtonians increasingly impenetrable social barriers included Richard Greener, who in 1870 had become the first black man to graduate from Harvard University. Fair-skinned and wealthy, Greener came to Washington in 1879 to accept a position as dean of the Howard University Law School. W. E. B. Du Bois considered him to be one of the most gifted black intellectuals of his time, and no sooner did he establish residence in the city than he was invited to every private gathering hosted by his wealthy black neighbors (including the Pinchbacks, the Purvises, the Bruces, and the Langstons—Langston Hughes's relatives). He was soon considered a leader among the upper rank, and a “catch” for any Washington woman able to keep his attention. Greener set his sights on Genevieve Fleet, a young biracial woman who owned a brownstone at Fourteenth and T Streets in a fashionable northwest suburb. She was a private woman who attended only select events, hosted very few of her own, and had a very small circle of friends. Still, she was known about town for her statuesque posture, poise, and beauty. She accepted Greener's marriage proposal. The couple had one daughter, Belle da Costa, who inherited her mother's simplicity, beauty, and grace and her father's intelligence, charm, and wit. She spent the early part of her life in Washington. Her parents were too well known among the black elite and among white Washingtonians for her to “pass” into the white community of the District. With her parents' blessing, she set her sights on New York and lived most of her life “passing” as a wealthy Spaniard among New York's white aristocrats.<sup>19</sup>

Over time, the distinction between the black majority and the black elite became evident at local vacation spots like the summer colony founded by Frederick Douglass's son (and named for his father), where fair-complexioned residents of Baltimore and Washington attempted to bar darker blacks. Frederick Douglass himself felt divided concerning his loyalty to the black aristocrats with whom he lived and socialized and the black majority whom he ardently represented. His identification with the black elite was undeniable: in fact, his home in the Anacostia section of Washington, D.C., started a trend among the black “Four Hundred” (the most elite black families) who, following Douglass, flooded the area in the early 1900s.



Douglass attended a few black aristocratic events in the city, while turning down many other invitations. He appreciated the social company of the black elite and also the intellectual exchanges that such occasions afforded him. Still, he felt a political allegiance to the most profoundly disadvantaged of Washington's black majority, who had drawn further and further from the sight of the upper classes. Douglass's sons were to become members of Washington's upper echelon, hosting many elite affairs.<sup>20</sup>

In addition to Douglass's home, the home of Georgia Douglas Johnson and Henry Lincoln Johnson on S Street, Northwest, became a social gathering place for Washington blue bloods and the "Howard crowd." Mrs. Johnson, according to one scholar, was "quite light-skinned and knew of considerable 'miscegenation' in her family background."<sup>21</sup> Henry Johnson, a devout Republican, was President Taft's appointee as recorder of deeds for the District of Columbia. On any given Saturday afternoon, their dinner guests might include writer Alain Locke; Kelly Miller, dean at Howard University; historian Carter G. Woodson; and, when they visited town, author James Weldon Johnson, his wife, Grace Nail Johnson, and W. E. B. Du Bois.<sup>22</sup>

Beginning in 1920, writer Jean Toomer, grandson of the Washington aristocrat and politician P. B. S. Pinchback, organized "literary evenings" at the Johnsons' home. Discussions often centered around Toomer's favorite topics: miscegenation, racial ambiguity, and the status of "near white" Negroes. During these gatherings, Toomer worked with great fervor to sway the other attendees toward his views of race. It is important, here, to mention that Toomer did not learn of his own black heritage until adulthood. Later, from his grandfather's Washington home, Toomer—who was tall and black-haired, with a light olive complexion—wrote to fellow writer Claude McKay about his racial ambiguity:

Racially I seem to have . . . seven blood mixtures: French, Dutch, Welsh, Negro, German, Jewish and Indian. Because of these, my position in America has been a curious one. I have lived equally amid the two race groups, now white, now colored. I have strived for a spiritual fusion analogous to the fact of racial intermingling.<sup>23</sup>

Against this striving, Toomer felt himself "artistically . . . pulled deeper and deeper into the Negro group."<sup>24</sup> Still, his ambivalence about race and



belonging was evidenced in the final writing of *Cane*, as well as in his story “Withered Skin of Berries,” a short fictional account of a woman passing in Washington, D.C., to gain employment while she maintained residency in a black District neighborhood.<sup>25</sup>

In 1921 Toomer went one step further and organized a gathering in the Johnsons’ home specifically for those who were interested in “the place and condition of the mixed-blood group in this country and, second, to formulate an ideal that will be both workable and inclusive.” Johnson, Toomer, and most of the attendees at this “meeting” were fair in complexion.<sup>26</sup>

While black Washingtonians were aware of the patterns of complexion-based discrimination, they assigned blame to migrants to the city rather than to native Washingtonians. In reality, old citizens (or “Old Cits”) were as much to blame, but they were in a position of privilege, owing no explanations for their practices or behaviors. Newcomers argued, however, that “while the old settlers are wrapped in the drapery of their scorn and contempt for us, we are up and doing things. If you ask who are the Sunday-school superintendents, or who is the president of almost any literary society, or who originates, executes to perfection, and mans anything credible to the colored people of the District . . . [it] is the newcomer.”<sup>27</sup>

The fair-skinned, Washington-born opera singer Lillian Tibbs, for example, could hardly be accused of bridging the divide between the haves and have-nots: Tibbs, along with her contemporaries, formed a social clique infamous for its criticisms of black folk culture. Nevertheless, she was respected among black Washingtonians for offering “cultivation classes” for the masses. Though W. E. B. Du Bois was the non-Washingtonian who received the most social invitations, and he was known to regretfully decline many, he seldom turned down an invitation from Tibbs, especially preceding her performance for Eleanor Roosevelt at the White House, which gained her recognition well beyond the black community. Her family home on U Street became a premier center for black literary events and for black writers and artists who were visiting the city. Those who previously wielded some social power, including the haughty founders of the fair-skin-only Lotus Club, Wyatt Archer and C. E. Mathews, were excluded from “Old Cit” circles because they lacked the stature needed to transcend their short length of residency in Washington.<sup>28</sup>



An irrefutable leader of the black aristocracy was Dr. Charles B. Purvis, a fair-hued physician who was descended from free people of color. Purvis, a chief administrator at Freeman's Hospital, was one of the wealthiest men of color in the District through the early 1900s, and he held a few exclusive gatherings at his District home, to which only a handful of men and women of status were welcomed.<sup>29</sup>

Leaders of the Washington aristocracy also included members of the Pinchback family, migrants from Louisiana who moved to Washington in the late 1800s. Pinckey Pinchback, the son of a wealthy white New Orleans planter and a mulatto slave, became involved in Louisiana politics. Like many of the Pinchbacks, Pinckey was fair enough to pass for white and like some of his relatives, he often chose not to. He married and had four children with his wife, Nina; their sons, who attended Ivy League schools, had successful and lucrative careers in pharmacy, medicine, and law in the District. Their daughter, also named Nina, attended an all-white finishing school in Massachusetts. Many years later, her son, the author Jean Toomer, would befriend Langston Hughes, and they would characterize aristocratic life in Washington City as schizophrenic, "living at the crossroads between the black and white worlds."<sup>30</sup>

The women of the aristocracy included Josephine Bruce, the wife of Senator B. K. Bruce, who was described as a "tall statuesque woman, fairer than many a Caucasian belle, her pale creamy complexion and slightly waving, abundant hair [giving] no hint of African blood," and Josephine Bruce's dear friend Ida Langston, grandaunt of Langston Hughes, who was the daughter of a wealthy white planter and educated at exclusive schools in the Midwest, where she passed as a white student. A third member of this group of lady friends was the wife of A. F. Augusta, the city's oldest and most successful black doctor. Mrs. Augusta's darker complexion did not go unnoticed among news writers: an editorial in the *Spectator* described her as "darker than many of her social circle, but her features are fine and of that regularity which marks the intelligent members of all races."<sup>31</sup>

Perhaps the most successful of the black entrepreneurs was the Wormley family, led by James Wormley. His sons subsequently became the most successful restaurateurs and hotel owners of color in Washington. The Wormleys, who boasted of having been free people of color since the 1700s, secured a



small fortune as caterers and hoteliers, hosting many of the parties, balls, and events organized by Washington's black aristocracy.<sup>32</sup> According to Francis Grimke, a friend of James Wormley, "No hotel in Washington stood higher than his; no hotel in the city was better conducted, or was patronized by a finer class of customers." The hotel was frequented by distinguished blacks from across the nation and abroad, although the Wormleys were occasionally accused of discriminating against their own, especially blacks of lower social stations.<sup>33</sup>

Perhaps the wealthiest and most well-known family in black Washington, D.C., was the Cook family. John Cook, who established private schools for black children, founded the elite Fifteenth Street Presbyterian Church in 1841. His sons were George and John Cook, who became, respectively, the superintendent of black public schools in the District and a trustee at Howard University. Believed to be the wealthiest black resident of Washington, the elder John Cook made most of his fortune in real estate.<sup>34</sup> The Shadds and Francisces followed suit and became owners of catering and restaurant businesses in the District.

Beyond private business ownership, the trademark professions of the black elite included medicine, law, teaching, and high-ranking government jobs. For women, teaching (mainly at Dunbar High School) was the most common profession of those employed outside the home.

Upper-class and upper-middle-class white Washingtonians were always distant from the black aristocracy, seldom acknowledging their existence. One white resident—John Gray, a Washingtonian who owned a lodge-style meeting place for whites—desegregated his business, creating a social meeting place for the fairest of Washington blacks. For a short time, distinguished black Washingtonians enjoyed the flirtation with congeniality among aristocrats across racial borders, but when the number of middle- to upper-class white patrons began to decline, Gray was forced out of business, confirming for the black aristocracy that integration into white social circles was not a possibility and confirming for well-meaning whites that the black upper crust did not have good standing among the white upper-middle classes.<sup>35</sup>

The leading social events among the black elite were club meetings, card parties, luncheons, dinners, and receptions hosted for an intimate group of friends or for a large gathering of business acquaintances, family members,



and neighbors. For out-of-town visitors, a series of teas, dinners, card parties, and small dances given by their Washington hosts and by friends were intended to give them a warm welcome to the city.<sup>36</sup>

Balls and soirées were often the occasions where young, single aristocrats were introduced to each other and where invitations would be extended to continue conversations at private homes. Over time, Sunday afternoon teas—salon visits in the winter, garden visits in the spring—were a chance for private conversation. In the end, securing invitations to most of the upper ten affairs of the season marked the end of social initiation. Fair complexion was understood, generally, to be a standard “membership requirement.”<sup>37</sup>

By 1900 Washington, D.C., was becoming a most popular settling place for blacks migrating from the Deep South, and the black population—totaling 94,000 by 1910—included 1,500 people who were classified as “professionals.”<sup>38</sup> This professional class comprised more than 400 colored teachers, 50 qualified physicians, 10 dentists, more than 90 ministers, and some 30 lawyers.<sup>39</sup>

In the earlier part of the twentieth century, black migrants might have chosen Washington over other cities for two reasons: it was becoming an ideal settling place for those seeking government jobs, and the public school system for blacks in the city surpassed those of other cities in quality and resources. With an assembly of blacks from different cities bringing new customs, practices, and beliefs, the District’s “black Washingtonian” prototype began to form: Washingtonians were thought to be more educated than “typical urban blacks” and more cosmopolitan and sophisticated than their southern contemporaries.<sup>40</sup>

It was during the second decade of the new century that Washington’s black aristocracy began to consider Du Bois’s “Talented Tenth” ideology—the call to rescue the black masses—more literally. In 1926 well-to-do black Washingtonians founded the Colored Social Settlement, a “community house built expressly for the social improvement of colored people.” The settlement was organized by the men and women of the “educated classes” who took up residence in impoverished areas of Washington “for the purpose of bringing culture, knowledge, harmless recreations and especially personal influence to bear upon the poor in order to better and brighten their lives.”<sup>41</sup> Located at Seventeenth and L Streets in southwest Washington, the settlement was a



sizeable brick building containing fourteen rooms, each housing a variety of uplift programs for boys, girls, men, and women. The settlement organizers were a recognizable group of “Old Cits,” including Roscoe Bruce, George Cook, Francis Grimke, and Mary Terrell, all active members of the elite and complexion-conscious Fifteenth Street Presbyterian Church. In addition to providing practical and educational training, participants received daily instruction on “proper” entertainment and rigid “guidelines” for personal cleanliness.<sup>42</sup>

With the short-lived success of the Colored Settlement, the members of the black elite had created an outlet for volunteerism. By no means was this charity meant to bridge the gap that existed between the well-off and the struggling majority. Daily life, on both sides, remained virtually unchanged. As Mary Church Terrell noted,

If all Colored people look alike to some folks, they all do not look alike to one another, when it comes to drawing the social line. It would be as difficult for a bore or a moral leper to obtain social recognition among educated refined colored people at Washington as it would be for a camel with a hump to pass literally through a Cambric needle's eye.<sup>43</sup>

As noted earlier, most fair-complexioned blacks remained in black locales, “passing” socially and sometimes professionally in the District, then returning to black communities. One black Washingtonian described passing as “falling off a log,” to which Mary Church Terrell responded, “falling off a log is a really difficult feat compared with the ease with which colored people in this country are sometimes transformed into white.”<sup>44</sup>

Herself fair-complexioned and acquainted with many blacks who passed for white, Terrell recorded the experiences of several people living on the color line. In one such case, a “competent and beautiful [colored] woman” from Washington, D.C., was discharged from employment at a District department store when it was discovered that she was “non-Aryan.” In a second case, a young couple, fair in complexion, headed to the Midwest so that the husband, a doctor, could open a new practice. His openness about his African blood was a hindrance, and after long and bitter disagreements, he headed to the East to begin a “white” practice while his wife and daughter returned to Washington, where she continued her life as a black woman. Of



this couple, Terrell said, “When I see this accomplished woman and her little daughter who is as fair as a snow drop and pretty as a peach, I cannot help wondering how the husband and father could have summoned the strength and courage to bid them good-bye.”<sup>45</sup>

Following the end of World War I, racial tensions were high in Washington, as they were in cities across the country. The bulk of these tensions were felt by poorer blacks, who performed domestic work and other forms of labor for whites and who, therefore, did not have the option of remaining isolated from racial issues. While some white Washingtonians thought of black Washingtonians as a burden to be politely borne, black aristocrats were sometimes imagined as the mediators between whites of the middle and upper classes and black “folk”—a curious and incorrect assumption, given the limited interaction between the races, and given the unlikelihood that black aristocrats would ever be welcomed into white aristocratic circles for any reason, and on any terms.

Passing was so common between the 1920s through the 1940s that the National Theater in Washington employed a black doorman whose job was to identify other blacks. These so-called spotters, who enforced a “passing test” against members of their own communities, had their names printed in black papers (notably the *Afro-American News*), which resulted in some community alienation. In truth, and to varying degrees, this suggested that the black majority, who were unable to pass, supported—although passively—the right of lighter blacks to “infiltrate” white establishments.<sup>46</sup>

By the 1930s the black Washington community had the grounding and social traditions of an old, esteemed society. In a 1938 radio broadcast, activist Nannie Helen Burroughs proclaimed that black Washington had made “greater progress in religion, education, in material advancement and in social adjustment than any similar group of Negroes anywhere in the world.”<sup>47</sup>

By the early 1950s, the Hecht Company (a department store), District eateries, and the National Theater opened their doors to colored citizens. With the integration of public schools in 1954, the black elite made the significant leap to white institutions, while the black masses moved into the previously elite black elementary and high schools.

The consequence of this new social order in the District was the maintenance of ties among old Washingtonians and a decline in the rate and



centrality of a “new elitism.” In an offshoot of the civil rights movement, the Black Power movement redefined “black beauty” to include a broader definition of physical attractiveness. Black Power, a phrase adapted by Black Panther leader Stokley Carmichael, was a call for black Americans to “begin to define their own goals, to lead their own organizations and to support those organizations. It was a call to reject the racist institutions and values of this society.”<sup>48</sup> The fantastic array of names that had been popularly assigned to skin colors—including “tease-’em brown,” “honest black,” “won’t-stop black,” and “blackout”—was itself a form of folklore, that is, naming lore. It found an audience among African Americans who could, perhaps, tease out of the derogatory intentions and become a celebration of diversity.<sup>49</sup>

By 1965 the number of black Washington residents outnumbered white residents six to one; this marked the first time in American history that a major city comprised more black residents than white. The black elite, those who had not left the city for homes in the Maryland and Virginia suburbs, lined Sixteenth Street in northwest Washington (the “new gold coast”) and the upper southeast. Northeastern housing projects and southwestern row houses hosted a black majority. What distinguished Washington’s black population from the blacks of southern cities was the serious fashion sense and stylish elegance that was to become the calling card of the black Washingtonian past and present. The infamous “native Washingtonians,” those who could boast of old family lineages in the city, had built up an arsenal of characteristics that were reminiscent of Langston Hughes’s characterization of the “Old Cits” forty years earlier: cosmopolitan, progressive, and educated. While many, at times a majority, of the black Washingtonians did not fit this mold, the weight of Howard University, of the “upper tens,” of Washington’s social legacy, continued to rest heavily on the carriers of the District’s traditions.<sup>50</sup>