

THE GREATER U STREET AREA - YESTERDAY, TODAY, & TOMORROW

“There is an excitement about this neighborhood. You can feel it when you walk the streets.”

Before Shinola and luxury high-rises, even before the beginning of desegregation and the 1968 riots, the U Street Corridor Northwest, DC, (Greater U Street Area) was known as Black Broadway. From the early 1900s into the 1950s, African Americans—subject to Jim Crow laws in other parts of town—were free to own businesses here and built what was often described as a “city within a city.” The corridor is bound by:

- on the north, Florida Ave. NW, towards the Meridian Hill and Columbia Heights neighborhoods
- on the south, S St. NW, towards the [Logan Circle](#) and [Shaw](#) neighborhoods
- on the east, 9th St. NW, towards the LeDroit Park, Howard University and Shaw neighborhoods
- on the west, 15th St. NW, towards the Adams Morgan and Dupont Circle and the Strivers' Section and Sixteenth Street historic districts

In addition to U Street itself, the intersecting 14th Street is a major retail, dining and entertainment corridor.

It was home to poets, musicians, authors, professors, doctors, and historians, and was anchored by Howard University. The district served as the economic, cultural, and spiritual center for African Americans during the height of the Jim Crow era, with over 200 Black-owned businesses patronized solely by African Americans. Even the Victorian-era buildings reflect the work of African Americans architects.

U Street's Black community thrived with successful businesses that fed back into its localized economy.

Today, we will highlight five neighborhood establishments that continue to reflect the vibrance of the African American presence in the Greater U Street area.



First, **Howard University**, the historically Black University founded in 1867 in Washington, D.C., and named for General Oliver Otis Howard, head of the post-Civil War Bureau, who influenced Congress to appropriate funds for the school. Although Howard University has always been open to students of any race, colour, or creed, it was founded with a special obligation to provide advanced studies for Blacks. Today, the University, comprised of 14 schools and colleges, is committed to further enhancing its strategic positioning as one of the premier research universities in the nation. Some luminaries who are alumni include Chadwick Boseman, Justice Thurgood Marshall, former Vice President Kamala Harris, Zora Neal Hurston, and Thomas Sowell.

The University's motto *Veritas et Utilitas*, Truth and Service, represents a key part of its identity. The more than 12,000 undergraduate and graduate students dedicate hundreds of hours each year to service here at St. Augustine, nearby LeDroit Park, around the nation, and throughout the world.



Second, **Industrial Bank**, a historic African American-owned bank based in Washington, D.C. was established in 1913 as the Industrial Savings Bank by John Whitelaw Lewis. The bank provided loans to thousands of families and businesses who could not borrow at white-owned banks. U Street's Black community thrived with successful businesses that fed back into its localized economy. The neighborhood was a hotbed for innovations in technology and culture, and it was

built and sustained independently by African Americans. Today, the bank has nine branches in D.C., Maryland, New Jersey, and Harlem, NY.



Next, **Lee's Flower and Card Shop Inc.** is a family-owned full-service flower shop that has been a staple of historic U Street for over 75 years. William Lee, a former Pullman Porter, and his wife, Winnifred Lee founded the business in 1945. Lee's is currently located at 1026 U St., NW and owned and operated by sisters Stacie Lee Banks (President & Co-Owner) and Kristie Lee Jones (General Manager & Co-Owner). The sisters are the third generation to run the family business which has expanded to a northeast location and provides. This third generation of Lees embraced the rapidly changing economy. They understand the importance of social media, digital marketing, and created a unique customer experience in the world of flowers.



Another landmark business in the U Street Corridor, **Ben's Chili Bowl** restaurant located at 1213 U Street, next to Lincoln Theatre, was founded on August 22, 1958, by Ben Ali, a Trinidadian-born immigrant of Indian descent and his fiancée, Virginia-born Virginia Rollins. The two were married seven weeks after opening the restaurant. The building they chose was that of Washington's first silent movie house, the Minnehaha, which was established in 1911. The building is a contributing property to the Greater U Street Historic District. The restaurant has been the epicurean destination for notables such as Duke Ellington and Miles Davis, president-elect Obama, DC mayors and visiting dignitaries from around the world. Ben Ali was a man who invested his life in a small business that weathered many storms and became the soul of a neighborhood and the pride of the city. With the expansion of the business, his sons, Nizam and Kamal, continue his legacy today.



Finally, **The African American Civil War Memorial Museum (AACWM)**, was founded in 1999 to share the largely unknown stories of the US Colored Troops (USCT) who fought for freedom, before and after the American Civil War. The Museum aims to serve as an educational resource for its local, national, and international community. The African American Civil War Memorial Museum honors the heroic roles of 209,145 US Colored Troops (USCT) who helped end slavery and kept America united under one flag.

From 1861 to 1865, the American union was broken as brother fought brother in a Civil War that remains a defining moment in our nation's history. Its causes and consequences, including the continuing struggle for civil rights for all Americans, reverberate to this day. From the battlefields to the home front, the cost of the war was steep...its lessons eternal.

Because of the historic significance and contribution of the U Street Corridor to American culture, the National Park Service has commemorated it by adding the Greater U Street area to the National Register of Historic Places. Tour of the Greater U Street Heritage Trail, which is part of the African American Heritage Trail in Washington, D.C. to learn more about past and present contributions of the African Americans.