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Capital History

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By Ann Geracimos - A visit to the Historical Society of Washington, D.C., is not only a trip through time, but also a multimedia adventure.

The grand old building known as the Historic Carnegie Library at 801 K St. NW, opposite the Washington Convention Center, functions in its new guise partly as a research library and partly as a venue for cultural and educational programs about the area's rich heritage.

"Washingtonians need a place to learn about their history and culture," says Sandy Bellamy, the society's executive director. "It's a good vehicle to bring people together for kindred attachment. We want D.C. to feel this is home."

Unlike the former museum on the site, the nonprofit society's resources and attractions are free and open to all as befits an institution dedicated to enlightening visitors about the District's history — seat of the federal government; a destination point for millions of visitors; and a vibrant, living city of families and neighborhoods.

The Kiplinger Research Library's holdings include thousands of books and pamphlets; 100,000 photographs; hundreds of manuscripts and maps; 5,000 objects; and such research aids as a vertical file of newspaper clippings, census records and legislative documents, many of them available online. Library director Yvonne Carrigan is the caretaker of the collection.

Public programs sponsored by the society take the form of exhibits as well as lectures, films, live concerts and a variety of events often centered around a celebratory theme. They are intended to appeal to all ages and mind-sets.

"I love to see the entire community engaging around a central topic," Ms. Bellamy says. "The District too often can be separated into nooks and crannies. The idea here is to build great civic pride in our home."

Beginning in January, hours were extended so the landmark building is open five days a week, including Saturday. Events are scheduled at different times to connect with visitors' varied routines.

Black History Month, for instance, featured, among many other offerings, a film titled "Against the Odds: The Artists of the Harlem Renaissance." March is Women's History Month, ushering in a series of pertinent events, including a film on Saturday about the Washington-based women's a cappella group Sweet Honey in the Rock.

Guided by a staff of no more than five, plus nine volunteers, the society is located in an edifice that once served as the city's central library and later as part of the University of the District of Columbia. A \$25 million capital campaign helped renovate and restore the beaux-arts building, and the society pays \$1 in rent to the city per year. Entering on the south side and escaping the traffic-clogged streets surrounding 200-year-old Mount Vernon Square, a visitor is absorbed into another, quieter world.

Patrons headed for the library are required to divest themselves of everything but pencils and notepaper. Lockers are provided for that purpose. A staffer is on hand to give advice and guidance. Many requests for factual information come to the library from around the country.

While engaged primarily in honoring the past, the society isn't ignoring modern resources. Plans are afoot to integrate interactive methods including the Internet into future exhibits — by employing YouTube, for instance. Artifacts relating to the old Griffith baseball stadium will be on view when the Nationals' new home opens in the District's Southwest later this month.

April will see an exhibit highlighting issues that led to the riots of 1968 "and how that impacted on the civil rights movement," Ms. Bellamy says. She also is busy working on what will be known as "The History Minute" on WHUR and possibly other radio stations, in which a local historian will speak about a historic property around the city.

When you go:

Location: The Historical Society of Washington, D.C., which includes the Kiplinger Research Library, is at 801 K St. NW.

Hours: Tuesday through Saturday, 10 a.m. to 5 p.m.

Admission: Free

Parking: Street and metered parking are available around Mount Vernon Square, opposite the Washington Convention Center. Commercial garages also are available nearby. The nearest Metro stop is the Seventh and H streets exit of the Gallery Place/Chinatown stop on the Yellow, Green and Red lines.

More information: Call 202/383-1800, send e-mail to info@HistoryDC.org, or visit www.HistoryDC.org.