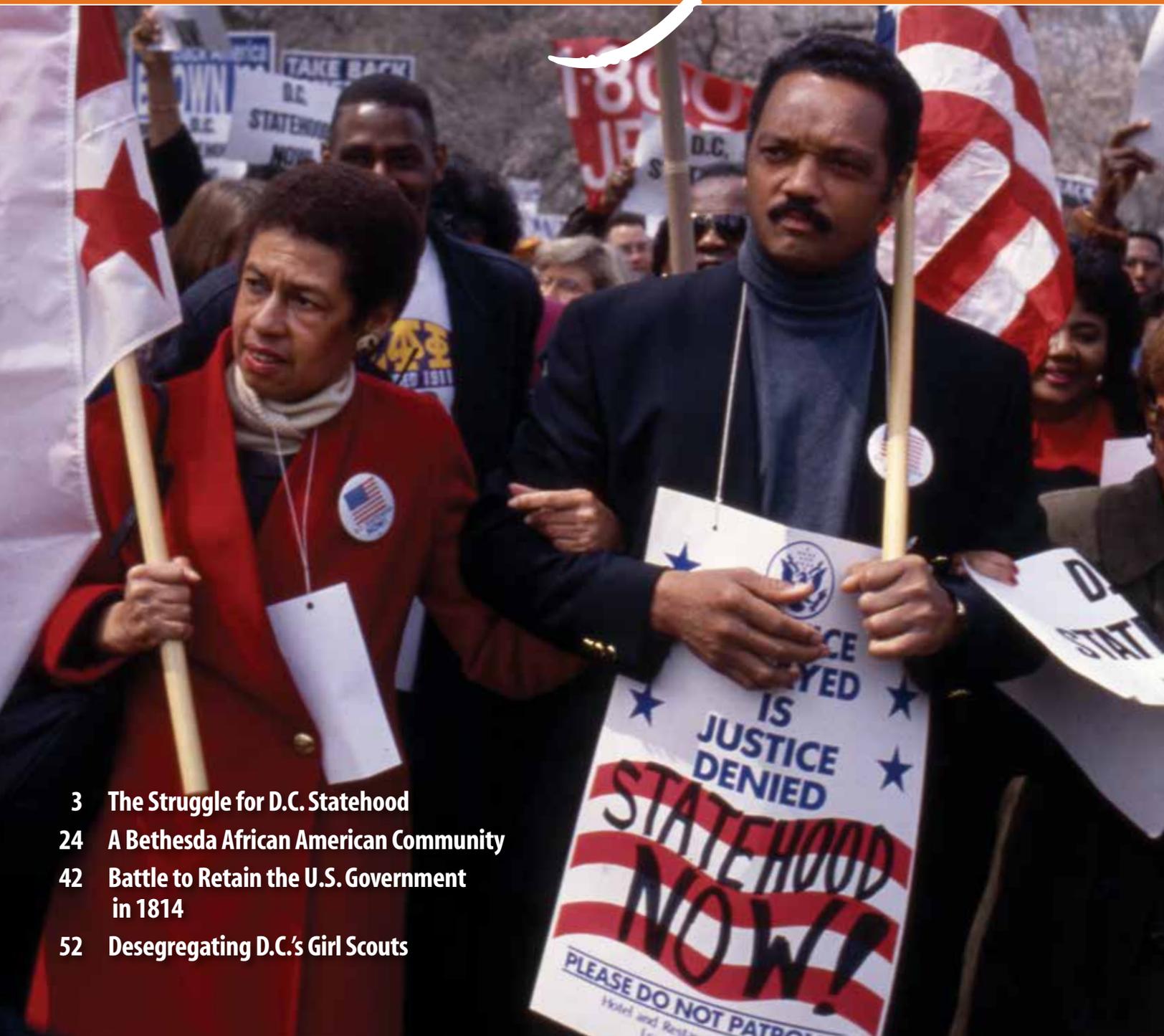


Washington

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The Historical Society is headquartered in the landmark Carnegie Library building at Mount Vernon Square in downtown Washington. During the Carnegie Library's restoration, operations and research services are taking place at the Newseum, 555 Pennsylvania Avenue NW. The public is invited to explore the research collections at the Interim Reading Room, view exhibitions, and attend public programs.

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Reviews

Alexander Robey Shepherd: The Man Who Built the Nation's Capital

By John P. Richardson (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2016), 249 pp., illus., index, cloth, \$29.95

REVIEWED BY CHRIS MYERS ASCH

Alexander Shepherd was the most influential and polarizing white public figure in Washington history. Lauded as “the man who built the nation’s capital” and condemned as a corrupt “boss” who cost D.C. residents the ballot, Shepherd remains a controversial figure, in his own time and in ours. In *Alexander Robey Shepherd*, author John Richardson explores the life of this compelling and complicated man, offering readers a detailed and fair biography that will give supporters and critics alike plenty of ammunition in the ongoing struggle to define Shepherd’s legacy.

A career intelligence officer for the U.S. government, Richardson spent 30 years researching Shepherd, immersing himself in Shepherd’s papers and contemporary newspapers and magazines. The author charts Shepherd’s rise to the height of municipal power in the early 1870s, carefully documents his turbulent, three-year reign at the Board of Public Works, and then follows the disgraced businessman to the canyons of northern Mexico—Richardson himself ventured there to research Shepherd’s desperate attempts to reverse his economic fortunes. The result is a labor of love that fleshes out a man who wielded outsized influence on the city but has never before been the subject of a serious biography.

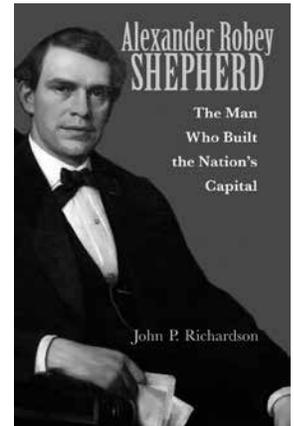
Born to a slaveholding family in Southwest Washington in 1835, Shepherd found his niche in the booming construction business of 1850s Washington and became a wealthy man. He served briefly in D.C.’s militia, the National Rifles, at the beginning of the Civil War and won a seat on the city’s Common Council in mid-1861. Ambitious and driven, he immediately began promoting the cause that would define his political career: economic development and physical “improvements” that would, he emphasized, “make this metropolis worthy [of] the hallowed name it bears.”

After the war, which left the city in terrible condition, Shepherd promoted economic develop-

ment through both the city’s largest newspaper, the *Evening Star*, which he partly owned, and the Washington Board of Trade, which he co-founded in October 1865. With support from businessmen, bankers, and real estate developers, Shepherd helped encourage Congress to create a territorial government for the District in 1871 in part to provide a stable financial base for restoring and improving the city. Shepherd was tapped to lead the new government’s Board of Public Works, which he turned into an engine of taxpayer-funded development that indeed transformed the nation’s capital.

Bolstered by unwavering support from President U.S. Grant, Shepherd hired laborers to build more than 150 miles of city streets, 120 miles of sewers, and 200 miles of sidewalks. City workers planted more than 60,000 trees, filled in the disgusting city canal, and razed the crumbling Northern Liberties Market. He embraced “the law of necessity,” which, Richardson writes, “may have become a blanket rationale for doing whatever he thought was necessary at the time to achieve his development objective.”

Shepherd’s ambitious agenda and debt-fueled spending ran afoul of wealthy, white conservatives in the city, particularly Democrats and “old citizens” such as W.W. Corcoran. For nearly two years, Shepherd stayed a step ahead of his critics, but financial realities ultimately caught up with him. By early 1873, the city government was nearly broke, and that September, just days after Shepherd was appointed territorial governor, the Panic of 1873 hit. As unpaid bills piled up, Congress investigated Shepherd and his allies. Though nothing suggested that Shepherd personally profited from corrupt dealings, the investigation highlighted the extent to which his relentless push to “improve” the city led to conflicts of interests,



Washington History editor *Chris Myers Asch* is co-author, with *George Derek Musgrove*, of *Chocolate City: A History of Race and Democracy in the Nation's Capital*, 2017.

influence peddling, no-bid contracts, and cost overruns. Congress, supported by local Democrats who embraced the opportunity to disenfranchise African American voters, promptly stripped the District of all self-government, and Shepherd suddenly found himself out of power and almost bankrupt.

Following his ignominious fall, Shepherd moved with his wife and seven children to Batopilas, an almost inaccessible village in the state of Chihuahua, Mexico, where he hoped to make a fortune in silver mining. Driven by a desire to prove his critics wrong, he spent his final 22 years leading “a life of labor and extreme simplicity,” battling harsh weather, difficult living conditions, and fluctuating economic trends before succumbing to appendicitis in 1902. A substantial portion of Richardson’s book covers this often-neglected period of Shepherd’s life.

Richardson does not shy away from examining Shepherd’s many shortcomings, particularly in terms of race—Shepherd opposed emancipation and black suffrage, and he generated intense opposition from many local black leaders. But the author offers a largely sympathetic (if not always persuasive) portrait of Shepherd, reminding readers repeatedly to understand the context in which he lived and worked.

One area that he does not explore in sufficient depth, however, is Shepherd’s anti-democratic view of governance. Embracing a restricted definition of democracy, Shepherd believed that property owners alone should shoulder the responsibilities of leadership—allowing the poor to rule would give them license to tax and spend other people’s money, in his view. He played a leading role in the counter-revolution that toppled the interracial democracy that flowered briefly in Washington during Reconstruction, and his profligacy gave Congress an excuse to disenfranchise all District residents in 1874. That is why Mayor Marion Barry ordered his statue removed from in front of the District Building in 1979, an incident Richardson mentions but does not adequately explain.

The controversy surrounding Shepherd’s legacy can be reduced to a single question: Do the ends justify the means? Richardson concludes that the physical development that Washington experienced during Shepherd’s leadership of the Board of Public Works did indeed justify the exorbitant financial costs, the questionable business practices, and the loss of self-government. The author essentially accepts Shepherd’s own defense of his methods: “If it had not been done in this way and in this

short time, the probability is it would never have been done.”

Yet it is a tribute to Richardson’s careful research and balanced narrative that many readers may disagree with his assessments of this fascinating but flawed man.

Just Another Southern Town: Mary Church Terrell and the Struggle for Racial Justice in the Nation’s Capital

By Joan Quigley (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 368 pp., index, cloth, \$29.95

REVIEWED BY TIKIA K. HAMILTON

For much of its history, Washington has remained trapped between two worlds symbolized by the progressive reforms of the Reconstruction era and subsequent regressive ordinances associated with segregation. While many federally owned spaces remained open to black residents before 1954, other public places, including local eateries, maintained a strict policy of segregation. Enter Mary Church Terrell, a long-time Washingtonian whose political connections included a succession of U.S. presidents from Theodore Roosevelt to Dwight Eisenhower. As Joan Quigley highlights in *Just Another Southern Town: Mary Church Terrell and the Struggle for Racial Justice in the Nation’s Capital*, Terrell’s influence was crucial. In 1950 Terrell helped launch a lawsuit against a well-known Washington restaurant. As a result, Quigley argues, Terrell helped bring about the demise of legal segregation in Washington and elsewhere.

Composed with meticulous detail and vivid prose, *Just Another Southern Town* is accessible to a wide range of readers seeking to learn more about the political landscape that spanned the life of a civil rights activist who remains well-known to many historians, but who has been largely disregarded by the broader public. The first section of the book explores Terrell’s early life, her experience at Oberlin College in the 1880s, and her seemingly tumultuous marriage to Harvard graduate and future judge, Robert H. Terrell, whom she reluctantly married despite fears that family life would diminish her professional ambitions. Juggling marriage and two children, in 1896 Terrell

Tikia K. Hamilton is a National Academy of Education Spencer Postdoctoral Fellow and author of *Making a “Model” System: Race, Education and Politics in the Nation’s Capital* (forthcoming).