

**Name of Site:** Anacostia Historic District  
**Address:** Washington, DC  
**County:** not applicable  
**Date of Property:** 1854-1930  
**Ownership:** Private and Public Ownerships  
**Owner Name:** Private and Public Ownerships

**Owner Address (if different):**

District is in Southeast (Washington, DC/southeast Quadrant). Roughly bounded by Martin Luther King Avenue on the West, Good Hope Road on the north, Fendall Street and the rear of the Frederick Douglass Home on the east, and Bangor Street and Morris Road on the south.

**Designation:**

DC Historic District and Landmark Designation 11/27/73 (expanded 2/3/78); Listed in the National Register of Historic Places 10/11/78.

**1. Provide the name of the individual (or group) nominating the site.**

African American Heritage Preservation Foundation, Inc.

**2. Provide the address and phone number of the individual(s) or group(s) nominating the site.**

420 Seventh Street N.W. Suite 501  
Washington, DC 20004  
(202) 347-1149

**3. What is the physical description of the site?**

Bounded roughly by Martin Luther King Jr. Avenue on the west, Good Hope Road on the north, Fendall Street and the rear of the Frederick Douglass Home on the east, and Bangor Street and Morris Road on the south, The Anacostia Historic District is one of Washington, D.C.'s earliest suburbs. The District -- located in the southeast quadrant of the nation's capital -- encompasses roughly twenty city squares, contains approximately 550 buildings dating from circa 1854-1930, and displays the city's richest collection of late nineteenth and early-twentieth century small-scale frame and brick working class housing. Incorporated in 1854 as *Uniontown*, the district has since expanded to include the *Griswold* subdivision and its immediately adjacent residential and commercial areas (*see attached map*). The unique character of the Anacostia Historic District is dominated by three major architectural styles: the "*Cottage*," the "*Italianate*," and the Washington "*Row House*" styles. In addition, representative examples of the charming Queen Anne style are also featured throughout the historic district. Though defined primarily by its residential properties, a core commercial strip along Good Hope Road and Martin Luther King Jr. Avenue functions as the area's primary thoroughfare and serves to physically and visually bind the district to the heart of downtown Washington, D.C. The buildings along these two streets include: early houses residential properties that have since been converted to commercial use, buildings constructed for combined commercial/residential purposes, with stores on the first floor and apartments above; and twentieth-century commercial structures. A small number of intrusions exist within the historic district; vacant lots and used car dealerships are more of a problem at the present time than large-scale buildings. The deterioration and neglect of properties throughout the district's residential and commercial sections constitutes Anacostia's greatest disadvantage and threat to its architectural and historic integrity.

#### **4. What is the site's history?**

The history of the Anacostia Historic District begins in the early part of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. In 1608, Captain John Smith recorded in his journals that he “sailed up the eastern branch” in search of the main branch of the Potomac River. Smith landed on the river’s south bank – where the present day Anacostia is located – and noted that he was well received by the Nacochtank Indians. The 1632 journals of another explorer, Henry Fleet, give the first indication that the name “Anacostia” was derived from the Nacochtank tribe. Fleet notes that at the time of his arrival, the same land traversed by Smith more than twenty years earlier was now referred to as the “Nacostine.” Later, the Jesuit missionaries would “Latinize” the name to the “Anacostines,” with the area eventually becoming known and referred to by the Nacochtanks as “Anacostia.” Until its early development in the 1850s for residential purposes, the land constituting the Anacostia area was primarily agricultural.

The Anacostia Historic District is significant for both its historical and architectural contributions to the District of Columbia. The district includes within its boundaries Uniontown, one Washington’s earliest suburbs, which was incorporated in 1854. Uniontown was the first suburb of Washington, DC and was designed to be financially accessible to Washington’s working class, most of whom were employed in the Washington Naval Yard. Unlike many neighborhoods across the river, land in Anacostia was less expensive and homeowners could frequently afford to buy two lots and build detached or semi-detached houses. Most existing buildings date from the 1870s through 1930 and include free-standing and semi-detached frame structures with front porches and Italianate detailing as well as brick row houses and one, two and three story commercial buildings on the area’s commercial streets. Today, despite the presence of many successful small businesses and an active citizenry, a number of buildings are vacant and slowly deteriorating and the historic character and prosperity of the neighborhood are endangered.

The Anacostia Historic District also contains within its boundaries Cedar Hill, the home of Frederick Douglass, a 19<sup>th</sup> century statesman, orator and abolitionist, between 1877-1895.

The Anacostia Historic District was designated as a local historic district in 1973 and expanded in 1978. The expanded district was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1978.

**5. How well known is the site? Who goes there? (tourists, school children?) Is this site open to the public?**

Though recognized historically as an integral component of the District of Columbia, the Anacostia Historic District suffers both in terms of its visitors, public services, civic benefits, and overall experience on account of its physical separation from the city of Washington by the Anacostia River – an element that while serving to divide the district from the heart of the city, also serves as one of the district’s neighboring sources of promise and potential.

The greatest amount of attention drawn to the area, particularly in terms of tourism and education, results from the inclusion of two well-known and respected sites: the Frederick Douglass Home, Cedar Hill, a National Historic Site managed by the National Park Service and the Smithsonian Institution’s Anacostia Museum.

**Cedar Hill: The Home of Frederick Douglass**

Two well-known sites in Anacostia include the Frederick Douglass home, Cedar Hill, a National Historic Site managed by the National Park Service and the Smithsonian Institution’s Anacostia Museum.

Frederick Douglass (1817-1895) was a slave who learned to read and write at an early age and escaped to the North from Maryland’s Eastern Shore. In the 1840s, Douglass was an agent of the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society and became a lecturer and leader of Rochester, New York’s Underground Railroad. He was the editor and publisher of the *Northstar*, an abolitionist newspaper. During the Civil War, Douglass convinced President Lincoln to enlist African-American men as soldiers in the Union Army. Two of Douglass’ sons joined the 54<sup>th</sup> Massachusetts Colored Regiment. In the 1870s, Douglass came to Washington and became president of Freedmen’s Bank, established for newly freed slaves; and marshal of the District of Columbia. In 1881, Douglass was appointed Recorder of Deeds for the District of Columbia. President Harrison appointed him minister-resident and chargé d’affaires for the Dominican Republic. As a result of his contributions to improving the social welfare of African-Americans, Douglass became recognized as the “father of the civil rights movement.” Douglass purchased his Cedar Hill home in Anacostia in September 1877. The property was added to the National Park system on September 5, 1962, and was designated a National Historic Site on February 12, 1988.

**The Smithsonian Institution’s Anacostia Museum**

The Anacostia Museum is a community-based and constituency-focused museum that works to increase the public awareness of African American history through research, exhibitions and programs. It is a national resource for the identification, documentation,

protection, and interpretation of African American history and culture in Washington, DC and those areas of the rural South that have been historically significant to generations of African Americans. Little attention has been given to these sites through traditional venues for teaching our Nation's history, for example, classroom education, exhibitions and publications.

Although many tourists and school children visit Cedar Hill and the Anacostia Museum, many other historically and culturally significant sites are not accessible to the public due to their neglect, hazardous conditions and lack of public accommodations and interpretation for the visiting public.

While blight is likely the area's greatest deterrent, it also suffers from sufficient public relations and inclusion in promotional materials and tour brochures aimed at tourists and visitors to the nation's capital. *(This is a problem for many of Washington's historic neighborhoods as much of the attention remains focused on the downtown Mall area and federal properties and visitors are not yet fully encouraged to explore the city's fabulous and distinct surrounding communities.)*

**6. Why is this site important? What preservation issues does it exemplify?  
(sprawl, inner-city decline, etc.?)**

The Anacostia Historic District is significant for its historical, cultural, and architectural contributions to the city of Washington, D.C. Its preservation is vital to retaining a comprehensive sense of the development of the nation's capital, particularly as it relates to the expansion of the city beyond the boundaries of the L'Enfant Plan and into its associated communities. The district's surviving physical fabric is key to defining its sense of scale and the quality of life intended within this former agricultural area. The rapid deterioration and neglect of this fabric threatens to erase this unique character and remove those physical, visual, and cultural resources that together define its perception and experience as a unified community. The continued lack of awareness, education, and adaptive re-use of the Anacostia Historic District must be addressed and resolved at both a local and national level. Developing viable solutions and funding mechanisms to support these efforts are critical to the ongoing redevelopment and revitalization of our nation's capital as a whole. Continued neglect and deterioration of this community will serve only to tarnish the outstanding historic preservation initiatives undertaken throughout other areas of the city *(see enclosed article, Close Up America – Anacostia, an Orphan at Steps of Nation's Capital – U.S. News and World Report, December 10, 1984)* and serve as a poor reflection of the limitations of preservation outreach in the District of Columbia.

Greater attention and support must be given to local efforts, initiated by the D.C. Preservation League (DCPL), to strengthen preservation enforcement in the District of Columbia, imparting fines and restrictions on property owners that allow their historic properties to deteriorate. City officials must respond to the demands to improve their

inspection and enforcement obligations – not only to protect and preserve the city’s architectural history, but to also avoid the repeated instances of life and health safety hazards created on account of such neglect and irresponsibility. The local government must work with national representatives to support DCPLs efforts to pass tax legislation (*already introduced to the D.C. City Council*) that would provide economic incentives to owners of properties 50 years and older for rehabilitation and historic preservation purposes.

**7. What is the threat to the site? (Is the threat a result of a natural disaster, poor maintenance, lack of funds, etc.?)**

Unplanned development and economic development pressures, coupled with ongoing neglect and lack of preservation enforcement regulations place the Anacostia Historic District in dire straights. Clearly, the lack of financial support (*both local and national*) and the risks currently facing this community pose a tremendous threat to the district. The erosion of the district’s physical fabric has resulted in the disappearance of services vital to the survival and sustenance of “community.” The area is an excellent candidate for reinvestment – and yet – such reinvestment threatens to introduce large-scale development inappropriate with the district’s distinct and contributing features. Very unfortunately, the plight of the Anacostia Historic District has been addressed in numerous articles and features for more than fifteen years; (*The Washington Post – A Future Dependent on the Past: In Ward Divided by the Anacostia River, Residents United on Historic Preservation; Anacostia lights a Candle against the Darkness; Piecemeal Initiatives Won’t Help the District’s Economy or Anacostia; and U. S. News and World Report – The “Other Washington” That Tourists Don’t See*) despite this coverage, little has been done to improve its deplorable state and deteriorating condition. Time is of the essence.

**8. How significant is the threat? (Is the building about to fall? Is the ship about to sink?)**

The threat to the Anacostia Historic District is immediate and ongoing. Many of these buildings are severely deteriorated and are in serious need of rehabilitation or restoration. In most cases, the District of Columbia has stated that these buildings and sites pose a safety threat without the knowledge or proper training on historic preservation issues by many of its inspectors. Furthermore, in the Fall of 1998, the District of Columbia City Council enacted “*The Prevention of the Demolition of Historic Buildings by Neglect Amendment Act of 1998*,” which provided for several new procedures aimed at protecting the city’s most severely deteriorated historic resources from demolition by neglect and at improving the appearance and safety of vacant buildings. Residents of historic districts who have frequently watched in dismay as potentially beautiful structures have been allowed to collapse were grateful for the Council’s action making it much more difficult for owners of buildings in historic districts to allow them to deteriorate beyond repair. However, former Mayor Barry and the control board were not convinced of the necessity for this law, with the former mayor refusing to sign it and the control board remanding

the bill for more analysis of the monetary impact. In addition, the control board is seeking information on the effects of similar laws in other cities. Currently, laws being reviewed are the cities of Atlanta and Chicago.

Without the enactment of this law, the introduction of historic preservation tax legislation, and the strengthening of preservation enforcement within the D.C. Department of Consumer and Regulatory Affairs, the Anacostia Historic District will, undoubtedly, be lost to the pressures of economic development. Its significant historic building stock will be replaced with examples of suburban sprawl, the character of the district will be obliterated, and its sense of place destroyed.

**9. How can the threat be eliminated? (*More money, change of ownership, education, protection mechanism?*)**

Reinvestment in the Anacostia Historic District could be sparked, in part, with the revitalization of its commercial corridor. This primary goal may be accomplished through the introduction and management of a *Main Street Program*, administered by the National Trust for Historic Preservation.

The Main Street Program has worked to rehabilitate and revitalize commercial strips across the country. The area along Good Hope Road and Martin Luther King, Jr. Avenue is ideal for this type of kick-off initiative. It is virtually guaranteed that the impact of attention such as this will result in dramatic “before” and “after” conditions for this neighborhood – while at the same time setting the standard for its redevelopment.

**10. Who are the major players? (*Is there a "Friends of" group, government agency, private citizens?*)**

African American Heritage Preservation Foundation  
The Anacostia Coordinating Council  
Anacostia Economic Development Corporation  
The Anacostia Historical Society  
The Anacostia Museum, Smithsonian Institution  
DC Preservation League  
DC Heritage Tourism Coalition  
Government of the District of Columbia  
District of Columbia Historic Preservation Division  
The Historical Society of Washington, DC

**11. Is there any opposition to the preservation of this site? Explain.**

Yes. Many redevelopment forces view preservation initiatives within the Anacostia Historic District as an obstacle to the introduction of large-scale commercial development and other such “improvements”. As is the case often, preservation is viewed here, in many instances – primarily due to a lack of interest, understanding, and recognition of its benefits – as prohibitive instead of as the vehicle for change that is key to the area’s perpetual survival and success. A lack of recognition of the area’s existing structures as actual resources for the city is apparent.

**12. How would listing this site as one of *America's 11 Most Endangered Historic Places* help?**

This listing would provide visibility and national focus on one of our Nation’s capital historic most significant African-American neighborhoods. Educating the public regarding this historic district and its sites would aid organizations in obtaining funding to preserve these neighborhoods while making it economically feasible to develop and revitalize for adaptive use. This educational process should be coordinated from within the community first, reaching out to the residents and business owners who know first-hand the area’s greatest challenges. Working with these individuals will be key to producing solutions that work for those closest to the history of this area – its residents and community members. Their support and input will be invaluable.

In addition, educational tools can be developed to enhance the public’s awareness of these districts and sites. With the District’s new leadership and interest in historic preservation of the city, educational outreach is of vital importance at this time. This listing would also encourage local development groups to become more preservation sensitive and bolster local as well as national private investment in the neighborhood.

**13. Other than listing this site as endangered, what else can the National Trust do to alleviate the threat?**

The National Trust can provide the necessary leverage to bring national attention to this endangered community that is a significant part of our Nation’s capital that has been overlooked and ignored. The National Trust can provide opportunities through *Preservation Magazine* and the *Forum* publication to solicit and publish articles regarding these endangered sites and offer viable solutions to the community groups involved in historic preservation, economic development and revitalization of these endangered historic districts and landmarks.

In addition to working to establish a *Main Street Program* within Anacostia, the National Trust can work with concerned local organizations to turn the numerous *articles* on Anacostia’s plight into *actions* aimed at making a visible difference in this community.



**14. How has the Trust been involved to date? What role, if any, is there for the Trust if this site is put on the list of the 11 Most Endangered Historic Places?**

Partially funded through support of the *Dorothea De Schweinitz Fund*, a brochure has been created specifically for the Anacostia Historic District detailing its history and landmarks.

Most recently, the National Trust's has provided funding in the District of Columbia, through their *Community Partners Program* for the Thurgood Marshall Center for Service and Heritage, (formerly the YMCA, which opened in 1912 as the first full-service YMCA for African Americans, that was once an endangered National Historic Landmark in the Shaw area). However, efforts in the Anacostia Historic District and adjacent areas could use the *Community Partners Program* and other kinds of National Trust program support.

**15. Provide any additional comments/recommendations.**

Individuals and organizations in support of this proposal will provide recommendations within the next few weeks.

It is recommended and/or requested that the National Trust work with the D.C. Heritage Tourism Coalition, the D.C. Preservation League, the Anacostia Economic Development Corporation and other interested organizations to coordinate a program aimed at drawing attention to the resources within the Anacostia Historic District as part of its upcoming Annual Conference to be held in Washington, D.C. in October. Since the National Trust is locally based here in the City of Washington, it would prove highly beneficial to all parties involved to be able to draw some positive attention to this perpetuating problem.

**16. Provide the names, titles, and phone numbers of all appropriate contacts.**

E. Renée Ingram, President and Founder  
African American Heritage Preservation Foundation, Inc.  
(202) 347-1149

Stephen J. Raiche, Chief  
Historic Preservation Division  
DC Department of Consumer and Regulatory Affairs  
(202) 727-7360

Jerry T. Maronek, Chair, Landmarks Committee  
DC Preservation League  
(202) 955-5616