

## Does D.C. History Matter?

**THE WASHINGTON POST, Sunday, May 27, 2007; B08**

On May 15, acting on a request from council member Marion Barry (D-Ward 8), the D.C. Council voted to delete \$500,000 in fiscal year 2008 funding sought by Mayor Adrian Fenty (D) to support the programs of the Historical Society of Washington, D.C. This unexpected and unfortunate action raises the question: does D.C. history matter?

For the answer, look no further than the response to the devastating fires at Eastern Market and the Georgetown public library. The people of this city care deeply about its history. They grieve when the artifacts of that history are lost, whether they are documents, photographs, paintings, or other irreplaceable symbols of our past.

Equally vulnerable are the stories such artifacts represent. There are countless stories, all different, some of them in conflict with one another. They are our heritage. Government has an obligation to support efforts to preserve them.

That is why so many states and cities throughout the nation allocate substantial tax dollars to support the preservation of history. They fund cultural programming, archives, historic preservation efforts, school programs, traveling exhibits, oral history projects, publications and more.

Last year, 25 states had annual history budgets of \$8 million or more. And it's not just big states. States with populations similar to the District's make substantial investments in their histories. Delaware budgeted \$6.7 million this year; in North Dakota, the figure was \$5.8 million.

Few places in the nation have the amount of history that Washington has. Yet the District's fiscal 2007 budget included only \$2 million for its historical legacy. Only three states invest less.

So what does the Historical Society of Washington do that warrants taxpayer support?

- It educates school children and District residents about the history of our city.
- It serves as a repository of hundreds of historic documents, more than a million images, and scores of maps that tell the city's stories. It is a resource for journalists, activists, historians, tourists and others interested in exploring the city.
- It is a forum for discussion and debate about what is beautiful in our city, and what is not.

The Historical Society's Kiplinger Library, recognized as one of the city's finest for resources for researching District history, is free and open to the public. Our Small / Alper gallery provides space for the sharing of treasures from our collections with the public. For 110 years, the Society's biannual journal, *Washington History*, has been the only publication devoted exclusively to the history of Washington as both hometown and nation's capital.

The Society's headquarters, the magnificent Carnegie Library building at Mount Vernon Square, has its own historic pedigree. Today, it is a central place that can bring people together to celebrate what's unique to our city. Recent events at the Carnegie have celebrated the renovation of the historic Howard Theater and marked the 145<sup>th</sup> anniversary of District Emancipation Day.

The Society is looking to the future as well, positioning itself to play an ever more vital role in the city. It is creating programming to make the Carnegie a place where both Washingtonians and visitors to our city come to learn, debate, and participate in the life of the District.

There is an important dollars-and-cents reason for making the Carnegie a destination not just for residents but for tourists as well. The competition among cities for tourism dollars is intense. The winners tend to be cities with the best cultural amenities. While Washington has an abundance of national attractions, local history can be an important economic engine as well. In this respect, Washington is indeed a very wealthy city. We should not squander that wealth.

Just as our city has changed over time, so has the Historical Society of Washington. Under new leadership and with a new direction, the society is expanding to be inclusive of all the city's stories. It celebrates all of the District's history – the history being made by today's council, the history that has been made by council member Barry himself.

One of the lessons of the fires at Eastern Market and the Georgetown library was just how valuable, and vulnerable, our historical resources are. So many of the city's stories have not yet been explored. So many stories have not been shared among Washington's diverse communities. If we do not act, they could be lost forever.

No city that fails to honor, protect, and share its heritage can be great. In the District, the task is immense and pressing. It is a labor that needs the commitment, ingenuity and resources that the Historical Society of Washington brings. It is worthy of solid and sustained support from the District government. It is required if we are indeed to be a great city.

**Bell Clement**  
**Executive Director**  
**The Historical Society of Washington, D.C.**