

Life in “The Berg”

Populated almost exclusively by Black residents, the racially segregated neighborhood of The Berg evolved by necessity to have its own set of dwellings, amenities, and social institutions. Houses like the “five frame shanties” that stood on this block in 1890 were not uncommon for this neighborhood, which had its beginnings just after the Civil War.



Houses like this one in the Negro Quarter of Rosslyn, Virginia may have stood along N. Pitt Street during the early 20th century.

J. Vachon, ca. 1937, Library of Congress



African-American workers at the Old Dominion Glass Company, Alexandria, Virginia.

Lewis Hines, ca. 1911
Library of Congress

Life in this neighborhood also presented other drawbacks. A variety of industries lay within walking distance, among them Robert Portner’s Brewery, the rail and coal yards along the Potomac, and the Old Dominion Glass Works. Although these enterprises probably provided jobs for some local residents, living in a marginalized, heavily industrial area most certainly was not a pleasure. Compounding the problem was a “City Dumping Ground” that took up several blocks along the floodplain bordering “Ralph’s Gut.” In the early 1940s, two blocks at the southern end of this dumping ground became the site of the George W. Parker (“Colored”) housing project, which consisted of brick-faced concrete block townhouses. Today, a high-rise apartment building and the Housing Authority’s Annie B. Rose House occupy that space.

Most Sanborn Fire Insurance maps of this period do not depict this specific block in any detail, but maps of the area do show that nearly all of the buildings were frame dwellings. Census data between 1900 and 1940 indicate that all of its residents were African American, and that all but two rented, rather than owned, their homes. However, the buildings that stood on the adjoining blocks give some notion of the neighborhood’s character. There were relatively few amenities (although this number varied over time). For example, in 1907, local residents could worship at a “Negro Mission” (which later became a First Baptist Church and then a Community Presbyterian Church); shop at the single grocery store that served the immediate needs of the community; and patronize the lone barber in the area who maintained a shop on North Royal Street.



View toward the Potomac River from the intersection of Wythe and N. Royal Streets, ca. 1950. Note the railroad car (right) on the Wythe Street railroad tracks.

Health Department Photograph, ca. 1950,
Alexandria Public Library, Special Collections



This is an excerpt from the Sanborn Fire Insurance Map of Alexandria, Virginia. (1921). The houses along N. Pitt and Pendleton Street in Block 359 were built along the edges of a marshy area known as Ralph’s Gut.

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