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Summary Notes on Prof. Johnson's Walking Tour of Historic Georgetown (11/9/00)

Prefatory Talk at the Front Gates, Healy Circle

Georgetown founded 1751; named not after George II, but after two merchants who founded it: George Beall and George Gordon. Georgetown was created as an elongated grid, based on the two main streets of M Street and Wisconsin Ave. Tobacco was carted down to the port on the Potomac, but by the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> c., tobacco culture was troubled (tobacco having depleted the land too much and the market becoming gutted.) Tobacco was being replaced by the growing of grain, and Georgetown and Alexandria were two of the greatest ports on the East Coast at the time. Shipments were even being sent to Scotland. Further South, cotton would replace the growing of tobacco, which would revolutionize southern culture.

1789: key date (but couldn't hear; noisy plane going over)

1791: residence act created the District of Columbia

The District of Columbia included land on the Virginia side of the river (Arlington), but this "other half" was ceded back to Virginia in 1848 because the District didn't really need it. (The Virginia part of was just farms.)

In the 19<sup>th</sup> c., Georgetown had about 10,000-20,000 residents; about 1/4<sup>th</sup> were slaves and free Blacks. The number of Blacks continued to grow till the 1930s. The Blacks lived on the east side of Wisconsin Avenue, basically; the Whites to the west.

When the Civil War broke out, federal troops took over the city. That's when the 80 forts were built. The Southern population fled the city then. Georgetown U. got caught in between; hence, we adopted both the blue and the gray in order not to take sides. Many of the Southerners never returned.

1878, Georgetown, which had been separate from the District of Columbia, was now annexed to D.C. The first thing the D.C. government did was to change all the street names. The city peaked at that time, but the C & O canal was falling into decline. There was a great flood in 1924, and after that, the canal was closed.

There are about 900 houses in Georgetown. In the Peabody Collection at the Georgetown branch of the D.C. library there is a history of every single house in Georgetown. This is especially important for real estate commerce and for historic preservation. Most of the houses that now exist (Prof. Johnson estimates: 2/3<sup>rd</sup>s of all the houses) in Georgetown are from the period 1880-1920, although many owners "federalized" their houses to make them seem older. On N Street, there are some genuine 18<sup>th</sup> c. houses.

In 1951, the citizens of Georgetown pushed for an "old town act". This dictates the things a person can and cannot do. Basically, a person can tear down everything but the façade of the house or building. The act really created a watchdog group that has been very strict. It is this group that has given the university so many hassles. The university's problems are not just those of "town and gown", but they concern the watchdog's sense of the proper "tone" for Georgetown. They are greatly opposed to the university's plans for expansion. [e.g. the "cap" on student enrollment]

In the 1930s, Georgetown was still a very small town, but with the New Deal (and here Eleanor Roosevelt was big on this), people needed houses. It was more practical to buy houses within the District, and this was when people began to buy up real estate in Georgetown. This is when the Blacks moved out. (See the movie produced for the Georgetown University Bicentennial, "Black Georgetown Remembered." Prof. Valerie Babb played a major role in the making of the film. There are still 4 Black churches in Georgetown, one Methodist, two Baptist, and a fourth church, but today, all the Blacks drive in to Georgetown from other areas. They return for the sake of old family ties.

#### Tour Stop: Holy Trinity Church

Holy Trinity is known as "the Kennedy Church." This was the last place JFK prayed before going to Dallas. The church on 36<sup>th</sup> Street is 100 years old. The old church, dating back to the late 18<sup>th</sup> c., is on N Street. There is a wonderful book on Holy Trinity.

There is a large inventory of books on Georgetown, too. And the biggest collection of archival material is in the Record of the Columbia Historical Society which can be found on the 5<sup>th</sup> floor of the library.

#### Tour Stop: 3407 N Street

Splendid Victorian home with Mansard roof.

#### Tour Stop: Cox Row (Corner of N & 34<sup>th</sup> Streets)

These row houses on the left side of the street as one proceed from campus (street numbers 3339-33327), dating from the 1790s, are one of the great strings of row houses in the nation. They are named after the then mayor of Georgetown, Mr. Cox. The houses across the street date from the 1890s, but were made to look older. The third one from the corner has an elegant Mansard roof.

#### Tour Stop: The Marbury House ( 3307 N Street [the 2<sup>nd</sup> one on the left before 33<sup>rd</sup> Street])

Dates from the early 19<sup>th</sup> c. Was the house of William Marbury, of "Marbury vs. Madison" fame. This was the home of Senator Jack Kennedy. He lived here at the time of the presidential election, too. Jackie Kennedy took courses at Georgetown. Fr. Joe Durkin taught her U.S. history, and she took U.S. Diplomatic History from Prof. Jules Davids. Later, Professor Davids helped write a good part of Kennedy's Pulitzer Prize-winning book, Profiles in Courage. Sorenson wrote a good part of it, too; he was such a wordsmith ("Ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country.") But Kennedy wrote a good part of it also, because he had written on the topic at Harvard. Although as presidential aspirant, he had no time to write, so Sorenson and Prof. Davids were his ghost writers.

#### Tour Stop: Houses with Mansard Roofs, 1418-1426 33<sup>th</sup> Street

Mansard roofs were added in the early 19<sup>th</sup> c. as a feature of modernization. We stop before a group of 5 townhouses with Mansard roofs, houses built in the late 19<sup>th</sup> c. Builders liked to construct 5 of these townhouses at a time.

### Tour Stop: 1524 – 33<sup>th</sup> Street

Building on the left side of the street has a plaque on it, identifying it as “The Yellow Tavern.” The plaque on the building states the following: “The Yellow Tavern, later [known as] White Horse Tavern. Erected 1788 @ 33 Market Street. [Recall here Prof. Johnson’s comment about all the street names being changed after Georgetown was annexed to the District of Columbia.] When George Town [sic] was a leading port, the tavern was a favorite stopping place for travelers and tobacco merchants from Frederick Town. Also a popular meeting place for Thomas Jefferson and other notables. Here major John Cox entertained General Lafayette with a dinner of reed-birds, followed by dancing to music from the balcony.”

Proceed to the end of the block; take a right onto Volta Street. Proceed a short distance to Pomander Walk on the left, opposite the park on the right.

### Tour Stop: Pomander Walk (on the left side of Volta, heading toward GU, just before 3328 Volta)

D.C. was two cities. Constance Green wrote a massive history of Washington (2 volumes, 1960, approximately 1,000 pages.) Her 3rd volume is titled The Secret City: A History of Race Relations in the Nation’s Capital (Princeton, 1967). Her book especially refers to these areas west of Wisconsin where Blacks lived, hidden in a sense, behind the houses of Whites. Jim Borchert’s Alley Life in Washington.....1850-1970, (Illinois, 1980) also speaks of the Blacks who lived in the back courtyards, these alley-dwellers. Pomander Walk offers a now gentrified renovation version of the alley houses that once belonged to Blacks. This was a very poor black neighborhood. The park on Volta had been the site of Black houses, but it was considered a very rough area so the houses were leveled, and a park constructed. This coincided with an era in which people were looking to create green spaces.

[If you go back out to Volta, take a left and go up to 34<sup>th</sup> Street, you can then walk down 34<sup>th</sup> and pass by the house which obviously belongs to Madeleine Albright: 1318 34<sup>th</sup> Street.

### Returning to the university

Paraphrase of Prof. Johnson: We are reminded that the whole Eastern coast is one of the world’s great zones of deciduous trees. Trees grow very easily here. But in during the Great Depression (and even before) trees were cut down in cities (before coal became widely available), and there were no trees in Georgetown. And you could look across the river and not see any trees. The trees of Georgetown date only from the period after which coal becomes widely available.