Georgetown’s African-American Heritage

Nestled along the back streets and historic homes of Georgetown, lies an unassuming patch of green space that is the birthplace of the neighborhood known as Herring Hill. This African-American community, established soon after the colony of Maryland created Georgetown in 1755, was named for the annual herring run in Rock Creek, which meanders through this historic Washington neighborhood.

Throughout the 18th and 19th century, Herring Hill grew to encompass roughly one quarter of what is now present day Georgetown. Bordered by M Street on the south and R Street on the north, and between 26th and 37th Streets, more than 4,000 black families lived in this 15-block area by the late 1800’s and worked as gardeners, cooks, and stable help for the gentry of Georgetown and the surrounding area.

Although M Street is now considered the main artery through Georgetown, P Street was the main avenue of Herring Hill. P Street, like any community’s main thoroughfare, was brimming with stores, schools, and businesses, all catering specifically to the African-American population.

By the mid 20th century, urban renewal programs gentrified the neighborhood and forced the majority of African-American families out of their historic birthplace. Although the majority of the original black families have moved to other areas of Washington, several of the original 18th century churches are still in existence and are attended by descendants of those original Herring Hill citizens.

We invite you to step back in time and discover the incredible stories of struggle, adversity, and achievement in one of the earliest and largest African-American communities established in Washington DC. Tours of Herring Hill and the African-Americans who called this neighborhood home for two centuries are on Rock Creek Park’s Black Georgetown Hike. Join us to learn about prominent Herring Hill residents like Emma V. Brown, who opened a school for Georgetown’s black children in her home, Dr. James Fleet, one of Herring Hill’s three black physicians, and Alfred Lee, a prominent black business owner who had a business on P Street.

The schedule for this tour can be found online at www.nps.gov/roc.

Present day view of P street in the area once known as Herring Hill.

Herring Hill holds reminders of Georgetown’s 19th century African-American community.

Welcome from the Superintendent

Rock Creek Park is a unique urban oasis in our nation’s capital. It offers visitors the opportunity to relax and reflect. It is a respite from the everyday. Whether you spent your childhood wandering through these woods or this is your first visit to the park, you will find something that brings a smile to your face and peace to your heart.

Exploring the park trails is a popular recreational activity. Some of these trails were originally designed for horseback riding and some also offer scenic views of the forest and the creek. Rock Creek Park also has much to offer if you are interested in history. Wander through the Civil War sites at Fort DeRussey and Fort Stevens (the only Washington fort that saw battle during the civil war), or visit one of the oldest standing structures in the District of Columbia, the Old Stone House in Georgetown.

Rock Creek Park is part of the National Park Service and, like all national parks, our mission is to preserve our natural and cultural resources not just for today but for generations to follow. You can help us protect these areas by enjoying your experiences in the park and by taking only pictures and leaving only footprints. Enjoy the respite of Rock Creek Park.

Sincerely,

Adrienne A. Coleman
Superintendent

2. Exploring Washington’s Winter Night Sky

Just because it’s winter doesn’t mean there isn’t a lot to see in the night sky. Discover the amazing adventure the night sky offers and learn what you can see right from your front door.

3. How to Become Bird Brained in Rock Creek

Cardinals, Chickadees and Blue Birds, Oh My! Read about the many bird species who spend their winters in Rock Creek Park. We also have some recommendations on where the best spots are to find our winter feathered friends.

3. Rock Creek, A Park Fit for a President

Rock Creek Park has been a respite for many of our Presidents. Read how past Presidents spent their leisure time in one of the nation’s oldest National Parks.

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Exploring Washington’s Winter Night Sky

The winter night sky is full of wonderful things: two bears, a king with his queen and beautiful daughter, a flying horse, a hunter, a bull, the seven sisters, and more. These pictures are in the stars, but it will take patience and an imagination to see how they fit. Let that be your adventure!

Begin your adventure as you step outside just after the Sun has disappeared below the horizon. You can see a glow on the horizon where the Sun has set. Point your left shoulder toward that glow so that you are now facing north. Now wait until the sky is dark enough to see stars. As the stars appear, you will see, in the north, a familiar pattern of stars, the Big Dipper in which four stars form the bowl and three others form the handle. The two bowl stars farthest from the handle are the pointer stars because they point to the North Star, Polaris. Try this. Point a finger at the bottom (of the bowl) pointer and move it past the upper pointer until it points to the first bright star. That will be Polaris, the North Star.

Polaris is at the end of an arc of stars which forms the handle of the Little Dipper. At the other end of the handle you will see four stars which form its bowl. Some people may think that the two dippers are constellations, but they are actually asterisms. An asterism is an easily-recognized pattern of stars which usually is a part of a constellation. Here, the Big Dipper is a part of the constellation Ursa Major, the Big Bear and the Little Dipper is a part of the constellation Ursa Minor, the Little Bear.

The interpretation of star patterns is not universal. In England, for instance, the Big Dipper is often called the Plough. In this country, the fugitive slaves called it the Drinking Gourd. The Drinking Gourd and the North Star were beacons that guided the fugitives north on the Underground Railroad.

In the western sky, just above the horizon where the Sun has set, lies the constellation Pegasus, the flying horse. You can see four stars forming a large square, the Great Square of Pegasus.

If the sky is dark and clear, you may be able to see a wide band of stars (light) crossing the sky, the Milky Way. In the Milky Way toward the north-east, you will see a pattern of stars that looks like the letter W (or M). This is the constellation Cassiopeia, the Queen of Aethiopia (probably the ancient kingdom of Kush). Her husband, Cepheus, lies just east of her but closer to the horizon. Between Cassiopeia and Pegasus lies their beautiful daughter, Andromeda.

Perhaps the most prominent winter constellation is Orion, the hunter, with his club, sword, and lion skin shield. Orion has everything, something red, something blue, something old, something new! Betelgeuse is a very old, red star. Rigel is a hot blue star. And the Great Nebula near the tip of Orion’s sword is a maternity ward for new stars.

Orion is facing a V-shaped group of stars, the Hyades, which, with the bright star Aldebaran for an eye, forms the head of the constellation Taurus, the bull. Beyond Taurus you will see a small cluster of stars, the Pleiades also known as the Seven Sisters.

For more information on your sky adventures, join us in Rock Creek Park’s planetarium and meet George who will show you the wonders of the night sky. We have the only planetarium in the National Park Service. Public planetarium programs are scheduled at 4:00 PM each Wednesday (for the youngest astronomers) and at 1:00 PM and 4:00 PM on Saturdays and Sundays. Visit our web site – www.nps.gov/rocr - for a complete schedule of planetarium and other programs. Our planetarium is a part of the Nature Center located at 5300 Glover Road, NW, Washington, DC. In addition to your backyard, our planetarium is a good place to start your exploration of Washington’s winter night sky.
How to Become Bird Brained in Rock Creek

Rock Creek Park has always been an important stop for migratory birds to rest and feed during their long journeys in the spring and fall. While many birds live in the park year round, others migrate to the park from farther northern regions to spend the winter in a climate that is milder than the areas from which they originated. This constant turn-over of birds among the local population makes bird watching a popular pastime even in the chilliest of months. Here are a few tips for those of you who would like to take up this educational and environmentally friendly diversion.

What You Will Need

You should start with a comprehensive field guide. This will allow you to identify and record the many birds you will observe in the park. Stop by the nature center for a free bird checklist to aide you in your quest. A good pair of binoculars is necessary for successful sightings preferably with a 7 or 8 magnification. Inexpensive binoculars will not provide you with proper alignment or a clear view. Birds have a tendency to move from place to place quickly. Sharing binoculars often results in a missed birding opportunity for someone in the group. Dress for the weather and wear comfortable foot wear.

Where & When To Go

The best times for bird watching are around sunrise and sunset. One of the most popular birding spots in the park is picnic area #8, because it has the type of terrain visited by multiple bird species. Located on elevated land it sits in an area where the upland forest meets the meadow a perfect place to practice your ornithological past time. But don’t nest here. Try to visit as many different habitats as possible. For example, walking along Rock Creek will help you view water birds such as ducks and King Fishers.

Rock Creek, A Park Fit for a President

Rock Creek Park has a long standing connection with the presidents of our country. From its earliest days the park has been a place of relaxation and recreation enjoyed by Presidents and citizens alike. Many of the Presidents have come to enjoy the peace and beauty of Washington’s largest expanse of green space, Rock Creek Park. Andrew Johnson would bring his family to the park for picnics in the area of Peirce Mill. Woodrow Wilson, the only President to marry while in office, courted his wife while on walks along Ross Drive. He would have his driver drop them off at one end of Ross Drive and wait for them at the other. Meanwhile Secret Service would ensure that the couple remained undisturbed. Harry Truman and his family were present for the opening night performance of the Carter Baron Amphitheater. Dwight Eisenhower would take a break from the cares of the Oval Office in a round of golf at the park’s golf course. Ronald Reagan would do the same by riding horses at the Rock Creek stables and equine field.

Perhaps the President that utilized and appreciated Rock Creek Park’s resources the most was Teddy Roosevelt. He approached the park with its forest covered hills and the stream filled valleys with the same enthusiasm and spirit he showed for the parks out west. Only the most intrepid and enduring of hikers was able to match Roosevelt’s rapid pace and point-to-point manner of hiking. One such hiker was the French Ambassador Jules Jusserand. On one of his first meetings with the president, Jusserand and a number of others joined Roosevelt on one of his point-to-point hikes. As one by one the others were left behind amidst the brush and streams, Jusserand doggedly kept pace with Roosevelt. He became a good friend of the President’s and one of the few people who would regularly hike with Roosevelt in the park.

Roosevelt’s love of the outdoors was not limited only to those who could keep pace with him. In the summers he would bring his family to the park, pulling the children in wagons once they tired. Winters saw them sledding down the park’s many hills.

Every day is President’s day in Rock Creek Park. Come enjoy the park’s beauty and it’s many recreational opportunities as did past Presidents.

Birds such as ducks and King Fishers are one of the many species of birds who spend the winter in Rock Creek Park.

Ranger Programs

Youth Planetarium
4:00 p.m. Wednesdays
This introduction to the night sky for the youngest of astronomers is a shortened version of our Night Sky Planetarium Program. Ages 4 and older.

Winter Night Sky
1:00 p.m. Saturdays & Sundays
Visit the only planetarium in the National Park system and explore the wonders of the night sky. View the brightest stars, planets, and constellations and learn their stories. Ages 4 and older.

Exploring the Universe
4:00 p.m. Saturdays & Sundays (December and January)
Join us for a series of planetarium programs exploring the universe. Topics for these programs include the sun, moon, stars, planets, and other space phenomena. Ages 7 and older.

Night Sky to Freedom
4:00 p.m. Saturdays & Sundays (February only)
In honor of African-American History Month, learn how enslaved people on the Underground Railroad used the night sky as a compass to reach freedom. Ages 7 and older.

Creature Feature
4:00 p.m. Fridays
Get acquainted with the Nature Center’s live animals and assist a park ranger in their feeding. All ages.

Black Georgetown Walks
Please contact Nature Center for times.
Old Stone House
Explore the stories of sacrifice, adversity, and success on this ranger-led tour of historic Herring Hill, a Georgetown neighborhood that holds reminders of the vibrant African-American community that thrived in the 19th century. Ages 8 and older.

A Presidential Park Hike
Please contact Nature Center for times and location.
Join a park ranger on this scenic hike and discover how previous American Presidents have utilized Rock Creek Park for a source of wealth, recreation, and solitude. Ages 8 and up.

Meridian Hill Hike
Please contact Nature Center for times.
Meridian Hill Park
Learn the story of Meridian Hill Park while strolling along the scenic walkways of statues and fountains of this man-made oasis. Meet at the Jewel of Arc statute above the cascading water-fall. All ages.

Children’s Programs
4:00 p.m. Thursdays
Children of all ages can join a park ranger to learn about the natural and cultural resources of Rock Creek Park. Programs are designed to be interactive, so children can play as they learn. Program topics vary. Ages 3 and up.

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Rock Creek Park invites you to partake in the quest of celebrating the beauty of the park’s natural elements-specifically, trees through the expression of art. So grab your camera, or paint brushes, pencils, and canvas and head out into the park! Use your artistic talent to capture the beauty and essence of Rock Creek Park trees that are meaningful to you. We’re not just looking for the largest tree(s), but also those trees that are noteworthy for their beauty, age, history, community significance, or for any other reason that is relevant to the artist.

Send us your framed photographs, paintings, or drawings of the tree(s) along with an essay of 300 words or less telling why the selected tree(s) have significant meaning for you. Your framed submission should be no larger than 18” x 24”.

Your choice of trees can be from Rock Creek Park proper or any of the other areas in Washington, D.C., administered by Rock Creek Park, including Palisades Park, Glover Archbold Park, Whitehaven Park, Battery Kemble Park, Fort Reno Park, Soapstone Valley Park, Little Forest Park, Fort Stevens Park, Battleground National Cemetery, Meridian Hill Park, Old Stone House, Francis Scott Key Memorial, Dumbarton Oaks Park, Montrose Park, Normanstone Parkway, Rock Creek and Potomac Parkway, Klingle Valley Park, Melvin Hazen Park, Bryce Park, Fort Bayard Park, Fort Slocum Park, or Fort Totten Park.

This exhibit is open to visitors of all ages. Entries must be hand delivered to the Rock Creek Park Nature Center and Planetarium by close of business March 16, 2008.

Visitors whose images are chosen from the entries will be invited to attend the opening exhibit and reception the evening of April 6, 2008.

All visitors whose images are chosen will receive a copy of Remarkable Trees of the World by Thomas Pakenham.

All submitted images and essays can be picked up by participants at the Rock Creek Park Nature Center and Planetarium after July 5, 2008.

For more information, visit our website: www.nps.gov/rocr or call (202) 895-6070.