The Roots of the University of the District of Columbia

Myrtilla Miner opened her “School for Colored Girls” in 1851 in Washington, D.C. A white abolitionist originally from New York State, Miner had come to see education as one of the keys to freedom.

At the time she opened her school, slavery was still legal in Washington, though many free blacks also lived in D.C. Miner was assisted in her teaching by Emily Edmonson, a young black woman who had been born into slavery and achieved freedom in 1848.

The school was often threatened by local white racists; Miner began practicing shooting with a pistol outside the school in order to scared them off. But Miner and her students persevered. Miner included abolitionist materials in the students’ course work, and used the school as a foundation for advocating for racial equality.

The school closed in 1860, and Miner died shortly thereafter — but her legacy and work lived on.

“I marvel... at the thought, the zeal, the faith, and the courage of Myrtilla Miner in daring to be the pioneer of such a movement for education here, in the District of Columbia, the very citadel of slavery.”

— Frederick Douglass, 1883

1856 Goad Map - School for Colored Girls

The “enlarged” or “new” school was founded in 1854 to raise funds for a new building for Miner's school.

Miner School Location

This plot of land, adjacent to Dupont Circle, was purchased as a home for Miner's school.

Portrait of Myrtilla Miner

About this Exhibit

UDC: A Visual History was supported by HumanitiesDC and the College of Arts and Sciences at the University of the District of Columbia.

Humanities DC

Discover the Tapestry of Our Nation's Capital

This exhibit was curated by Amanda Huron, with assistance from Chris Anglin, University Archivist. Additional research was performed by James Bertolick, Anthony McKearin, and students in the course The History of the District of Columbia. G. Derek Moogrove served as Humanities Scholar on the project.

Exhibit designed and produced by Paris Design. Special thanks to April Messe, Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences; Sheila Harmon Martin, Chair of the Division of Social and Behavioral Sciences; and Clifton Johnson, Student Center Director.

Images in this exhibit are provided as a courtesy from the UDC Archives, unless otherwise noted.

Aspire. Accomplish. Take on the World
The Washington Normal School opened in September 1873 in the Franklin School building, at the corner of 13th and K Streets NW. The school began with a class of 20 students, and a mission of training teachers for the city’s white public school system.

The school was renamed for James Ormond Wilson, superintendent of the city’s schools, after his death in 1911. In 1913, the school moved to a new building at 1100 Harvard Street NW, where it remained until the creation of D.C. Teachers College in 1955.

In 1933, Wilson Normal School transformed into a four-year, degree-granting teachers college that offered tuition-free higher education for white residents of Washington, D.C.
After Myrtilla Miner’s school was closed, the property was sold and the Miner Fund was created to support the education of African American youth in Washington, D.C.

In 1876, the Miner Fund opened an independent school to train African American teachers, named the Miner Normal School.

In 1929, the Miner Normal School began transforming into a four-year, degree-granting teachers college that offered tuition-free higher education for African American residents of Washington, D.C.

Miner Normal School and Miner Teachers College attracted remarkable faculty, including fourth generation Washingtonian Euphemia Lofton Haynes.

The first African American woman in the U.S. to earn a PhD in mathematics, she founded the school’s math department.
D.C. TEACHERS COLLEGE

1955-1977

The Supreme Court’s decision in Brown vs. Board of Education, issued in May 1954, required an end to segregation of public schools nationally. A companion case, Bolling vs. Sharpe, required the end to segregated schooling in D.C. specifically.

The summer following the Supreme Court’s ruling against segregation in public education, Miner and Wilson Teachers Colleges opened admissions to students of all races. The following year, the School Board merged the two schools into one, integrated institution.

MINER & WILSON MERGE

The merged institution, D.C. Teachers College, opened its doors in the fall of 1955. Like its two predecessor schools, DCTC was a four-year school that initially offered tuition-free degrees to Washingtonians. The tuition-free policy ended circa 1960.

Students developed their skills through student-teaching in D.C. public schools, as depicted here. Graduates of D.C. Teachers College went on to form the backbone of the public school teaching profession in Washington, D.C.
In 1968, Federal City College (FCC) opened as the city's first public liberal arts institution of higher education in the District. FCC offered four-year, two-year, and graduate degrees. The school addressed a tremendous demand for public higher education in Washington.

FCC's buildings were scattered throughout downtown D.C.; truly, the city was its campus.

**The Lottery System**

Over 6,000 students applied for admission in 1967-68, but having only prepared for 1,300 students, the school used a lottery system to select applicants.

The resultant student body was 98% D.C. residents, 95% African American, and 60% full time workers.

Federal City College was an exciting experiment in urban public higher education that attracted a roster of notable faculty, including C.L.R. James, Ira Berlin, Gil Scott-Heron, and many others.
Washington Technical Institute (WTI) opened in 1968, at the same time as Federal City College. While FCC focused on the liberal arts, WTI focused on vocational training.

Here, students could earn 2-year degrees in subjects geared towards training in a particular career, like nursing, computer science, mass media, architecture, and printing.

WTI opened in a set of brick buildings, located at the corner of Connecticut Ave. and Van Ness St. NW, that had recently been vacated by the National Bureau of Standards.

In 1973, construction began on this site for a new campus for WTI.

UDC’s Dennard Plaza is named in honor of Cleveland Dennard, the visionary founding president of Washington Technical Institute.
David A. Clarke
School of Law

1972-PRESENT

Antioch School of Law was founded in Washington in 1972 as a school specializing in public-interest law. Edgar S. and Jean Camper Cahn, an interracial couple, founded the school in order to train lawyers to advocate for poor people, and to work for social and racial justice.

The school was innovative in many ways; for example, it required its first-year law students to spend a week living with a poor household in Washington so that they could get a better sense of the challenges of poverty.

D.C.’s Law School

In 1986, Antioch School of Law, which was struggling financially, was taken over by the city of Washington, and renamed the District of Columbia School of Law — an effort led by D.C. City Council Chairman David A. Clarke, himself an activist attorney.

The school became part of the University of the District of Columbia in 1995, and was renamed in honor of David A. Clarke in 1998.
The process of consolidating D.C. Teachers College, Federal City College, and Washington Technical Institute into a single institution, the University of the District of Columbia, began in 1976, with the founding of the institution’s charter Board of Trustees, chaired by Ron Brown.

Consolidation was formally announced in August 1977, and completed in 1978. Since then, the University of the District of Columbia has served thousands of residents of the District of Columbia, as well as students from around the country and around the world.

Serving D.C.’s Needs

The mission of UDC reflects its history, reverberating up through the present:

“Embracing its essence as a public historically black urban-focused land-grant university in the nation’s capital, UDC is dedicated to serving the needs of the community of the District of Columbia, and producing lifelong learners who are transformative leaders in the workforce, government, nonprofit sectors and beyond.”

SPECIAL EDITION
Student Tripartite Convention Results

The Warrior

The Warrior, 1977
The student newspaper. The Warrior covered everything from student life to international issues.