Migration to Washington: Making A New Place Home

by Phyllis M. May-Machunda

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It has been said that Washington is a transient city, one whose residents change every two to four years due to the political whims of the rest of the nation. This popular view is reflected in jokes that it takes little more than a couple of years residency to be a Washington native. However, a deeper look into the history and culture of the city reveals more than just "official" Washington. Beyond the monuments to which millions pilgrimage each year exists a little recognized residential city currently undergoing a process of tremendous change and redefinition due to the impact of the migration of populations from all over the world.

The area now defined as the District of Columbia was once occupied by Nacotchtanke Indians, an agricultural people driven out by English settlers in the mid-17th century. After the Revolutionary War, leaders searched for a centrally located place for federal headquarters and a unifying symbol for a new nation. By the time George Washington selected the 100-square-mile site carved out of the borders of Maryland and Virginia on the banks of the Potomac River and Congress designated it as the capital in 1790, the region had developed a thriving tobacco culture supported by Black slave labor. As the District grew, government became the city's primary industry, uniting the region's southern rural foundation with northern financial interests to form a service economy. Lacking an industrial base, the city attracted only small numbers of Irish, Germans, Italians and eastern Europeans during the major wave of 19th century immigration to the United States.

The recurrent migrations to Washington of Afro-Americans in search of freedom and a better quality of life have been one of the primary forces in the history of this city. Beginning prior to the Civil War such migrations as escapes from slavery and southern oppression continued unabated, peaking during the Great Migration of the early decades of the 20th century and again after World War II. Current estimates suggest that Black Americans now make up thirty percent of the metropolitan area and seventy percent of the population within District lines. For most Blacks and for more recently arrived refugees from many countries, Washington has symbolized freedom and has been viewed as a mecca offering improved educational and employment opportunities.

Since the late 1800s Chinese people have been a part of the local population, migrating here from the American West Coast to escape oppressive conditions. Restrictive immigration laws imposed limits on the growth of the community until the 1930s. The community developed and maintained an enclave of businesses and residences – first, near Pennsylvania Avenue and 4th St., N.W., and later at its current location several blocks further north. "Chinatown" serves the neighborhood as a symbolic, cultural, and business center for Chinese and other Asians in the metropolitan area. Its shops, businesses and institutions support Chinese lifeways and ease culture shock for new immigrants.

Washington is now the home of immigrants from more than sixty countries. Approximately twelve percent of the more than 3.5 million people in the metropolitan area are foreign born. Since the 1970s their number in the metropolitan area has tripled and since 1980 doubled. The city now hosts the fourth largest group of Koreans and the third largest number of Central Americans in the world, including the second largest group of Salvadorans in the United States. Washington is presently home to the largest group of people outside Africa who once lived in Ethiopia. During the 1970s and 1980s immigrants also arrived from Korea, Laos, Viet Nam and Cambodia to seek refuge in the metropolitan area and start new lives.

Migration often means leaving family, homeplace and friends behind for potential advancement and security. This sometimes occurs at great sacrifice to all concerned. It is common for people to migrate in their early twenties, breaking or stretching customary links with family and friends. Many Salvadorans who have come to Washington have left their children behind with grandparents until their situation becomes stable. Some families are never able to return to their homeland, thus disrupting the cultural contact between generations.

Traditional culture has played an important role in making Washington home for people who have migrated to the city. Despite traumatic circumstances, if people bring little else with them, at least they carry their culture. They select, modify, adapt, reinterpret, revitalize

Lions symbolizing good fortune dance in front of local Chinatown businesses to drive away evil spirits at a Chinese New Year celebration.
Photo by Richard Strauss

and drop aspects of their cultural traditions as they adjust to their new environment. In addition they adopt new traditions, synthesize and blend old with newer ones and create new mechanisms for supporting and expressing who they see themselves to be.

Foodways provide one of the best opportunities to view these cultural processes. Foods and their preparation form an intimate part of one's cultural identity. People generally go to great lengths to produce familiar foods and prepare them in culturally appropriate ways. If ingredients are unavailable because they are not grown in this region or climate, people creatively seek alternatives: they may travel or send home for special items; experiment with foods of similar texture or taste as substitutes; attempt to grow and preserve particular foods themselves; buy produce or meat from local farms because they can't find them in the urban supermarket; encourage local groceries to carry specific items; or purchase imported foods from the multi-ethnic neighborhood markets. Many Black Americans from the Carolinas and Virginia, for example, keep small gardens in their urban yards just to have fresh collard greens like those from home. They also frequently raise turnip, rape and mustard greens to supplement their diet. However, kale, also important in the diet of this group, is a green that became incorporated into traditional Black foodways only after they moved north.

The Ethiopians provide another example. In order to make their traditional flat, crepe-like bread *(injera),* the grain *tef* is needed. Until recently *tef* was only available in the Horn of Africa, so many local Ethiopians have learned to make *injera* with substitute ingredients, such as Martha Washington's Self-Rising Flour, until they find ways to grow *tef* in America.

Maintaining ties to home is an important facet of migration. During every homecoming Black Americans, Africans, and Trinidadians alike feel the necessity of demonstrating that they have taken good advantage of the opportunities migration has afforded them. They also seek to absorb the revitalizing and rejuvenating powers of renewing ties with home. For those who cannot return home in person or very often, keeping those bonds strong is still important. Children are sent to grandparents in the summer; letters, audio- and videotapes are conveyed through the mail; weekly radio programs broadcasting in both places carry messages to friends and relatives; local and foreign language newspapers print the latest items from home; and gifts are

exchanged through friends and acquaintances, as they travel near home.

One of the major ways contact is maintained is by sending money home, either to help the financial situation of relatives or to provide an opportunity for other family members to come here and seek their fortune. One of the most significant occupations in this regard is domestic work. For years domestic work was one of the primary occupations open to Black women. Through this occupation hundreds of women saved money to bring their families to Washington or to provide for their education. Today, Salvadoran, Chinese and Trinidadian women use this same occupational role to improve their status and that of their families.

The community festival setting provides visitors with opportunities to be exposed to a wide variety of ethnic foods. Photo by G. Wheeler

People of color often find it advantageous to develop group identities across broad categories in the new environment for reasons both internal and external to them. When dealing with a particular cultural group, outsiders, whether from the mainstream or another minority, rarely make distinctions that groups make within themselves. Instead, a group may be viewed as a monolithic community with homogeneous wants and needs. Often it is confused or combined with other groups having similar cultural characteristics or physical features. Sometimes, however, when numbers are too small to maintain particular traditions, this similarity works to a particular group's advantage. In Washington the urban environment provides exposure to others from similar cultures and offers opportunities for communities to link with those sharing similar struggles. Frequently alliances across national, regional, political, racial, religious, class and educational boundaries arise to preserve a community sense of self in ways they could never occur at home. Community services and networks work to ease adjustments for newcomers and are provided by earlier immigrants as a sign of hospitality, to protect strides made by the earlier community and to integrate them into the existing social system.

As an urban setting Washington provides opportunities for people to interact with others with whom they might never have mingled and to behave in ways that they could never have in the home setting. This creates stimulae for the development of new forms of expression and distinctive local traditions arising out of the blends. A prime example of this is in the Adams-Morgan/ Mt. Pleasant neighborhoods of the city, where a spirit of Latino culture pervades. Residents of the area are from all parts of Central America and the Caribbean. Few community activities are limited to the participation of a single ethnic group. Bands, stores, restaurants and churches are multi-cultural in their staffing and audiences. The richness of such cultural contact leads to the forging of new identities and the synthesis of traditions. For many, including new immigrants, the importance of expressing a broader Latino identity rather than a more specific ethnic one is a way of indicating a new start in life.

For decades, farmers from local surrounding areas have brought in produce for sale at outdoor Washington markets. Photo by Marjorie Collins, Library of Congress, Farm Security Administration

This year's Festival program will address these issues and many more. In telling their stories and demonstrating their traditions immigrants to Washington allow us to understand the cultural aspects of migration and how they have attempted and in some cases succeeded in making a new place here.

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Suggested reading

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