

Ben's Chili Bowl's 65th is a Birthday For All DC

A short history of Black DC and Ben's Chili Bowl 2023



Ben's Chili Bowl Foundation
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On August 22, 2023 Ben's Chili Bowl will turn 65 years young. But it's not just a birthday for Ben's. It's a celebration of DC's African American history, culture and character. It's a celebration of our city's resilience.

DC's people have a long history of bouncing back from hard times. Our Black community is front and center in this birthday story and Ben's is a perfect case study - a study in our quest of freedom and it's ongoing re-definition.

From the 1770s, DC's Black population struggled to free themselves from bondage in the slave states of Virginia and Maryland whose land created the enslaved District of Columbia in 1791. Each decade thereafter, more Black Americans struggled to win freedom. They did.

In 1800, 20% of Black Americans in DC were free. By 1830, 50%. By the 1850s, DC was a precarious "safe-haven" for run-away enslaved people hiding in free Black communities in Georgetown, Foggy Bottom and Southwest from slave-catchers and kidnappers as far away as Georgia. By 1860s, DC had become 90% free as more freedom led to more leadership of

African Americans pushing to abolish slavery. Their loud voices and earnest organizing skills convinced a radical Republican Congress to abolish slavery in DC on April 16, 1862 - nine months before Lincoln's reluctant Emancipation Proclamation.

DC's Black men fought and died in the Civil War. They are now honored on U Street at the African American Civil War Memorial and Museum. In 1867, Black men here became the first Black people in America to vote while Howard University opened its doors to newly emancipated Black people the same year. A year later, Barry Farm, in Anacostia, became America's largest Freedmen Village settled by those fleeing a slave South during the Civil War. Over 25,000 Black people flooded into DC where Black churches, schools, businesses, social venues and communities gave people of African descent a semblance of America's ideal equal justice under law. DC was on its way to becoming a "city of magnificent intentions" and becoming chocolate in color, socially sweet, culturally charismatic and politically potent.

Fast forward 150 years, DC is no longer *Chocolate City*, a moniker from a song by George Clinton of Parliament-Funkadelic in 1971. Mr. Clinton, AKA, the Godfather of Funk, reveled in DC being a 75% Black city where Black excellence and progress was the envy of people of African descent worldwide. Anchored by Howard University, DC produced America's "best and brightest" since the 1880s during the rise of oppressive Black Codes, convict-lease system, lynching and Jim Crow in every southern state. DC resisted harsh Jim Crow laws.

When Ph.D.s, M.D.s, D.D.s, D.D.S.s, J.D.s and men and women of Arts & Letters and business acumen graduated from Howard during the *nadir period* of the Black American experience (1896-1930s), that is, Jim Crow suppression, these graduates did not return to the violent South from whence they came. They stayed in DC to cultivate their new talents building the *Black Mecca* of America - Washington, DC.



Anna Julia Cooper

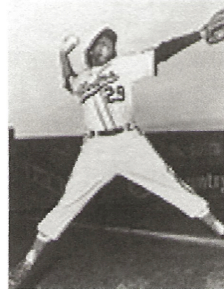


Mary Church Terrell

In 1910, the Howard Theatre opened at 7th & T, NW where the phrase *Chocolate City* was coined. By the 1930s, DC emerged as the premier city for Black excellence. The 1940s brought five major theaters up and down the U Street Corridor now known as America's *Black Broadway*, a phrase coined by Pearl Bailey at the Casbah Club, now Ben's Next Door. Twelve beauty salons and barber shops lined U Street. Over 200 Black businesses bustled in the Shaw-Cardozo-LaDroit Park area. The Black dollar circulated and stayed in the segregated Black community. Wealth and community building followed. *The Mecca* rising.

Ben's Chili Bowl established itself in 1958 on U Street. A Howard University dental student, Ben Ali, and his new wife Virginia, a teller at the Black-owned Industrial Bank just two blocks

away, opened Ben's on August 22. A successful Black working and professional class had disposable income enough to finance large churches, schools and vibrant cultural venues including Griffith Stadium where Josh Gibson hit baseballs out of the park onto Georgia Avenue bouncing off Black owned cars making him the all-time home run hitter ever - 862. Barry Bonds is #2 with 762. Hank Aaron #3 at 755.



Mamie "Peanut" Johnson



Josh Gibson

DC was a rich, deep, delicious chocolate, indeed. Scholarly law students and Howard lawyers desegregated schools and lunch-counters (Thurgood Marshall, Franklin Reeves and Mary Church Terrell); medical doctors invented life-saving medicines like plasma (Dr. Charles Drew), scientists refined cell biology (Dr. Ernest Everett Just) and philosophers, entertainers, educators and poets fueled the Harlem Renaissance (Georgia Douglas Johnson, Duke Ellington, Anna Julia Cooper, Alain Locke, Jessie Redmond Fauset and Zora Neale Hurston). The Apollo Theater in Harlem opened in 1932, twenty-two years after the Howard, and capitalized on "Amateur Night" started at the Howard in the 19teens. Most of Harlem's greats came from U Street, Howard University or the Shaw community. Before there was the Harlem Renaissance, it was the DC Renaissance that gave birth to that dynamic community north of Central Park.

But not only did the Black intelligentsia build the *Mecca*. Laborers, line cooks, lower and middle-grade government workers, nurses, clerks, choir members, teachers, postal employees, domestics and shop keepers and street sweepers, all contributed to a vibrant, highly diverse DC Black community where a Howard professor lived next to a construction worker conversing



Postal Employees a result of the Great Migration

freely about arts, culture, sports and the ongoing drama in civil rights struggles. Their diverse colors matched their diverse interests and points of view with a healthy appreciation that they were all equal in the eyes of Jim Crow. Barber shops, beauty salons, bar stools, baseball stadiums and Bible studies hummed with humor and philosophical musings. They built community, indeed.

By 1955, DC became the first major American-city majority Black. Our city was an inviting destination for African Americans fleeing a hostile South during the Great Migration. By 1960, we became the first major American-city voting majority Black. There was no stopping Black progress by the early 1960s when civil rights leaders in The Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and The Southern Christian Leader Conference (SCLC) had their offices across the street from Ben's Chili Bowl and down the street, respectively. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. established his Poor People's Campaign headquarters around the corner from Ben's at 14th & T. Ben's had already showed its commitment to building community by feeding organizers of the 1963 March on Washington, the civil rights movement through the 60s and the Poor People's Campaign in 1968. But then tragedy struck on April 4. The King of Peace was assassinated. All *Hades* broke loose. Ben's was the only business permitted to stay open during four days of federally imposed curfew because community leaders and government officials jointly needed a place to eat, meet, exhale, strategize and quell the rebellion.

Fire, anger and death were loosened on America's *Black Mecca*. Blocks were burned out along 14th, 7th, U Street, NW and H St., NE. Darkness fell on the lights of *Black Broadway*. It took years to clean up the ugly, smelly, charred mess. People and businesses fled. Few ventured on U Street thereafter. As if to pour salt on this open wound, drugs, crime and violence followed in the 80s. It was dark and dangerous just to walk down the street. But the late 80s proved even more devastating. Metro construction opened a 60 foot canyon along U Street for five long, dusty, dirty years. One could not even walk down U Street, literally. You had to enter Ben's from the back alley. Still it stayed open. Still it endured.

Those once bustling Black businesses became shuttered. By mid-1990s, only five Black businesses survived the 1968 rebellion: The Prince Hall Black Masons, Industrial Bank, Lee's Florist & Card Shop, The Howard Theatre (sporadically) and Ben's. They stayed open heroically. They survived. Now they thrive. Today, those everyday-people who stayed and persevered, they struggled to re-build the *Mecca*. Honor them. Let us keep them here!

A wise person once said, "The only thing permanent is change". Change is, paradoxically, our constant friend.

So here we are, 65 years later. Chocolate City has become Chocolate-Vanilla Swirl, soon becoming Mocha-Melt.

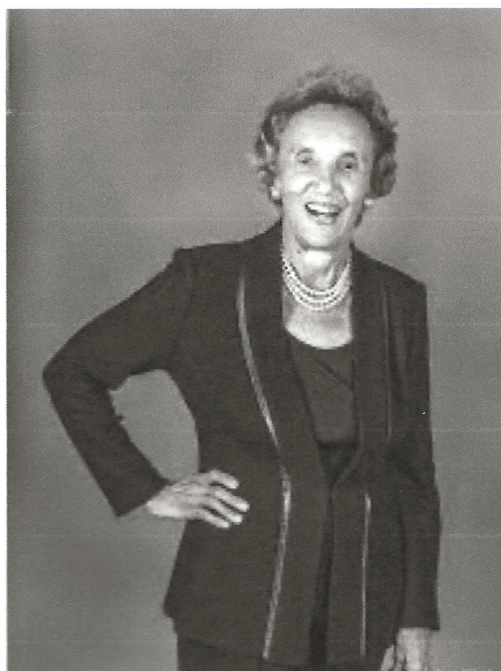
But Chuck Brown Way and Duke Ellington's statue sing a silver note at 7th & T, NW - ground zero for Black DC where atop the Howard Theatre Louis Armstrong blows his cornet speaking directly to God. Ben's hums as a destination. Activists in mayoral campaigns, to Jesse Jackson for President '84 & '88, to Black Lives Matter, environmentalists, the Funk Parade and #Me2 leaders, use Ben's as a meeting and organizing space. Even our Metropolitan Police Department uses Ben's as a training site for its recruits teaching them about the history of policing in DC, where U Street was a contentious space as police brutality was being countered by a young upstart named Marion Barry in 1969. U Street is back. We remember.

It took enormous courage, faith and character to survive slavery, the Back Codes, Jim Crow, lynching, mass-incarceration, micro and macro aggressions in a White supremacist, racist America over the last 232 years in our Nation's Capital. But still it rises. This is DC history, culture and its proud sense of resilience. This is our character. Today, our history is on brick walls along U Street for the world to see in murals painted by young hip artists. Take a stroll down U Street from 5th to 15th marveling at our resilience. Our story is spray-painted on the walls and alleys. Graffiti not. Gratitude yes.

The Bowl is run by the Ben Ali family, led by its matriarch Virginia Ali, and today operated and owned by her three sons, Haidar, Kamal and Nizam and their wives and children. They continue the tradition of an eatery open to all equally with the motto of "Food, family, friends and fun." Ben's is more than a hot dog joint. The family extends itself to the family of the DC community, and indeed, the community of humanity. Everyone is welcomed to Ben's by Virginia Ali's philosophy opening her doors to all peoples needing a safe place and space to meet, eat, talk, communicate, laugh, be happy, dance to a soulful jukebox (the only remaining jukebox on U Street) and exhale from the worries of the outside world. From homeless people to Members of Congress, from a construction worker to a Howard professor, from any color, creed, ethnicity and class, you are welcome at Ben's. The Ben Ali family is a symbol of Black excellence, courage, resiliency and love, just like the history of their city.

Celebrating Ben's on August 22 is not simply saying happy birthday Ben's. It is saying "thank you" to those businesses, people, tears, smiles and struggles along U Street in the Shaw, Cardozo and LaDroit Park communities full of proud churches, Victorian homes and fine schools who held firm to the idea of Black excellence. **August 22** is also, prophetically, the birthday of **The Howard Theatre** and the indomitable **Chuck Brown**. **All the money we raise at our 65th Anniversary event goes the Ben's Foundation to support community groups in DC.** Please donate at www.benschilibowfoundation.org.

Happy birthday Ben's and "thanks" *Black Mecca* of America. Not gone. Not forgotten. Happy 90th birthday to Virginia Ali on December 17, 2023. You are our history.



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