A new road linking Washington City with Rockville, Maryland, helped create a village here in the early 1800s. Later, Confederate and Union troops arrived via that road to fight the Battle of Fort Stevens.

Follow this trail to discover how Brightwood honors the past even as it has matured into a modern, urban neighborhood.
Welcome.

Visitors to Washington, DC flock to the National Mall, where grand monuments symbolize the nation’s highest ideals. This self-guided walking tour is the eighth in a series that invites you to discover what lies beyond the monuments: Washington’s historic neighborhoods.

Brightwood has been shaped by its location along a turnpike built in the early 1800s to link Washington City and Rockville, Maryland, and by its status as the site of the only Civil War battle to take place within the District of Columbia. This guide, summarizing the 18 signs of Battleground to Community: Brightwood Heritage Trail, leads you to the sites where history lives.
As you walk this trail, please keep safety in mind, just as you would while visiting any unfamiliar place.
HARRIED COMMUTERS SPEED along Georgia Avenue every day without ever knowing this is a neighborhood, much less one with a distinguished past. Yet free African Americans farmed this area as early as the 1820s. And in July 1864, Union and Confederate soldiers fought an important Civil War battle here. Viewing the skirmish from Fort Stevens, President Lincoln became the only serving U.S. president ever to come under enemy fire.

That Brightwood would develop became clear in 1818, when a private company broke ground for the Seventh Street Turnpike to link Washington City to Rockville, Maryland. Soon a small community named Brighton grew up where this road, today’s Georgia Avenue, crossed the old Milk House Ford Road (now Rock Creek Ford Road). This intersection continues to define the neighborhood.

With the turnpike came a toll booth and a roadhouse providing meals to travelers passing through this rural area of Washington County, District of Columbia. Other new institutions serving the community’s European American and free African American farmers and wealthy landowners were Emory Chapel and the Brighton (later Brightwood) Post Office. By 1859 a racetrack at the southwestern edge of today’s Brightwood drew racing fans from all points.

As the United States erupted into civil war in 1861, Brightwood’s calm gave way to activity. Union forces built a ring of forts around Washington, strategically locating Fort Stevens along the turnpike in Brightwood. The fort displaced homes and even a chapel, but all was quiet until July 12, 1864. On that hot and dusty day General Jubal A. Early led his Confederate troops down this route from Maryland, where they encountered Union troops marching north from downtown Washington. By the day’s end, neighbors had joined with Union troops to repel the Rebels. The capital was saved, and the only Civil War battle fought in Washington was over.

Among Washington’s defenders was local militia leader Matthew Gault Emery, a prominent builder whose Brightwood summer home became a camp for troops, a signal station, and a transfer point for the wounded. Later Emery was elected as Washington City’s last mayor during our first period of home rule (1802-1871). Part of his estate is today’s Emery Park.

After the Civil War, Washington’s peacetime economy boomed. Brightwood, like other rural parts of the District of Columbia, began to...
develop a more urban style. The neighborhood’s future was ensured in the 1890s, when new electric streetcar lines allowed government workers to live here and ride to jobs downtown. The limestone Masonic temple and the columned Bank of Brightwood were both completed just after World War I (1914-1918) at the intersection of Georgia and Missouri avenues. They formed an architectural gateway that can be seen today.

Hundreds of brick rowhouses rose off Georgia Avenue, luring hard-working government clerks and professionals and their families. A new Classical Moderne style “Park and Shop” opened on Georgia Avenue in 1937 with stores and the 1,000-seat Sheridan movie theater.

As in many DC neighborhoods, Brightwood’s rowhouses came with covenants prohibiting sales to certain white ethnics and to African Americans. Over time, though, the covenants against white ethnics were broken, and by the late 1940s Brightwood became known for its Greek, Jewish, and Italian families. Georgia Avenue businesses reflected the neighborhood’s ethnic mix. The old African American settlement near Fort Stevens had largely disappeared during the 1940s, as modern brick apartment buildings replaced the aged frame houses. But a new wave of African American families arrived in the early 1950s after the Supreme Court effectively outlawed race-restrictive covenants in 1948. The 1954 school desegregation ruling intensified the turnover from white to African American. Some white families, fearing racial change or lured by new suburban housing, moved away. But others defied block-busting efforts and stayed. The African American families who joined them came for the reasons many people stayed: a well-located, family-friendly neighborhood.

Brightwood’s modest commercial strip on Georgia Avenue lost many of its businesses after the civil disturbances following the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s assassination frightened owners away. By the 1970s, residents agreed, Georgia Avenue had clearly seen better days. However, in 2008 this artery is receiving new attention as part of Washington’s Great Streets redevelopment project. The old Stansbury Masonic Temple has been reborn as condominiums, and new businesses are moving in among the old. Once again, as the toll booth and roadhouse caused 19th century travelers to pause here, 21st century travelers are invited to stop and explore all that Brightwood has to offer.
Racing at Brightwood

Kennedy and 14th Streets
At Colorado Avenue NW

Fresh water springs in this pleasant high ground once drew European settlers. Farmers called this area “Crystal Spring.” In 1859 the half-mile Crystal Spring Racetrack opened on land just west of this intersection. For 75 cents, Washingtonians hopped a stagecoach from Washington City (south of Florida Avenue) for a day at the races. Later known as the Brightwood Trotting Park, the course attracted laborers, congressmen, and everyone in between. Over time horses, bicycles, autos, and even mules competed along the track. A reservoir was built near the track in 1899, and tennis courts were added later. Racing continued until 1909. In 1937 the reservoir was filled in for the courts and playing fields of today’s Rock Creek Tennis Center on 16th Street.

In 1894 hundreds of unemployed men camped at the racetrack during the nation’s first mass march on Washington. An economic crash had forced thousands out of work, leading Ohio businessman Jacob Coxey to mount a campaign to persuade the U.S. government to create jobs by building public facilities. To cheering crowds, his followers, dubbed “Coxey’s Army” by reporters, paraded from Brightwood to the Capitol to present this new idea to Congress. But Congress found the new political tactic threatening. Coxey was arrested on the Capitol steps, and his petition was never presented.

The bus turnaround here was built in 1936 for the number 52 streetcar. The first streetcar arrived in 1907 as an extension of the 14th Street line from Park Road.
The city park across the street was once Emery Place, the summer estate of Matthew Gault Emery.

A prominent builder, Emery was Washington City's last elected mayor during our first period of home rule. He was succeeded in 1874 by a presidentially appointed board of commissioners, which governed until Mayor Walter Washington was elected a century later. Emery made a fortune in stone-cutting, including the cornerstone for the Washington Monument. He excelled in insurance, banking, and eventually new technologies – electric streetcars and lighting.

During the Civil War (1861-1865), Captain Emery led the local militia. His hilltop became Camp Brightwood, a signal station where soldiers used flags or torches to communicate with nearby Fort DeRussy or the distant Capitol. During the Battle of Fort Stevens in July 1864, Camp Brightwood was a transfer point for the wounded.

The property passed on to Emery’s daughter Juliet and her husband, businessman and civic leader William Van Zandt Cox. In 1946 Cox heirs sold the rundown estate to the city for use as a playground. Emery Recreation Center opened about 1958.

Across Georgia and one block behind you was the site of two successive neighborhood department stores. The Abraham family operated shops and eventually Ida’s Department Store there from 1915 until 1983. Morton’s came next, part of a chain founded in Washington in 1933. In his early stores, Morton’s owner Mortimer Lebowitz refused to segregate rest rooms or prohibit black customers from trying on clothes, despite local custom.
ENGLISH, IRISH, AND GERMAN SETTLERS, as well as enslaved and free African Americans, were the first non-natives to claim Brightwood. Farmers dominated until after the Civil War. Then in the 1890s electric streetcars allowed government workers to live here and ride to jobs downtown. By the 1940s, sons and daughters of Jewish, Greek, and Italian immigrants had arrived, often from older city neighborhoods.

Abraham Posin, founder of Posin's Deli and Bakery, was typical of the newcomers. His family had immigrated from Russia around 1910. Young Abraham visited an uncle living in Washington, where he met and married Gertrude Rose, another Russian émigré. The couple opened a store in Foggy Bottom, later moving to the Arcade Market in Columbia Heights and then in 1947 to 5756 Georgia Avenue. Abe's sons, World War II veterans Max and Hyman, eventually took over the store.

Although most of his Jewish customers moved on in the 1950s, Max stayed to serve the African Americans and Caribbean immigrants who took their places. He died in 1995, and his son Randy closed the store three years later.

The firehouse just beyond Posin's is here because, back in 1891, residents formed the Brightwood Citizens' Association and lobbied for city-style improvements. In addition to the firehouse, they secured sewers, sidewalks, streets, electric and gas service, and an elementary school.

The church at 5714 Georgia became the home of Canaan Baptist Church in 1956, but it soon outgrew the space and moved to 16th Street in Mount Pleasant.
The grand, neo-classical revival style building that you see across Georgia Avenue north of Missouri opened in 1925 as the Bank of Brightwood, thanks to the efforts of the Brightwood Citizens Association. Designed by Treasury Department architect Arthur Blakeslee, the bank’s ornate Corinthian columns seem to say, “This is a serious institution!” Its arrival reflected the area’s growth as a place of business.

The community’s development began in earnest after Congress united Washington City (south of Florida Avenue) with Washington County (north of Florida Avenue to the District Line) in 1871. Soon land developers envisioned housing where farmers grew wheat.

First came Brightwood Park, just south of today’s Emery Park: 82 acres of the estate originally granted to James White in 1772. Next came “White-Croft,” west of today’s Georgia Avenue at Madison Street, followed by North Brightwood, east of today’s Georgia Avenue to Eighth Street and north from Rittenhouse to Tuckerman.

The bank supported these ventures, but it failed in 1932, a victim of the Great Depression and embezzlement. Its building was sold in 1940.

The small Art Deco building next door was designed by William Russell as a restaurant with office space above. Its Modern façade used glass blocks and large blue glass plates. In the 1940s George “Pops” Valtos operated the Seven Seas Grill there, serving steaks and chops. Later Jen Cheng and Lana H.C. Shao moved their Chinese restaurant there from Shaw and decided the Seven Seas name worked for them as well.
In 1818 the private Rockville and Washington Turnpike Co. began building a road to link Washington City to Rockville, Maryland. This road helped create a village. A toll gate on what today is Georgia Avenue between Quackenbos and Rittenhouse streets encouraged travelers to pause here. Lewis Burnett built a roadhouse, or restaurant, on this intersection’s southwest corner. By the early 1860s the roadhouse became Moreland Tavern, offering sleeping accommodations. During the Civil War, the tavern housed the officers who would lead the defense of nearby Fort Stevens during the Confederate attack.

The tavern made way for the wood-frame home of Stansbury Masonic Lodge No. 24. Besides meeting and secret ceremonial spaces, the hall housed the Brightwood Hotel. The Freemasons, an ancient fraternal organization with roots in the building trades, continue to do good works and create fellowship. Washington’s Freemasons have served in all professions, from bricklayer to president.

In 1919 Stansbury member Frank Russell White designed a grand new limestone temple. Its main meeting room could hold 200 and had a mezzanine and balcony with a pipe organ. The first floor initially housed a post office, then a Sanitary (later Safeway) Grocery and eventually a Pontiac car dealership.

The Freemasons rented their meeting spaces to Greek Sunday schools, high school fraternities, synagogues, and others. After Stansbury Lodge moved to Takoma in 1987, the building was sold. In the 1990s, it gained brief notoriety as a nightclub, and in 2007 reopened as the Lofts at Brightwood.
This building opened in 1912 as the Military Road School, the area's third public elementary for African Americans. For decades it was the only public school serving black children in Upper Northwest and nearby Maryland.

The school gave students “the tools to be successful,” recalled Patricia Tyson, a student in the 1950s. Teachers required good behavior, good grammar, and respect for the historic contributions of black Americans.

The Italian Renaissance style school, designed by Snowden Ashford, held four classrooms. After the Supreme Court’s 1954 Brown v. Board of Education decision outlawed school segregation, the Military Road School closed, and many of the students were moved to Brightwood Elementary. In 2003 the Military Road School was listed on the National Register of Historic Places, and in 2007 re-opened as the Latin American Montessori Bilingual Public Charter School.

The original portion of Brightwood Elementary, across Missouri Avenue to your left, was built for white children in 1925 in a Colonial Revival style by noted Washington architect Waddy Wood. Its modern addition opened in 2005. Brightwood Elementary has long helped immigrants adjust to American life.

The Queen Anne style house at 1329 Missouri Avenue is one of Brightwood’s oldest. It was moved back on its lot in 1933 when Military Road (now Missouri Avenue) was widened and straightened. Owner George Lightfoot, a professor of Latin at Howard University from 1891 until 1939, often entertained Carter G. Woodson, W.E.B. Du Bois, and other African American intellectuals here.
Even before emancipation freed Washington’s enslaved people in April 1862, a free African American community had developed here amid the European American farmers. The District of Columbia, unlike its neighbors, permitted the formerly enslaved to remain within its boundaries. The Shamwell family of free blacks settled in Brightwood in 1837. By 1854, four free black landowners clustered here along Rock Creek Ford Road (once called Milkhouse Ford Road), with a fifth on Piney Branch Road. Four of the five were women.

During the Civil War, Fort Stevens and Camp Brightwood attracted more freedmen and women seeking work and protection. For the next 90 years, African American families worked the land, remaining in substantial wood-frame houses even as surrounding farms fell to subdivisions. St. Luke Baptist Church, founded near Fort Totten in 1879, occupied this corner for 29 years. It was the heart of the community. But city redevelopment forced it to move in 1960. The congregation relocated south to Colorado Avenue and later to 1415 Gallatin Street, NW.

Brightwood’s first public school for black children, known as the Military Road School, opened at the end of the Civil War in a small wood-frame building close to the school’s present site.

Over time, modern development consumed most of the old settlement. Some families, like the Shamwells, refused to sell (their former house remains, enveloped by apartments). But by 1931 new roads and apartments had displaced most. Soon the modern Doreen and other apartments dominated Rock Creek Ford Road.
APPLE AND PEACH TREES ONCE COVERED THE SLOPES TO YOUR LEFT, SOME 40 ACRES’ WORTH, ALL PLANTED BY NOTED HORTICULTURALIST JOHN SAUL (1819-1897). IN THE 1870S SAUL WAS ONE OF BRIGHTWOOD’S LARGEST LANDOWNERS. IN ADDITION TO THESE ORCHARDS, HE OPERATED NURSERIES FOR ORNAMENTAL TREES AND GREENHOUSE PLANTS NEAR THE OLD BRIGHTWOOD RACE-TRACK AND ON SEVENTH STREET, AND DEVELOPED A NATIONALY RENOWNED SEED CATALOGUE BUSINESS.

SAUL ORIGINALLY CAME TO WASHINGTON IN 1851 FROM COUNTY CORK, IRELAND, TO WORK FOR ANDREW JACKSON DOWNING, THEN ONE OF THE NATION’S MOST IMPORTANT LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTS. SAUL ASSISTED DOWNING AS THEY LANDSCAPED THE CITY’S KEY PUBLIC SPACES: THE NATIONAL MALL, THE ELLIPSE, AND LAFAYETTE SQUARE. SAUL’S DESCENDANTS WENT INTO REAL ESTATE, FOUNDING THE B. F. SAUL COMPANY AND ALSO CHEVY CHASE BANK.


NOTEED WASHINGTON ARCHITECT JOSEPH ABEL DESIGNED THE RITTENHOUSE, EMBRASIZING GLASS AND NATURAL LIGHT, AND CENTERING THE TALL BUILDING IN ITS GRASSY SPACE.
The Brightwood Heritage Trail, *Battleground to Community*, consists of 18 illustrated historical markers. Each marker is capped with an H. You can begin your 90-minute walk at any point along the route.

Sign 1 is found at the intersection of Colorado Avenue, Kennedy Street, and 14th Street.

This trail is easily reached by Metrobuses 52, 53, 54, 70 and 71.
WE HAVE HARRY WARDMAN TO THANK for the rich variety of Sheridan Street rowhouses. Wardman, considered Washington’s most prolific developer, built hundreds of offices, apartments, hotels, and comfortable rowhouses from 1899 to 1938. When he decided to sell some land he owned here along Sheridan Street, the purchasers hired a “Who’s Who” of the era’s best architects, resulting in an array of building styles.

Wardman kept two parcels, for which his chief architect, the Turkish-trained Mihran Mesrobian, employed two different styles. At numbers 1370-1378 are five Tudor style houses. Advertisements in 1934 boasted of the latest features: sleeping porch, breakfast porch, fireplace, and built-in garage. Mesrobian gave Georgian style touches to the roof lines and front porches of 1356-1368. With paneled recreation rooms and then-generous, eight-cubic-foot refrigerators, they sold quickly.

Wardman lost much of his fortune at the beginning of the Great Depression in 1929, but by the early 1930s, he was back in business. The houses on Sheridan Street were some of the last he built before his death in 1938.

Among Sheridan Street’s styles is Colonial Revival, chosen for 1334-1346 by Clarence Harding, who was noted for designing the old Woodward and Lothrop Department Store on F Street. Arthur Brodie designed the houses at 1320-1332 in the Art Deco style. Charles Dillon used the Romantic style for numbers 1300 to 1308. And George T. Santmyers, who contributed buildings to Washington from 1914 until 1960, designed 1339-1391 Sheridan in the popular English cottage and Craftsman styles.
IN THE 1930s as now, this area was a family-friendly, “move-up” destination for hardworking government clerks and professionals. Like many DC neighborhoods, Brightwood had covenants prohibiting house sales to certain white ethnics and African Americans. Over time, though, the covenants against white ethnics were broken, and by the late 1940s Brightwood became known for its Greek, Jewish, and Italian families. Yet in these blocks, there were few African Americans.

In 1948 the Supreme Court ruled race-restrictive housing covenants unenforceable. In 1954 the Court overturned school segregation. Some white families, fearing racial change, moved on. Others were lured by newer suburban housing. Still others defied block-busting efforts and stayed. The African American families who joined them came for the reasons many stayed: attractive houses that were convenient to stores, schools, and transportation. Ann Gardner remembers telling her husband in 1958, “What a beautiful location, Brightwood.”

The St. John United Baptist Church is the second house of worship to occupy this corner. The building opened in 1958 as Agudath Achim synagogue. Agudath Achim, organized in 1939 in a house on Quackenbos Street, peaked in the late 1950s with more than 400 families. As its members moved to the suburbs, the congregation declined. Finally in 1977 it merged with Har Tzeon in Wheaton, Maryland, and sold the building to St. John United Missionary Baptist Church. St. John was organized in 1976 and, led by Rev. Dr. John M. Alexander, Jr., first met at Meridian Hill Baptist Church.
On July 11 and 12, 1864, this intersection was the center of the only Civil War battle fought in the District of Columbia. Here, Union sharpshooters at Fort Stevens, supported by forces across the northernmost of Washington’s ring of forts, stopped General Jubal A. Early’s Rebels. Early attacked from the north, along the Seventh Street Turnpike and the Georgetown Turnpike (now Georgia and Wisconsin avenues).

Completed in 1822 as a dirt road connecting the Potomac River to Rockville, Maryland, the Seventh Street Turnpike soon grew deeply rutted. In 1852 it was paved with eight-foot wood planks. The road’s private owners placed a toll booth just north of Emory Church, prompting Brightwood residents to create a free bypass (essentially today’s Piney Branch Road). In 1871 the city acquired the turnpike, abolished the toll, changed the name to Seventh Street Road, and paved it with macadam, a layer of crushed rock and cement. In the late 1880s Brightwood citizens arranged to rename the road Brightwood Avenue.

In 1909 residents traded the naming rights to Georgia Senator Augustus Bacon in exchange for his support for community improvements. Bacon was irritated that “Georgia Avenue” in 1900 applied to a few disheveled blocks near the Navy Yard and wanted a grander thoroughfare to honor his state.

By the 1930s the neighborhood was filled with family housing. Children enjoyed pony rides on a lot here, and churches held carnivals.

Across the intersection was the latest fad: a miniature golf course.
This busy section once was a “country road” to Washingtonians looking for peace and recreation. If you drove by here a century ago, you would have passed woods and large estates, maybe even fox hunters. Across Georgia was the private Villa Flora Club, offering live music and fine dining amid “a spacious lawn, rich with the perfume of roses.” By 1907 the club’s 1,000 members frequently made the society columns. The Villa Flora closed around 1915.

The Villa Flora rented meeting space to other organizations, and in 1906 leased property to the Automobile Club of Washington to build its club house. This social club appealed to the city’s earliest car owners, men of wealth and leisure who could afford the expensive “sport” of “automobiling.” From here it was a short ride to the Brightwood Trotting Park, which briefly offered commercial auto races. In one 1903 event, the fastest cars traveled at 15 miles per hour. After the Washington club affiliated with the American Automobile Association, members gained access to other AAA clubhouses for dining and sleeping accommodations long before motels and fast food restaurants lined America’s highways. By the 1920s, falling prices for automobiles greatly increased the number of drivers and took most of the sport out of automobiling.

Long after housing replaced the open fields, Beck’s Polar Bear frozen custard stand across Georgia, roughly where the Safeway parking lot is today, attracted folks from all over. The large plaster polar bears became a neighborhood landmark.
A Nation Mourns

AFTER THE REBELS were turned back as the Battle of Fort Stevens ended in 1864, scores of Union soldiers lay cold and silent. Forty-one of them are buried here in this tiny plot dedicated to their sacrifice. President Abraham Lincoln, who had observed the battle, spoke at the dedication. At barely one acre, Battleground National Cemetery is one of the nation’s smallest.

Memorial Day — established by veterans in 1868 to honor the Civil War dead — once drew hundreds to this hallowed place. John I. White’s grandfather, Lewis Cass White, was a veteran of the battle of Fort Stevens. John later recalled Memorial Day ceremonies here during the early 1900s that attracted veterans from both sides. A military band would play, and crowds listened to patriotic speeches and poems. Students from the Brightwood School placed flowers and American flags on the graves, and artillery men would fire a salute. “Following the ceremonies,” White wrote, “the surviving comrades of the Grand Army of the Republic, who had traded shots with the Confederates before Fort Stevens, converged . . . for a light lunch” on his grandfather’s porch “and fought the battle all over again.”

Memorials to units that fought in the battle are located at the cemetery’s entrance, where two six-pound, smoothbore guns stand guard. The small, sandstone superintendent’s house was designed by General Montgomery Meigs, engineer, architect of the Pension Building (now the National Building Museum), and veteran of the Battle of Fort Stevens.
Back in the 1920s, most people walked or rode a streetcar to go shopping. Then cars became affordable, and people drove everywhere. Soon the shopping center, with free parking, was born. In 1937 Brightwood’s “Park and Shop” opened on Georgia Avenue.

Brightwood’s center included the 1,000-seat Sheridan Theater. The Classical Moderne style hall, by nationally known architect John Eberson, matched local architect Morton Levy’s retail shops. Six local businesses shared the space with national chains Kresge’s and A&P.

By the 1950s Georgia Avenue enterprises reflected Brightwood’s ethnic mix, with many operated by Greek, Italian, and Jewish merchants. To your right was the Waffle Shop/John’s Lunch, owned by John and Evthokia Deoudes. Their son Logan recalled that they served American food “done with Greek hands.” The Deoudes family is immortalized in George Pelecanos’s novel, *Hard Revolution*. Real estate broker and Greek language radio show host Penelope Apostolides rented the Sheridan Theater to show Greek films. The Caludis family ran Arrow Cleaners at 6233 Georgia Avenue.

While the rioting that followed the assassination of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., in 1968 spared this area, it spurred dozens of middle-class families to move to the suburbs. Businesses soon suffered, and vacant storefronts became common. In the 1970s the Sheridan became a live theater, briefly housing the Black American Theater. Later it became a church. By the end of the 1990s, though, new investment and community activism brought the promise of revitalization.
ACROSS QUACKENBOS STREET is Emory United Methodist Church. Named to honor Bishop John Emory of Maryland (1789-1835), the congregation dates from 1832.

From the beginning, Emory welcomed all races but, like most Washington churches then, seated African Americans in a separate gallery. In 1846 the national Methodist church split over the slavery issue. Seven years later Emory sided with the South. In 1939 the Methodist Church reunited.

Despite its southern sympathies, the church had helped Union forces build Fort Massachusetts (later named Fort Stevens) in 1861. Troops tore down Emory’s new church to build an ammunition magazine, using some of the bricks to build the fort. Emory’s basement served as a military jail. In 1870 the congregation replaced the lost building with a stone chapel, which was later replaced by the current church.

Emory’s support for the nation’s needs has included ministering to soldiers at Walter Reed Army Hospital during and after World War I.

As Brightwood’s racial complexion changed in the 1950s, Emory’s congregation became predominantly African American by the 1970s.

In the late 1880s, the city built a public school for Brightwood’s white children on this corner. The current Brightwood Elementary at 13th and Nicholson streets succeeded it in 1926.

As you proceed to Sign 16, note the driveway that separates Emory Church from Fort Stevens. It is a remnant of the original Piney Branch Road, built to bypass the toll booth on the Seventh Street Turnpike (later Brightwood Avenue and now Georgia Avenue).
hearing those words, President Abraham Lincoln ducked down from the Fort Stevens parapet during the Civil War battle that stopped the Confederates from taking Washington.

On July 9, 1864, some 15,000 Rebels led by General Jubal A. Early defeated Union forces at the Battle of Monocacy near Frederick, Maryland. Early’s troops, suffering from the battle and the summer heat, then turned south to march on the lightly defended capital city. But the Monocacy encounter and skirmishes along the Rockville Turnpike gave the Union time to regroup. On the 12th, the Union's fresh troops challenged the Rebels in a fierce but brief fight. Early's forces retreated to Virginia. The only Civil War battle fought in the District of Columbia was over.

President and Mrs. Lincoln both witnessed the afternoon battle. Eyewitness Captain Elisha Hunt Rhodes of Rhode Island recorded the scene: “... [O]n the parapet I saw President Lincoln standing looking at the troops. [The] ladies were sitting in a carriage behind the earthworks. We marched... into a peach orchard in front of Fort Stevens, and here the fight began. For a short time it was warm work, but as the President and many ladies were looking at us, every man tried to do his best... the Rebels broke and fled... A surgeon standing... beside President Lincoln was wounded.”

Abraham Lincoln is the only serving U.S. president to have come under enemy fire.
Elizabeth Proctor Thomas (1821-1917), a free black woman, once owned some 11 acres in this area. Known respectfully in her old age as “Aunt Betty,” Thomas and her husband James farmed here. When the Civil War began in 1861, her hilltop attracted Union soldiers defending Washington.

Thomas later told a reporter: one day soldiers “began taking out my furniture and tearing down our house” to build Fort Stevens. Then a visitor arrived. “I was sitting under that sycamore tree . . . with what furniture I had left around me. I was crying, as was my six-months-old child, . . . when a tall, slender man dressed in black came up and said to me: ‘It is hard, but you shall reap a great reward.’ It was President Lincoln.”

For years afterward, although her land was returned, Thomas unsuccessfully pressed the federal government to pay for her destroyed house. “[H]ad [Lincoln] lived, I know the claim for my losses would have been paid,” she often said. Thomas died at age 96 after a lifetime of community leadership.

After the war, Fort Stevens fell into neglect. Finally, in 1938 the Roosevelt Administration’s Civilian Conservation Corps rebuilt the portion of earthworks that you see today.

The Church of the Nativity, to your left, has served the community for more than 100 years. The building replaces a series of smaller churches built near the corner of Peabody Street and Georgia Avenue, which are still used by the congregation.
A chartered streetcar cruises past Emory Methodist Church on Georgia Avenue, around 1960. Collection of Ed Havens

18

A Streetcar Named Brightwood

Georgia Avenue and Peabody Street NW

The large structure across Georgia Avenue opened in 1909 as a “car barn” that could service more than 40 streetcars at once, and often did so late at night. As a young boy in the 1950s, Thomas Reardon remembered the busy barn as “a scary place” where streetcars’ lights gleamed in the darkness “like the eyes of monsters.”

Powered at first by horses, the streetcars by 1893 ran on electricity provided by overhead lines. Congress prohibited overhead lines south of Florida Avenue, so southbound streetcars stopped there to switch to an underground conduit.

With two quick rings on the bell, the conductor alerted passengers that he was about to move. At night, residents recalled, the hum of the streetcar could be heard for blocks. Buses replaced streetcars here in 1960 (and citywide in 1962). Subsequently the car barn housed a series of auto dealerships.

Next door at 5921 Georgia Avenue, Sidney Hechinger opened his third building-supply store in 1927. Three years later he built a substantial Art Deco style store on the site. The long-standing and prosperous Hechinger family business had begun in 1911 with a wrecking and salvage company located at Sixth and C streets, SW. Three generations of Hechingers directed the company with a strong sense of civic responsibility. John Hechinger, Sr., served as chairman of the first City Council of the 20th century. The family sold the business in 1997, and the buyers closed its doors forever two years later.
Sources

The process of creating a Neighborhood Heritage Trail begins with the community, extends through story-sharing and oral history gathering, and ends in formal scholarly research. For more information on this neighborhood, please consult the resources in the Kiplinger Library/The Historical Society of Washington, D.C., and the Washingtoniana Division, DC Public Library. In addition, please see the following selected works:


Acknowledgments


Cultural Tourism DC

Cultural Tourism DC is a nonprofit coalition of more than 200 arts, heritage, cultural, and community organizations throughout the nation’s capital. We help visitors and Metro area residents experience Washington’s authentic arts and heritage, while promoting local culture as a tool for economic development.

For more information, and to sign up for Events Update, a free e-calendar of cultural happenings, please visit www.CulturalTourismDC.org or call 202-661-7581.

The Brightwood Heritage Trail Working Group of neighborhood residents, business owners, activists, and scholars organized to develop and support the Brightwood Heritage Trail in collaboration with Cultural Tourism DC.

The Military Road School Preservation Trust, a nonprofit, membership organization, exists to ensure that the Military Road School, together with its site and legacy, as well as related archeological resources, be preserved in perpetuity for the interpretation of local history, including that of Fort Stevens, the evolution of the educational system for African Americans in Washington, and the history of the surrounding area.
On this self-guided walking tour of Brightwood, historic markers lead you to:

— Fort Stevens, where President Lincoln came under fire during a Civil War battle

— The tiny National Cemetery, where 41 veterans of that battle are buried

— The former summer estate of Washington’s last 19th-century mayor

— A Classical Moderne “Park and Shop” shopping center

— The site of an early free black settlement

— The site of Washington’s first club for “automobilists”

— A historic African American elementary school