

Scenes from the Past...



Photos, above and at left—courtesy, Martin Luther King Memorial Library, Washingtoniana Division.

The Lucy D. Slowe Hall, above, has not changed significantly in appearance since its original construction in 1942.

The building was photographed by the Office of War Information in 1943, when these occupants, at left, were shown enjoying quiet time in the streamlined lobby.

Located in LeDroit Park on the edge of Howard University, the Lucy D. Slowe Hall at 3rd and U Streets, NW, was built in 1942 in a stripped-down Art Moderne architectural style. Both the building and who it is named after yield an interesting insight into the role of African-American women in Washington just before and during World War II.

The building was built at a cost of \$760,000, and officially opened in December of 1942 for the exclusive use of housing African-American government workers pouring into what was then a segregated city and in desperate need of affordable housing. At that time, Washington was experiencing a surge in population, mostly with women arriving to answer the call of the government needing to fill tens of thousands of positions to aid the war effort. Most African-American women, however, were not allowed to room in the city's many temporary housing blocks built on the Mall, which were reserved for white workers only.

When it was built, Slowe Hall was designed to accommodate 277 single rooms, which rented for \$7 per week, and 22 double rooms, which rented for between \$6 and \$6.50 per week. One bathroom was provided for every four rooms, along with a large lounge, several card rooms, a cafeteria, and a snack bar on the ground floor. It was managed by W. Spurgeon Burke upon its opening.

Controversy erupted a year later, however, when it was discovered that Slowe Hall was only 50 percent occupied, despite the crowded conditions and long waiting lists of many of the city's other rooming facilities. It turns out that only 15 percent of the 160 occupants in January of 1943

had been referred to the Slowe by the government agencies that had hired them. Most learned of the accommodations by way of the Traveler's Aid booth at Union Station, or from black taxi drivers.

Girls that were eligible for living at Slowe Hall had to be in Washington for less than a year prior to signing a lease or other agreement for government-constructed living quarters. It was noted in the *Defense Housing News* in January of 1943 that Maj. Ina MacFadden was a resident, the only Washington recruiting officer for the African-American contingent of the Women's Auxiliary



Photos above—courtesy, Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division.

Army Corp's (WAACS), an enlisted company of women, both black and white, whose ranks eventually numbered over 150,000 by the war's end.

The building had been named after Lucy Diggs Slowe, a pioneer black woman educator at Howard University who had died an untimely death in 1937. She had been born in 1885 in Berryville, Virginia, the daughter of hotel proprietor Henry Slowe and his wife Fannie. Following her mother's death in 1890, Lucy went to live with an aunt's family that eventually moved to Baltimore. She entered Howard University in 1904, the first graduate from the Baltimore Colored High School ever to do so. She worked as a clerk in Washington during her tenure there, although she continued to commute to and from Baltimore for her studies.

Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, the first African-American Greek letter sorority, was founded on January 15, 1908 at Howard University. Slowe was one of 16 women who met in Minor Hall and founded the sorority with a common purpose to "Cultivate and encourage high scholastic and ethical standards, to promote unity and friendship, to study and help alleviate problems concerning girls and women, to maintain a progressive interest in college life, and to be of service to all mankind."

Her assignment was to prepare the first draft of the sorority's constitution. Slowe performed graduate work at Columbia University, from which she received a Master's degree in 1915. From 1915 to 1919, she taught at Armstrong High School in Washington, and served one year as Dean of Girls. In 1917, she won the singles title at the first American Tennis Association (ATA) national tournament, becoming the first African American woman to do so.

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Building manager W. Spurgeon Burke is shown in his office, above right, while girls are seen playing cards in one of the several game rooms, above left. Two government war workers, Miss Ivy L. Kelsa of Rochester, New York (reclining), and Miss Mercedes A. Brooks of Saint Louis, Missouri, are shown in the double room at the Hall, above center. These photographs were taken by the Office of War Information staff in 1943.

Lucy D. Slowe. photo—courtesy, Howard University Dept. of Residence Life

RESERVATIONS RECOMMENDED

By Alexandra Greeley*

PESTO Pasted

For weeks, a friend urged me to have dinner at Pesto, the comely Italian newcomer to upper Connecticut that has replaced the charming if slightly odd Mrs. Simpson's restaurant. It's one thing to be a royal watcher, but something quite different to dedicate an entire restaurant's décor to the resolute Wallis Simpson of King Edward VIII's fame. Gone and almost forgotten, Mrs. Simpson's has metamorphosed into something quite different, though wouldn't you know it—one or two pictures of her still remain.

So recently, a group of us met in the now-Italianized quarters that have become Pesto, and found that, somehow, this restaurant has not yet caught on, though it's been in place for about a year. Could be that Mrs. Simpson's ran beneath the city's culinary radar anyway, so what happens here is of little consequence. On the other hand, Pesto is one of those rare places that you wish would be filled with jovial patrons, toasting each other and ordering up large plates of tiramisu.

The truth of Pesto falls somewhere in between anonymity and overcrowded. Although it was a Monday night, never the best for attracting crowds as the work week begins, Pesto was essentially empty. Well, almost—a group of businessmen had taken over the back dining room for a pre-dinner meeting, and they exited as we sat down. And except for a young couple who dropped in mid-meal, we were alone.

Crowded or empty, I suspect the service here would remain steadfast and courteous, so that can't be faulted. Perhaps the menu lacks appeal. It certainly is minimal enough to limit hungry patrons' appetites: a few antipasti, a few pastas, and a few entrées make up the sum total of edibles here. And of the entrées, at least three—the grilled Atlantic salmon, the breast of chicken with red peppers, and a grilled Angus steak—don't necessarily summon up thoughts of Tuscany. These could be anywhere foods. Indeed, my braised lamb shank, or *stinco di agnello brasato*, with a mountain of orzo lacked depth of flavor—where's the garlic??—and with its diminutive size, seemed that there was more orzo than meat.

But the antipasti and pastas are a different matter altogether. With these, the kitchen steps forth in a blaze of glory, doing itself proud with such starters as thin strips of cooked eggplant tucked around a filling of prosciutto, gorgonzola and tomato. This dish is simple and self-assured—how can anyone go wrong with such a combination anyway? The cooks also experimented with an extravagant offering of wild boar sausages with spinach and balsamic vinegar, a lusty pairing we exclaimed over. But why, then, insert on the menu a classic Caesar salad, an overblown Californian creation that has really seen its day? As for pastas, at least two stood out for their ingenuity: the farfalle with prosciutto and mushroom sauce and the spinach and ricotta ravioli with a tomato and basil pesto. But another puzzle: Why something so unimaginative as shells with meat sauce—unless, of course, the meat was lamb, wild boar, or roast goose?

That management has big ideas stands out when you hear that the owner has hired a pastry chef, a sure clue that someone intends to delight and impress. Because it's Italy's classic dessert, we opted for the pastry chef's version of tiramisu, which appeared in a small glass compote and looked like more froth than substance. Of course, one dessert shared five ways can't go too far, so I may have missed a key element. I was hoping for a wedge of sponge cake tucked under a tower of whipped mascarpone instead.

But for Pesto, it is still relatively early days, and the staff clearly cares about the product. Although the menu stays the same, except for daily specials, I'd be willing to return to sample more of the appetizers and pastas. □

Pesto, 2915 Conn. Ave.; 332-8300. Open for dinner daily. Entrées: \$17-\$19.

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SCENES

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In September 1919, she was asked to organize the first junior high school in the District of Columbia by the Board of Education. She was appointed principal of this school, Shaw Junior School, and served in that position until June 1922, when she became the Dean of Women at Howard University, a position she held until her death in 1937.

Kathryn Nemeth Tuttle, Ph.D., included an interesting short biography of Slowe in her conference paper, "The Historical Perspective of Women Administrators in Higher Education," presented at a symposium held earlier this year at the University of Kansas. Dr. Tuttle wrote that Dean Slowe "worked untiringly to professionalize the dean of women position at historically black colleges and founded the National Association of Deans of Women in Negro Schools in 1929. [However], "sexual discrimination clearly framed her turbulent relationship with Howard President Mordecai Johnson, and some charged, to

her untimely death. . . . Slowe endured the double discrimination of gender and race, so that even within the presumably supportive environment of her fellow deans of women, she faced humiliation when her meetings were held in segregated hotels. And even within an African-American college, her assertion of authority on behalf of women students was repudiated by the college's first black president."

Slowe also became the first president of the National Association of College Women (NACW), dedicated to raising the standards in colleges for black women. Sadly, she died of kidney disease at age 52 on October 21, 1937.

The Lucy D. Slowe Hall is now part of the Howard University campus, housing upper classmen. In addition to the Slowe Hall, an elementary school at 14th and Jackson Street, NE, is also named in her honor.

—Paul Kelsey Williams
Historic Preservation Specialist
Kelsey & Associates, Washington, DC

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