

“New Institutions, Better History,” *Washington History* 32, nos. 1&2 (Special Issue: Meeting the Moment, Fall 2020): 75-77.

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Monuments are coming down. Names are coming off buildings. Some fear a retreat or erasure of history, but monuments and names have never been about history. They are celebrations and simplifications, reflecting their time and makers. In this moment, I see an opportunity to introduce a more nuanced understanding of history to the public—better public history than names and monuments could ever offer.

I have spent the last few years trying to explain to both public and academic audiences why Woodrow Wilson’s racism mattered in his time and why it matters today. Now his name is coming off buildings at Princeton University and perhaps soon off a public high school in the District. While some are surprised, Wilson’s racism is not news to many African Americans, especially in DC, who have long shared family stories of his presidency’s devastating impact on Black federal employment.¹ The Wilson Administration did not just segregate federal offices for the first time. It destroyed lives by derailing careers and erasing equal employment in the nation’s civil service.

But removing names to make spaces more inclusive is only a start. My aim has been to deepen our understanding of Wilson’s history, to explain *why* it matters. What does this new understanding of Wilson—one connected to a broader movement for equity and inclusion—mean for telling the history of Washington, DC? How might we seize the opportunity to tell a fuller, more truthful history beyond the stories of individual “great men”?

We are in desperate need of education about the prevalence and persistence of racism in American life. But an anti-racist education will require more than tearing down symbols and stories of white supremacy. We’ll need new ways to tell better, more complex stories that the public can access. We’ll need to move beyond worshipful monuments and hidebound institutions. For example, the name “Woodrow Wilson High School” cannot possibly tell the story of Wilson’s impact on life in the District. Its removal won’t either. But the President Woodrow Wilson House in Kalorama has taken on a new role: no longer simply a “flame-keeper” dedicated to the final years of the 28th President, the house museum is rewriting its tour to tell the story of how racism shaped American life in Wilson’s time.

I feel lucky to be a part of a new project to further the public’s historical understanding: the new Capital Jewish Museum in downtown Washington. To me, the development of this museum (formerly the Jewish Historical Society of Greater Washington) is an opportunity to build, from the ground up, a historical institution that tries to meet the challenge of the moment: to tell history that is honest and inclusive. Done right, this new museum will enrich the public history landscape of Washington beyond changing building names.

The Capital Jewish Museum will try to answer the question: “What has it meant to be Jewish in the nation’s capital?” Doing this requires an examination of the intersection of American democracy and American Jewish experience. How have those who identified as Jewish—religiously, culturally, publicly, and personally—sought to live and work in a city whose central purpose is to be a crucible of governance and representation? The answer, my colleagues and I have discovered, is complicated and instructive.

Let’s take, for example, the lives and careers of Joe Rauh and Janice Eichhorn. Rauh arrived in DC in 1936, a plucky New Dealer and Supreme Court clerk, but found his life’s work as a civil rights lawyer, with a particular interest in winning recognition of the rights of all DC citizens. Eichhorn moved from Illinois to work for Congress in 1964, only to discover that by becoming a DC resident, she had lost

her representation in that legislative body. The movement for Home Rule that she joined would bring some change, but not full enfranchisement of Washingtonians. Rauh's and Eichhorn's careers tell inspiring histories of civic action by Jewish Washingtonians. Simultaneously, they raise awareness of serious gaps in this seat of American democracy and lead us to interrogate the reasons why their heroism was necessary in the first place.

The numbers of DC Jews rose in every era in which Americans have looked to Washington for leadership and service, from the Civil War to the progressive era to the New Deal to the Cold War—whether it was German immigrant Simon Wolf moving to DC in the midst of the Civil War to practice law and becoming an advisor to U.S. presidents or Clara Schiffer taking a job in a New Deal agency in 1935 and becoming a lifelong activist with the League of Women Voters.²

To honor this legacy of public work, we must tell stories of Jewish Washingtonians' contributions to the public good; but we must also document those times when Jewish Washingtonians fell short. After World War II Jewish Washingtonians fought for school desegregation, but also participated in white flight. Later they demanded equity, but also fueled gentrification and displacement.³ Community activist Marvin Caplan's efforts to fight segregation and white flight must be told next to Ralph Bunche's public renunciation of his credit line at the Jewish-owned Hecht's Department Store because of its mistreatment of Black shoppers. Labor organizer Hyman Bookbinder may have represented Jewish Washington at the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, but just as representative were the persistent whites-only restrictions at Jewish-owned apartment complexes across the Washington area.⁴

Consider the Jewish story of 1968. This has long been presented as a record of straightforward loss: loss of property and loss of trust between DC's Black and Jewish communities. Can we tell an extended, more nuanced story about Black and Jewish relations in the capital? Can we have empathy both for those who rose up, and for those who watched their family businesses burn—and honesty about those who did not see the burning because they had long since moved away and would never return to rebuild?

On April 15, 1968, just days after the riots, DC Council Chairman John Hechinger told his fellow Washington Hebrew congregants that they were not living up to their values. Pointing to a noble but unfulfilled set of promises the congregation had made in 1963, Hechinger called his community to task. "Judaism is not just a matter of believing," he instructed. "It is primarily a way of living."⁵ The obligation to be true to Jewish values of *mitzvot* (good deeds) in the nation's capital is unique; failing to live up to those values here is especially meaningful. As Hechinger's statement recognized, Jewish Washingtonians have at times fallen short in working and fighting for equality and the common good. Those failures serve as prompts to reflect on the lessons of history for today.

In the case of 1968, one path toward building a broader historical understanding is to ask visitors to engage with the many motivations, participants, and proceedings of the 1969 Freedom Seder, in which Black and Jewish Washingtonians came together to tell multi-dimensional stories of discrimination and liberation. The Freedom Seder did not resolve the District's problems, of course, but it offers a model for genuine dialogue that still matters today in Washington and beyond.⁶

Like many organizations, the Capital Jewish Museum has issued a statement calling for racial justice.⁷ To live that statement we are changing how we teach history, asking new questions beyond mere celebration, actively engaging visitors and inviting new storytellers to tell overlooked stories. We can broaden how we define whose lives "count" as history and include experiences that upset settled narratives of progress or righteousness. In the past, we have told stories about Jewish Washington. Today, we can consider what those stories mean to the District as a whole. How do the struggles and the relative prosperity of the Jewish community connect to the histories of our neighbors? How did restrictive covenants limit where Jews could live? How have Jewish homeowners and businesses benefitted from

the public policies and business practices that shaped urban and suburban development in the last half-century? The story of hard work, ambition, and investment for some—is also a story of social inequality, disinvestment, and discrimination for others.

This moment does not have to be just about removing stains and statues. We can learn from the past to shape our actions in the present and future. What the current social justice movement means for a museum focused on a primarily (but not exclusively) white community is clear and direct: we must tell histories that all can access, in which Black lives matter; stories that move our nation forward on the path to real democracy. This moment can be about reckoning with history, and museums can be leaders in that work. As we reconsider our past, we can build new institutions and actively engage visitors in exploring better history.

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¹ Susan Levine, "Bridge's Namesake Unpopular on Md. Side: Citing Wilson's Segregationist Policies, Pr. George's Offers to Give Up Span Adornment," *Washington Post* (Feb. 16, 2004); Gordon J. Davis, "What Woodrow Wilson Cost My Grandfather," *New York Times* (Nov. 24, 2015).

² Francine Curro Cary, ed. *Urban Odyssey: A Multicultural History of Washington, D.C.* (Washington: Smithsonian Books, 1996).

³ Chris Myers Asch and George Derek Musgrove. *Chocolate City: A History of Race and Democracy in the Nation's Capital* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017); Kate Masur, *An Example for All the Land: Emancipation and the Struggle over Equality in Washington, D.C.* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010); Lauren Pearlman, *Democracy's Capital: Black Political Power in Washington, D.C., 1960s-1970s* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2019).

⁴ Marvin Caplan, *Farther Along: A Civil Rights Memoir* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Press, 1999); Sarah J. Shoenfeld, "Teachable Moment: 'Blockbusting' and Racial Turnover in Mid-Century D.C.," *Washington History* 30-2 (fall 2018): 50-54; Ralph J. Bunche to Charles B. Dulcan, May 19, 1936, Ralph J. Bunche Papers, Department of Special Collections, UCLA Library, oac.cdlib.org/ark:/13030/hb700009sf/?brand=oac4; Michael E. Staub, *Torn at the Roots: The Crisis of Jewish Liberalism in Postwar America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 155.

⁵ John W. Hechinger, "The Urban Crisis and Our Congregation," speech to the Washington Hebrew Congregation, April 15, 1968.

⁶ Julie Zauzmer, "The Freedom Seder: The anti-racism dinner party that changed American Judaism," *Washington Post* (Mar. 29, 2018); Arthur Waskow, *The Freedom Seder: A New Haggadah for Passover* (Washington: Micah Press, 1970).

⁷ Lillian and Albert Small Capital Jewish Museum, "Equity and Justice Commitments," capitaljewishmuseum.org/equityandjusticecommitments/