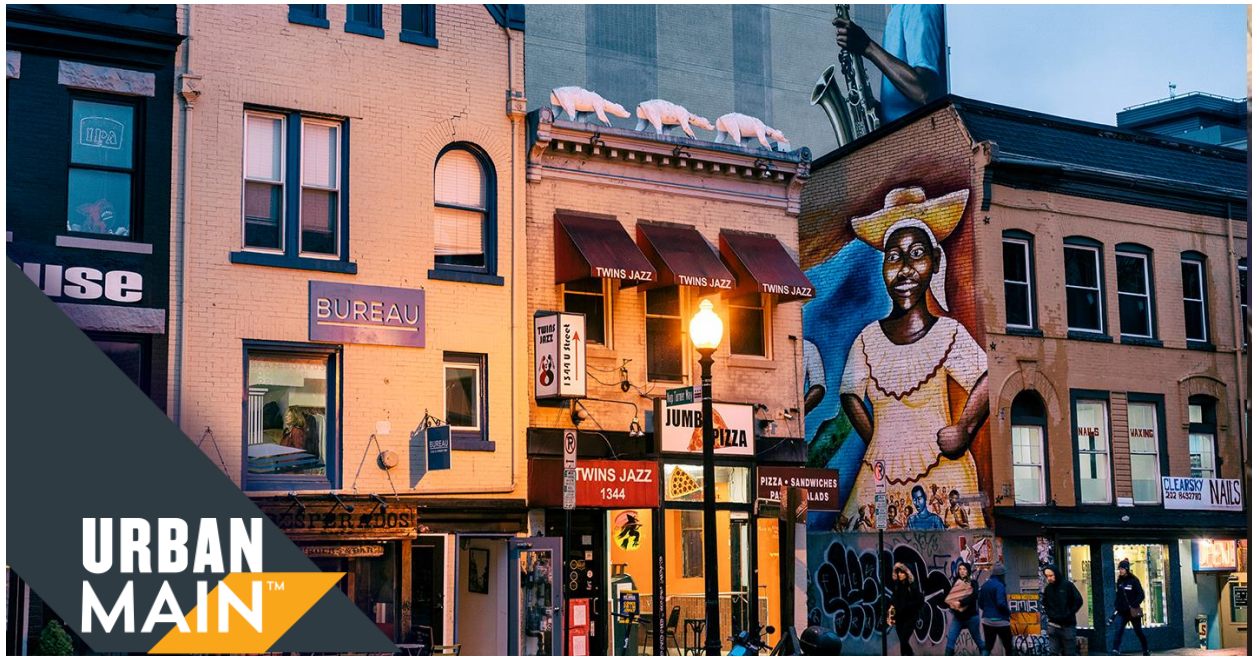


# U Street: The 'Black Broadway' of D.C.



*Credit: Mike Maguire*

## The History of U Street

Anchored by the famed Howard University, the U Street District served as the economic, cultural, and spiritual center for African Americans during the height of the Jim Crow era. Nicknamed “Black Broadway,” U Street was home to over 200 black-owned businesses patronized solely by African Americans. Industrial Bank, the city’s oldest black-owned bank, provided opportunities for African American home ownership and capital to open businesses. Black Washingtonians sent their kids to day camp at Twelfth Street Young Men’s Christian Association (YMCA), the country’s first African American YMCA, they worshiped together in neighborhood churches, and launched a movement against segregation at U Street’s various gathering places.

Like many Black Wall Streets, U Street transformed at night. The Hollywood, Crystal Caverns (later renamed Bohemian Caverns), Club Bali and more [featured entertainment greats](#) like Pearl Bailey, Cab Calloway and Sarah Vaughn. U Street served as the prominent symbol for black culture and sophistication amid the racial and political tensions of the time. African American activists, intellectuals, politicians, artists, lawyers, and businessmen would purposefully stop in Washington, DC to visit the U Street corridor to bask in black excellence.\*

## Business Spotlight: Ben’s Chili Bowl

Over the 62 years [Ben’s Chili Bowl](#) has served up its namesake chili to locals, tourists, celebrities, and everyone in between, it has become been an institution on the U St. corridor. According to Ben’s Chili Bowl’s official historian and chairman of the Ben’s Chili Bowl

Foundation, Dr. Bernard Demczuk, Ben and Virginia Ali started Ben's Chili Bowl in 1958. African American-owned businesses thrived on U St. around that time, but after the 1968 riots that partially destroyed many storefronts, along with the area's crack epidemic and crime of the 1970s, businesses suffered.

Demczuk says that Ben's "held on by the skin of their teeth," and their grit and hard work helped them to survive, as well as the community's support of the black business that remained. U St. also saw a resurgence in the 90s that brought more customers back to U St., although only eight African American-owned businesses remain on U St. today. Family has been key to the restaurant's continued success,

according to Demczuk. Ben and Virginia's three sons grew up working at the restaurant, and despite going away to college, they all felt compelled to come back and work at the family business. "They could have gone on a different route, but they came back because of family, community, and the fun aspect of this. The key was that the business was open to them," Demczuk said.



*Courtesy of Ben's Chili Bowl*

The restaurant's celebration and preservation of its history and culture also keeps customers coming back. There are seven large murals in and around the store, along with photos of famous customers who've eaten at the restaurant, including everyone from Barack Obama to Malcom X. As the restaurant's historian, Demczuk works to preserve and celebrate the restaurant's history and the corridor's black culture. He gives free lessons on the history of the restaurant, Black Broadway, and black history and culture in the restaurant every week. Ben's Chili bowl has expanded to five other locations in the DC area, but Demczuk says they've tried to incorporate the restaurant's heritage everywhere they go.

### **Business Spotlight: Signature Image Salon**

[Signature Image Salon](#) focuses on haircuts and treatments for a diverse clientele ranging from college students to DC business executives. Since Vonetta Dumas started the salon in 2011, she noticed an influx of big box stores and chains made it harder for small businesses to survive on U St. Dumas said that over the past six years, 36 minority and African American-owned businesses have closed on one block alone. Dumas credits her business' success to quality services, new marketing strategies, and building strong relationships in the community.

Dumas has recognized that the success of her own business and others in the corridor are intertwined, and she has built a strong network of referrals among small business owners. Her block created its own social media page, website, commercial, and flyer to build relationships and promote local businesses. Dumas says she'll regularly refer her clients to grab dinner at a restaurant on the block or get their nails done across the street after a haircut, and those businesses will refer clients to her. Signature Image Salon and other businesses exchange flyers and business cards to display in their storefronts, as well.

Dumas has managed to build up a loyal customer base by hosting creative in-store events and employing new marketing strategies. For example, the salon recently hosted a Valentine's Day event to pamper female small business owners in the area. Dumas has also built a strong social media presence and runs a variety of promotions, including gifts with purchase, deals for college students and seniors, client referral programs, and birthday promotions. The salon offers special customer service touches to create an upscale experience in the salon, like free wifi, executive services to clients who can only get hair done before work or during lunch, massages, free mini facials, and makeup retouches.



*Courtesy of Signature Image Salon*

\* Source: Demczuk, B. Ph.D., *U Street and The Black Mecca: Be Not Forgotten, Be Not Denied*.

*UrbanMain has been working with [District Bridges](#), [Shaw Main Streets](#), and [DC Main Streets](#) to support small business development in the U St. corridor.*

### ***About District Bridges***

*District Bridges works to enrich neighborhood vitality by bridging community engagement and economic development opportunities so residents, businesses and organizations can thrive. This is accomplished by serving as an umbrella organization for several Main Street programs. The U Street Main street supports community-based economic development in the historic U Street "Black Broadway" corridor through grants, technical assistance, and consistent community engagement. Sheika Reid enthusiastically began as the Program Manager in January of 2020.*