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SECTION E

The Washington Times

# Black Georgetown

By Gail A. Campbell  
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**W**hen Pauline Gaskins Mitchell and her lifelong friends walk the streets of Georgetown, they see beyond the chic shops and expensive homes that shelter a white elite.

These children of Georgetown remember a bustling small town with "a black business on just about every corner," a lively, diverse community splintered by real estate speculation that began at the close of World War II.

"The black people in Georgetown do not refer to the houses here as belonging to the present owners," Mrs. Mitchell said. "We think of them as the residences of the original black families."

"We say that's the Jones' house or the Wharriors' house or the Gaskins' house," said Morgan Brown, a robust man born on 26th Street NW in 1918.

His most vivid memories and those of 50 current and former Georgetown residents will become images on the silver screen tonight when a 30-minute documentary premieres on the Georgetown University campus.

The film, "Black Georgetown Remembered," is one of numerous events planned to celebrate the university's 200th birthday, said Kathleen Lesko, director of programming for Georgetown University's Bicentennial Committee.

"No one's ever done this before," Mrs. Lesko said. "Nobody's focused on the black community. Nobody knew how significant it really was." The university found itself uncovering a history of local and national importance.

The filmmakers began the project two years ago, interviewing 15 black families still living in Georgetown. They were able to locate former

Pauline Gaskins Mitchell, still living at the family home on P Street in Georgetown.



Photo by Ross D. Franklin. The Washington Times

## TOWN

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residents through Georgetown's four black churches.

David Powell, a Silver Spring-based filmmaker, volunteered to make the documentary. He condensed more than 30 hours of interviews into a half-hour film.

"Almost everybody we talked to had a poignant sentence or two," Mr. Powell said. "The sense of community that these people experienced existed because of the multi-generational families that had their roots right here."

For years, "the [black] community was invisible to me," Mr. Powell said. As a Washington native, he found that startling.

"I heard people talking about the fact there was a black community in Georgetown that I saw no evidence of any longer," said Valerie Babb, an assistant professor of English at Georgetown University. She suggested the documentary and wrote a preliminary script outline.

The \$40,000 film was underwritten by the D.C. Community Humanities Council, D.C. Natural Gas, a division of the Washington Gas Light Co., Doggett Enterprises and the C&P Telephone Co.

After tonight's premiere, copies of the film will be distributed to Georgetown's four black churches — Jerusalem Baptist, Mount Zion Methodist, Alexander Memorial Baptist and First Baptist — as well as District public schools and libraries, Mrs. Lesko said.

The film will be screened again Tuesday at 5:30 p.m. at the university's Intercultural Center, 37th and O streets NW.

Local historian Carroll Gibbs narrates the documentary. His scholarly history of the black community in Georgetown begins before the Revolutionary War and traces the black presence there through the mid-20th century.

In 1810, Georgetown's census showed 551 free blacks and 1,162 slaves among the nearly 5,000 people living in the Northwest community.

Georgetown became a prominent stop on the Underground Railroad, that secret route to freedom for runaway slaves, including Harriet Tubman, who later returned to help others escape.

Mr. Gibbs highlights sites such as the first school founded (1810) for black Georgetown women, on Dunbar Street. A slave pen where blacks were held prior to auction was at 3266 O St., and slave quarters were at 3410 Volta Place. He also mentions the brief presence of historical black figures such as abolitionist Sojourner Truth and surveyor Benjamin Banneker.

During the Civil War, free blacks



Photo by Ross D. Franklin/The Washington Times  
Sylvia Martin Bailey, Robin Stevens Paves and Morgan Brown go over some material for the documentary on the black families of Georgetown.

unnumbered slaves. Blacks manned Union army hospitals, helping wounded soldiers on the grounds of Georgetown College, and at a hospital set up at the Convent of Mercy on N Street. They also helped construct Union forts north of the city.

After the war, in 1867, 8,200 black men and 9,800 whites registered to vote in Washington's municipal election.

In the 1940s Georgetown's history took a decisive turn. Real estate speculation forced blacks out of the community, intruding the gentrification of Capitol Hill.

As rents skyrocketed, blacks who did not own their homes moved. "Even today, Georgetown is one of the few areas in the city to have a smaller black population than it did three decades ago," Mr. Gibbs said.

By documenting that history now, Mr. Gibbs said, "we capture the early years before they slip away."

The plight of Georgetown's splintered black community shows "how important it is to remember history, place and people," Ms. Babb said.

That history comes alive for Mr. Brown every time he remembers the good old days. His deep baritone voice booms with warmth when he recounts his parents' initial move to Georgetown in 1917.

"In 1929 my family moved from 29th Street to 26th Street in a flat upstairs," he said. "Twenty-sixth Street was dirt then."

Like most black Georgetowners, he lived in the neighborhood until 1947. Most families moved out that year, he remembers. Some even had their homes condemned in the real estate scramble.

Sylvia Martin Bailey remembers moving that year: "That's when you had to get out if you didn't own your own home. Speculators came in and

I guess the owners got offered more, so that was it."

Mr. Brown remembers his father tried to buy the building they lived in.

"It was for sale then for \$7,500. But when he went to try to buy the place, he was redlined," Mr. Brown said. "The finance companies would not loan him money, or found reasons not to loan money. He was barred from borrowing money. He went to court and he still could not get it."

A Jewish grocer wanted to help them. "But when he tried to get it, the house went up to \$11,000," Mr. Brown said. "Which was unheard of money for property at that particular time."

Still, Georgetown instills mostly fond memories.

"We had all kinds of people in this neighborhood," Mr. Brown said. "You had people who played in bands. You had doctors, teachers, attorneys, bootleggers, number writers, laborers, maids and chauffeurs."

Gene Kelly (the actor/dancer) was then in the Coast Guard. He used to come down here to play [tennis]. I remember a time he came down here to the apartment to get a good glass of water. He played tennis with all of us. He used to live up here on P Street, around 31st Street.

"My grandmother, Carrie Brown, was a hairdresser," Mr. Brown continued. "People came to her house, where she had a stool for people to kneel on while they leaned their heads over the bathtub."

"She used to wash their heads with Sargol soap, which had coconut oil in it. She'd wash it and dry it, then she'd press it. A short head of hair cost 75 cents. If you had real long hair, it was \$1.

"She did that for over 40 years

here in Georgetown," Mr. Brown recalled.

His grandmother wasn't the only black entrepreneur.

Catherine Pitman Jones said when she was a girl attending Phillips School on N Street, the jazziest place in town was the Blue Mouse Theater, at 26th and M streets, owned by the late George Martin. "They used to have vaudeville acts and movies."

Georgetown was abuzz with black businesses, Mrs. Bailey added — shoe shops, barbershops, tailors, grocers, pharmacies, funeral homes and restaurants.

Mrs. Mitchell was luckier than most of her neighbors.

"My grandfather left us the property, and he said he wanted it to remain in the family, going from one generation to the next," she said. "And that's what we have done."

Her grandfather, Caleb Hawkins, moved to Georgetown in 1868. He alternately owned a grocery store, a notions store and a restaurant. Today Mrs. Mitchell and her sister, Helen Gaskins Jackson, live across the street from each other on P Street.

They've seen the neighbors change with each passing decade. Now they are congressmen and diplomats, she said.

"The neighbors through the years have been very congenial and friendly," Mrs. Mitchell said. "Not friendly in the social sense, but very congenial."

Mr. Brown said segregation meant blacks had to walk downtown to go to high school.

"We couldn't go to Western [High School, at 35th and R Streets NW, now Ellington School of the Arts] because we were colored," he said. "So we had to walk all the way downtown to First and P Street, where you had Dunbar on the right side and Armstrong on the left side."

For Hannah N. Williams, a former Georgetown resident whose grandfather owned the 29th Street plot where the Mount Zion Methodist Church now stands, Georgetown's segregation merely reflected the times.

"It was a white neighborhood from 28th Street on up on P Street, and 31st Street on up on O Street," Mrs. Williams said. "Blacks generally lived below 27th Street."

"We called the neighborhoods either the Heights of Georgetown [for whites] or Georgetown," Mrs. Williams said.

"We used to go up to the Heights, but we didn't go into those buildings. We weren't allowed in them, and with segregation you knew where you belonged. It was pleasant to stay away than to be put out."

"It didn't make any difference what you looked like [how fair-skinned], said Mrs. Williams, who herself is fair-skinned. "They knew who was and who wasn't [white] and they didn't let you in."



# GEORGETOWN

U N I V E R S I T Y  
Office of Public Relations □ 37th and O Streets, N.W. □ Washington, D.C. 20057

## NEWS

CONTACT:  
Robin Stevens Payes  
202-625-2235

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### GEORGETOWN UNIVERSITY FORUM TO BEGIN NPR SATELLITE DISTRIBUTION

WASHINGTON, D.C. -- This fall, Georgetown University Forum, a public affairs radio show produced in Washington, D.C., by Georgetown University, will debut on National Public Radio (NPR) stations. The weekly, half-hour program, beginning satellite distribution on October 6, 1987, features such diverse and quotable guests as sports medicine expert Gabe Mirkin; former EEOC head Eleanor Holmes Norton, currently a Georgetown law professor; Dr. Edmund Pellegrino, director of the Kennedy Institute of Ethics; Fr. Robert Drinan, former Congressman from Massachusetts, now at Georgetown University's Law Center, and many others. Current and controversial issues are the focus of discussion, from foreign affairs to presidential politics, from international business to bioethics, medicine and law.

Because Georgetown University Forum originates in the Nation's capital, its guests are newsmakers who offer in-depth analysis of Washington politics, and insights into the people who make things happen. And because Georgetown University itself is a leader in higher education, in clinical education, in medical research, and in law, the Forum serves to inform its audience about the latest health breakthroughs, the implications of new laws, and practical ways to understand what such changes mean in our lives.

For almost a decade, Georgetown University Forum has been playing to Washington audiences on commercial station WASH-FM and other selected stations across the country. The 1987 season marks a national premiere

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