INTRODUCTION

Finding My Roots

Digging up the History of DC's Public Schools

> A public school is supposed to be the symbol of advancement and the avenue to equality.
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> —*Washington Post*, 1965

> Paul Laurence Dunbar Senior High School. Where leaders are cultivated and dreams are born.
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> **—Banner on school building exterior, 2008**

PAUL LAURENCE DUNBAR HIGH SCHOOL in Washington, DC, was an institution of mythic proportions in my mind. It was the first public high school established for and by Black people in the United States.[1] It was also the first public high school established in DC for any student—Black or white. It held a central position in the Black American struggle for equality during the Jim Crow era. Its administrators, teachers, and alumni were a veritable who's who of Black achievement and firsts, ranging from Dr. Charles Drew, who pioneered blood plasma storage; educator Anna Julia Cooper, one of the nation's first Black woman PhDs; Carter G. Woodson, the father of Black history; Robert C. Weaver, the first Black person appointed to a cabinet-level position in the federal government; and Eleanor Holmes Norton, longtime representative to Congress from DC.[2] My aunt Donna attended Dunbar, and Great-Aunt Helen had taught there. Elegant

and statuesque, stern yet soft, Aunt Helen was the quintessential woman educator (figure I.1). She never married, never had children of her own. In the patriarchal cliché of her era, her students were her children. So were her numerous nieces and nephews. She lovingly encouraged my studiousness as a teen, showering me with hardcover versions of the classics, from *The Iliad* to *The Diary of Anne Frank*. So, on a sunny summer afternoon years ago, I made my first trip to Dunbar High School to pay homage to a history connected to me as a Black American, and through my maternal lineage.

Dunbar was a few blocks from my grandfather's home in LeDroit Park, the former residential destination for the New Negro intelligentsia of a bygone era. The area represented the epitome of Black achievement during the Jim Crow era, from the prominent historically Black Howard University, nicknamed "The Capstone of Negro Education" and later, "The Mecca," to LeDroit Park, a romantic streetcar suburb home to Robert and Mary Church Terrell, Walter Washington, Duke Ellington, and Paul Laurence Dunbar, to the U Street commercial corridor where Black businesses, music, and culture once thrived. I was proud that my grandfather lived in LeDroit Park—even though in my childhood of the 1980s and 1990s, most people referred to it as "the 'hood around Howard" or "the ghetto"—because I knew the history of the neighborhood and no one could take that away from me.[3] Growing up, I left the wide plains of Oklahoma City where I lived, to visit my mother's side of family in Washington almost every year, during summer break or on holiday vacation. This was the nucleus of Chocolate City, the only version of Washington I knew intimately, and Dunbar High School was a major anchor institution with which I had yet to become fully acquainted.[4] The monuments on the National Mall were just a backdrop to this storied landscape.

The neighborhood around Dunbar faced economic depression since the unrest of the late 1960s, when middle- and upper-middle-class Black residents left for greener pastures in suburban Prince George's County, Maryland (as their white counterparts had done in Montgomery County, Maryland, and northern Virginia a decade earlier in the face of school desegregation).[5] The condition in the neighborhood around the school grew even more dire in the 1980s and 1990s when the crack epidemic and gang-related violence gripped the city, and the city confronted an impending bankruptcy scare.

During my childhood and teenage years, many of the houses in the blocks surrounding my grandfather's home were bricked in or boarded up. The neighborhood sidewalks were uneven and unkempt. I had to gingerly dodge trash and broken liquor bottles as well as drug paraphernalia. Yet Howard University students passed through the neighborhood on their way to and from classes and dorms at George Washington Carver and Lucy Diggs Slowe Halls. They stopped to greet to Grandpa, "The Godfather," or "Mr.

LeDroit Park," as they called him. Grandpa would sit on the porch most days, with the widest assortment of people you could ever meet coming through the house: local politicians, folks suffering from addiction, community activists, neighborhood characters, church folk, corrupt folk. You name them, he knew them. His Christmas lights lined the porch year-round; his rusted metal chairs never moved an inch from their prominent porch location.

In the midst of all that, he would always remind me, the area had once been home to a proud and rich history through a collection of institutions and residents that made up the heart of Black Washington.[6] The city was unique in its powerful, well-educated Black upper class, which existed for over a century prior to the classic civil rights era, and its influential Black middle class, which grew out of the opportunities the federal government provided African Americans throughout Jim Crow.

By the time I was in college in the early 2000s, the neighborhood around Dunbar was changing again. It was on the precipice of a major demographic and economic turn. The word *gentrification* flitted through the air, as a few scattered white homebuyers began looking more closely at the section of Washington that had once been the cultural capital of Chocolate City.[7] It was then that I decided to take the history of Black Washington and its built environment seriously. An architecture major at Yale, I found my architectural history classes most compelling. In 2002 I elected to take a graduate-level seminar on historic preservation, and it was there that the foundation of my professional journey began to crystalize. When confronted with the question of what topic I would pursue for my senior thesis, I chose my grandfather's neighborhood. Similarly, when I attended graduate school at the University of Virginia, I completed a master's thesis on a cultural landscape that my grandfather referred to as Malcolm X Park (official name Meridian Hill Park) due to the stories he told me about that site. Indeed, it was family history and Black history, told to me by my maternal grandfather in Washington, DC, and my paternal aunt in Oklahoma, which set the course of my future research, teaching, and practice.

It was for these reasons that I selected Dunbar as the topic of a seminar paper when pursuing my doctorate at George Washington University. With the rapidly gentrifying status of the school's neighborhood, what would become of this educational landmark? I could follow my intellectual interests, remembering the stories my grandfather told me while sitting on his porch. By that time, a series of strokes rendered him nonverbal and confined to a bed in a Maryland nursing home. His best storytelling days were behind him.

I printed out directions from Google Maps in the house where, as an income-restricted graduate student, I rented an upstairs bedroom. Following

Figure I.2. View of Paul Laurence Dunbar High School looking southeast down New Jersey Avenue, NW, Washington, DC. Amber N. Wiley, photographer, 2012.

along the straight paths and turns from the stapled pieces of paper, doubt crept in when I arrived at my destination. I wasn't sure I was in the right place. The building towering in front of me looked nothing like the esteemed edifice I had fashioned in my mind. I had dreamt up an early twentieth-century garnet-red brick schoolhouse of austere classicized motifs, perhaps two or three stories high, crowned with a firm, powder-white pedimented portico. Something that signified history, tradition, pride. In place of my imaginary Dunbar stood a singular, mightily constructed building, sorely neglected, that sat anomalous and utterly oblivious to its immediate context. It was a tawny-brown brick-and-concrete ten-story high-rise brutalist fortress, monumental in the skyline, positioned in stark contrast to the colorful two- and three-story row houses that made up the surrounding neighborhood (figure I.2). One point was certain—Dunbar High School's design was meant as a visible statement; indeed, a proclamation—about the people who created it and the young scholars who would use it. The building was striking. It was purposeful, sculptural, and overpowering.

I estimated by the style and materials that it was a product of the late 1960s or early 1970s. The protagonists behind its design and construction were an

unknown variable in my equation—were "they," the creators of this building, a representative sample of an engaged local community? Or conversely, were "they" a system of white municipal and federal bureaucrats dictating the destruction and creation of the landscape to perpetuate a feeling of alienation and oppression in the Black community? These questions would become clearer in looking at the history of the school building itself. I presumed a white superintendent and architect had dumped the monstrous intervention on an unsuspecting Black neighborhood as a political statement—one that disrupted the urban fabric, one that reminded the surrounding community of who was really in charge.

But I was sorely wrong.

First, I had to get acquainted with the educational facility, which was no simple undertaking. The building had become a point of contention, and even shame, while its academic reputation fared no better. School administrators did not entertain the notion of an architectural historian (or anyone, for that matter) coming to examine the rugged facilities. But every year as summer came to a close, the District of Columbia Public Schools system (DCPS) hosted its annual Beautification Day, where businesses, nonprofit groups, and individuals adopted a school to clean before the academic year began. I took initiative as the local lead of the Washington chapter of the Yale Black Alumni Association to adopt Dunbar High School, and spent two years with a team of alumni, their children, and friends, preparing the school for the beginning of fall classes. Our tasks included giving the walls a fresh coat of paint, pruning bushes, pulling up weeds, planting flowers, sweeping up debris, cleaning windows, wiping down desks, and hanging welcome signs around the building. Inasmuch as it was a volunteer opportunity, it was also a research opportunity, a chance to explore the school's nooks and crannies and to pour love into it—a service that I associated with all that school provided, to which our community was indebted. Moreover, it was a learning opportunity for Yalies of all stripes to appreciate the depth of the history of Dunbar, and the many contemporary needs of the beleaguered school.

Though it had numerous entrances, most of the doors were chained shut from the inside. The defining exterior feature was the carbon-colored, water-stained patina trickling down its sand-brown concrete coursework. The escalators that once transported students from the entry lobby to class had long ceased to function. The vertical maze of its dim cavernous interior resembled a parking garage as one ascended the central pre-cast concrete ramps connecting floors and classrooms. At some point, workers rolled paint over the graffiti that adorned the ramps. The spot-stained and ragged slate-gray carpet appeared original to the 1977 building.

About halfway up the height of the school tower was the cafeteria—a magnificent space surrounded by windows on all but one side, giving it