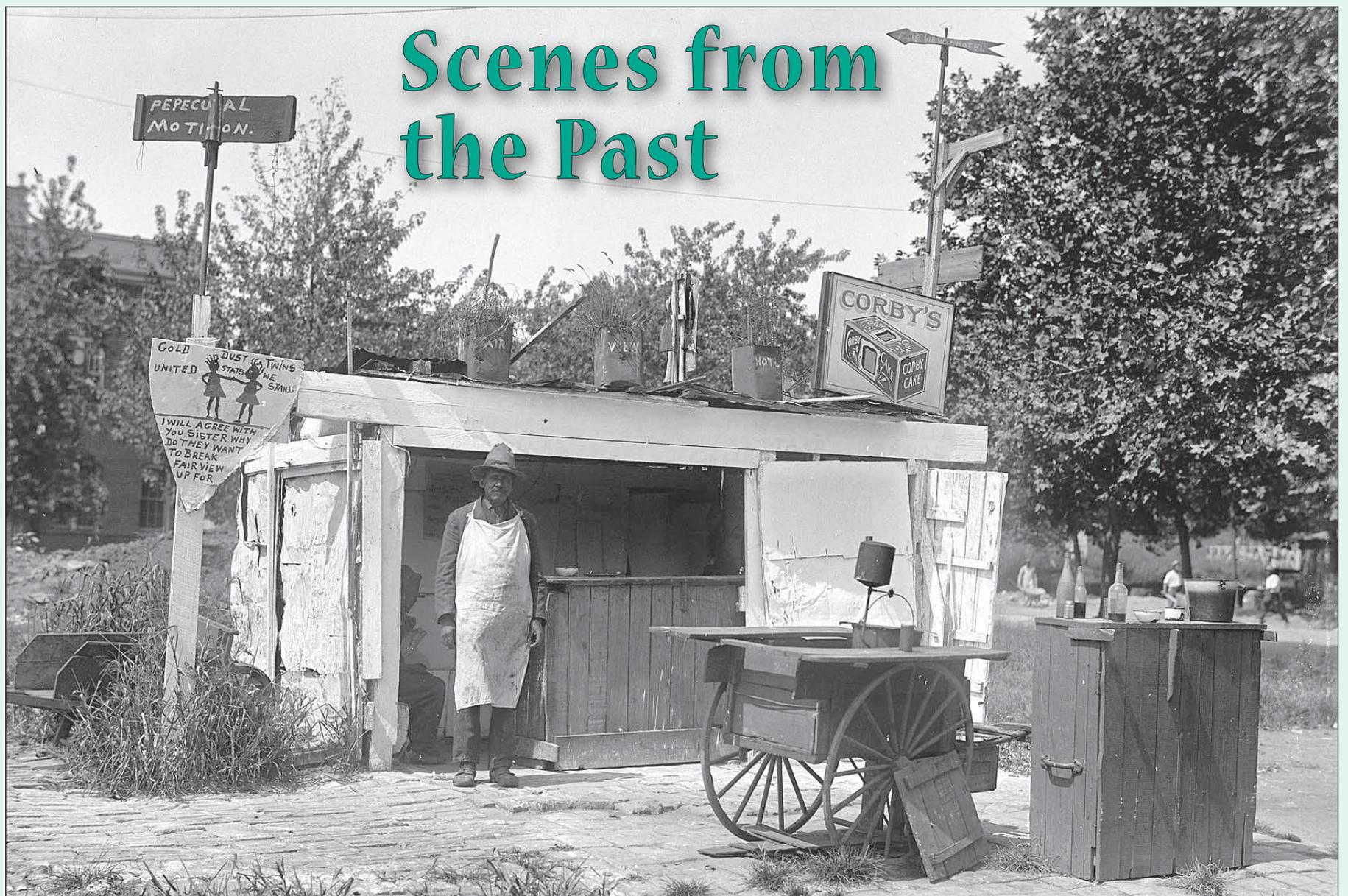


# Scenes from the Past



View of the "Fair-View-Hotel" food stand at Florida Avenue and First Street, NW.

photo—Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division.

The image of a sole shopkeeper tending his roadside stand at First Street and Florida Avenue, NW at first does little more than remind Washingtonians about the rural nature of what was then still considered the edge of town, when the photograph was taken shortly after the turn-of-the 20th century.

Upon closer inspection, however, the image reveals walls covered with philosophical sayings and observations, some of which might not ever be explained. The image certainly is a rare snapshot of a lifestyle experienced by hundreds of thousands of post-Civil War African-Americans that eventually flooded Washington in the search for jobs in the decades following the War.

The man and proprietor of the stand was Keith Sutherland, who pronounced his name "Keitt." He had been born enslaved in Charles County, Maryland about 1854, and escaped to Washington in 1862. He first worked polishing shoes around the Treasury building, and recalled in a 1900 *Washington Post* article about watching President Lincoln's funeral procession pass by, with a white horse tied behind the hearse.

He then resided, as did hundreds – if not thousands – of freed blacks, in a "contraband camp" in a large, vacant square just south of 12th and S Streets, NW, where the Garrison Elementary school is now located. The squalid conditions, bars, poolrooms, tents and shacks extended southward for a block in an area appropriately coined "Hell's Bottom."

Sutherland eventually opened a ramshackle food stall at 1111 R Street, in the heart of Hells Bottom. In a January 1, 1897 article, the *Post* reported that there

were hundreds of such stands, located in nearly every alley of the city:

"The alleys of this city are filled with colored cook-shops, which heretofore have paid no license fee . . . only the police and the people who visit the numerous alleys and little streets of the city know how many of these cook-shops exist. The colored people generally resort to these places for pigs' feet, meat pie, and substantial provender prepared by the old mammies and quaint old colored men who run them, and cook dishes to the taste of the people of their race."

At the time, Sutherland was fined \$25 for not having a license, just as a new enforcement program took place.

Again, on February 4th, 1900, the *Post* interviewed Sutherland, this time at his stand in Hell's Bottom. That interview offered a rare glimpse into life in the neighborhood at the time. According to Sutherland as recorded and edited by the reporter, "There were two very lively places in those days. One was a triangular square at Rhode Island avenue and Eleventh street. It was here that an eloquent colored preacher, who went by the name of 'John the Baptist,' used to hold revival services, which were attended by the newly-freed slaves. The revival was all right, but the four or five barrooms in the neighborhood used to hold the overflow meetings, and when the crowds went home at night you couldn't tell whether they were shouting from religion or whisky.

"Then there was what was known as the 'contraband camp,' located on S street, between Twelfth and Thirteenth. The negroes who had just been freed stayed there waiting for white people to come

and hire them. They got into all sorts of trouble, and many of them settled in the neighborhood. Money was scarce and whisky was cheap – a certain sort of whisky – and the combination resulted in giving the place the name which it held for so many years. The police force was small. There was no police court, and the magistrates before whom offenders were brought rarely fixed the penalty at more than \$2. Crime and lawlessness grew terribly, and a man had to fight, whenever he went into the 'Bottom.'

"The unsettled condition of the locality made things worse. Men used to shoot reed birds where Corcoran street now is. I have caught many a mud turtle there in the '60s. I saw a man get drowned in the creek at Seventh and R streets. At the point where the engine-house is now located on R street [Ed. Note: the building in the 900 block is still there and is now an artist's studio] a man could catch all the minnows he wanted for bait. Tall swamp grass afforded easy concealment for any one who wanted to hide after a petty theft or the robbery of some pedestrian. Consequently, it is small wonder that the law was defied in those days.

"A white man never wanted to cross the 'Bottom' after dark. If he did he had to keep stepping. Just how many crimes of magnitude were committed there no one can tell. The life of the negro was far from easy.

"At times the trouble grew serious. I have seen 500 negroes engaged in a fight all at once in 'Hell's Bottom.' That was during the mayoralty elections, and the riot would be started by the discovery of a negro who was voting the Democratic ticket."

Sutherland rose to a level of promi-

nence and relative wealth within his community, hanging a sign over his door that read "Mayor of Hell's Bottom." He and his wife and four children lived at 1643 Vermont Avenue, NW in 1880.

By 1916, his stand had relocated to the intersection of First Street and Florida Avenue following development of the Hell's Bottom area. He, curiously, had a sign painted on three tin buckets atop the stand that read "Fair-View-Hotel." Known as a famous "colored philosopher," the stand was decorated with sayings, and Sutherland was always eager to offer advice and predictions to customers. When threatened with closure in 1916, he presented the health department an eight-foot-long sheet of paper, signed by hundreds of neighborhood supporters. He remained open.

Sutherland resided at 104 Seaton Place, NE, and eventually returned to his former neighborhood at 1640 11th Street, where he died in February of 1933. His predictions and philosophical statements continued right up to his final days, and during his final few months, he dreamed of a great voters' landslide for Franklin D. Roosevelt. The dream was so "clear" that he wrote Roosevelt a description of it, following which Roosevelt responded with a "thank you" note saying he found the prediction "very encouraging." □

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