

gan. It was when I resided on Fuller Street NW behind the Potter's House, in a building owned by arts patron Herb White, that I began to grow and mature as a writer. I walked the streets like Walt Whitman. I listened to the different languages spoken on Columbia Road. Soon my friends came from El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Chile. My poetic voice embraced the words of Pablo Neruda, Roque Dalton, and Ernesto Cardenal. From these writers I learned about revolution and social justice. It was because of DC friendships that I found myself one day in Managua, Nicaragua.

Travel is air to a writer. It helps one see and feel. Poetry has afforded me travel invitations from around the world. It seems each time I take a journey I become more aware of poverty or how Black people are viewed and discriminated against in countries outside the United States. Long before hashtags and social media, there was a need to protest—to cry out. One understands “the howl” that came from Allen Ginsberg’s voice.

*I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed
by madness, starving hysterical naked,
dragging themselves through the negro streets at
dawn looking for an angry fix. . . .⁴*

It seems we have inherited a world in which silence is now dead. Listening to George Floyd crying for his departed mother is sadly the return of the heavy blues. We cannot let this happen to the best minds of another generation. We cannot let madness suffocate their song. It’s time for our nation to be well again, to sing again.

The Black Lives Matter street mural on 16th Street in DC is not far from two of the apartment buildings where I once lived. The mural was created after many marches and protests in the city. It’s a reminder to all of us that to be a citizen in the 21st century is to be bold. Mayor Bowser taking back the streets of the District is what statehood looks like.

Since Covid-19 I’ve been sitting in my backyard staring at a large statue of the Buddha. I’ve been writing haiku and paying more attention to nature. I’m learning the names of birds and measuring the changing wind with each breath. Above, the sky is blue. As a Black man I can still breathe. I don’t take this for granted.

Too many of my brothers and sisters are disappearing from this earth.

*early morning walk
it seems the world is still here
black lives still matter⁵*

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Notes

1. New Negro Movement works and political authors key to my Blackness studies include: *The Big Sea*, Langston Hughes (1940), *On These I Stand*, Countee Cullen (1946), *The Wretched of the Earth*, Frantz Fanon (1963), *Neo-Colonialism: The Last Stage of Imperialism*, Kwame Nkrumah (1965).
2. Walter Dyson, *Howard University—The Capstone of Negro Education: A History: 1867-1940* (Washington: The Graduate School, Howard University, 1941).
3. “Southern Cop,” included in Sterling Brown’s rejected and unpublished manuscript *No Hiding Place*, is found in Michael S. Harper, ed., *The Collected Poems of Sterling A. Brown* (New York: HarperCollins, 1980).
4. Allen Ginsberg, “Howl,” in *Howl and Other Poems*, (San Francisco: City Lights, 1956).
5. E. Ethelbert Miller, Haiku #60, in *the little book of e*, (forthcoming, 2021).

Defending Tenants in the Midst of Plague

BY AMANDA HURON

What happens when a housing crisis intersects with a pandemic?

We’re finding out now in real time, in Washington and around the globe. But Washington has already been through this: just over 100 years ago, when the so-called “Spanish flu” hit a city already strangled by high housing costs. Today’s scenario is different from yesterday’s in key ways. But in the end, a pandemic piled on top of a housing crisis is what forced the creation of rent control in Washington in 1919—making it the first city in the United States to get such controls. As tenants in DC fight to keep their housing in the midst of a pandemic today, there’s much to be learned from the past.

First, the housing crisis. The United States entered World War I in April 1917. Tens of thousands of people streamed into Washington for jobs in the war bureaucracy, and a housing shortage ensued, causing rents to spike. A year into the U.S. involvement in the war—in May 1918—the U.S. Civil Service Commission reported that half its job offers were being turned down because salaries were not enough to pay Washington’s exorbitant

rents. Members of Congress, convinced that the District's high rents were a threat to national security, and that landlords were using the wartime emergency to gouge tenants, decided to act. Back then, there was some moral outrage around the prices landlords were demanding simply because the market seemed to bear them. Today, we accept this as the way the real estate market works.¹

Under the leadership of Senator Willard Saulsbury, Jr. (D-Delaware), a member of the Committee on the District of Columbia, Congress passed a resolution that declared a freeze on rents in Washington for the duration of the wartime emergency. Landlords could neither raise rents nor evict tenants whose leases had expired. This was a big deal. "With the signing yesterday by the President of the Saulsbury anti-eviction resolution an entirely new status was conferred upon rented or leased property in the District," reported the *Washington Herald* on its front page on June 1. "The tenant — Can snap his fingers at the landlord as long as he pays the rent he agreed to pay before the bill became a law and is behaving himself on the premises he is occupying."²

Second, the pandemic. On September 21, 1918, the District recorded its first death from the new flu: a freight brakeman who was believed to have contracted the disease in New York a few days earlier. Over the next several weeks, the disease spread rapidly through the city. Washington, flooded as it was with war workers, many of whom lived tightly packed into rooming houses, was ripe for transmission. The city's experience in 1918 may feel familiar today. The District issued an order prohibiting indoor meetings, and quickly extended it to ban all meetings, indoor and outdoor, including church services and rallies. Transit was seriously affected, as many streetcar drivers had become sick with the flu. Because local army camps were particularly hard hit, restaurants and other places that did not meet certain sanitary standards were banned from serving soldiers, and guards were posted to prevent them from entering. Though the flu did not have the same impact on the District as today's coronavirus pandemic in terms of job loss and economic devastation, it seriously disrupted life.³

As the flu contagion gained momentum, District officials seemed to recognize that access to housing was a prerequisite for health, and acted accordingly. For instance, as the fall weather grew cooler, they required landlords to provide heat regardless of

tenants' ability to pay for it—because they believed warm rooms were important for fighting the flu. Washington was at the time run by a three-man commission, appointed by the U.S. president. One of these commissioners, Louis Brownlow, reminded the public to alert the police if landlords were failing to properly heat their apartments or rented rooms. "He also made it plain," the *Washington Post* reported in a front-page story, "that those landlords who fail to comply with the direction to furnish heat will be dealt with severely and that the arbitrary seizure of apartment houses controlled by parsimonious landlords is not an impossibility."

Some landlords apparently resented this requirement to provide heat regardless of tenants' ability to pay, given the Saulsbury Resolution's prohibition on raising rent. But Brownlow held firm. "No meanness will be tolerated," he said, "'as warm rooms are demanded not only for the comfort of the sick, but as a protection for the well.'" That the District would threaten to seize apartment buildings if landlords did not provide their tenants with heat in the midst of a public health crisis is an intriguing precedent.⁴

But don't feel bad for the landlords. As it turned out, tenants were being evicted in the midst of the pandemic despite the Saulsbury Resolution—because they didn't know their rights. Some tenants, in fact, were being evicted *because* they were sick with the flu. Some landlords, particularly of rooming houses, were evicting people—many of them young women—who showed flu symptoms, out of fear that they'd infect others in the house. Families were being evicted, too: in the first week of October, a widow with three sons off fighting in France was evicted, along with her two daughters, at least one of whom was sick with the flu. Stories of evictions and other abuses of renters were recounted in several of the District's newspapers. One reporter's outrage was not atypical: "Hunnish inhumanities and cruelties are being outdone right here in Washington in the treatment of tenants and room-renters—notably homeless and defenceless [*sic*] girl war-workers—by many greedy landlords," wrote Bill Price in the *Washington Times*. "Side-by-side with the ravages of influenza stalks an unprecedented epidemic of piratical attempts to profit financially from humanity's fright, accompanied by wolfish neglect and mistreatment of the ill."⁵

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By the spring of 1919, the war had ended, and the flu had begun to abate. The Saulsbury Resolution was set to expire soon, and many observers expected rents to then shoot up by 40 percent. That's when labor unions got involved, agitating on behalf of their tenant members. In June both the Bookbinders Local Union No. 4, and the Central Labor Union—which represented 60,000 Washington workers—urged Congress to extend the Saulsbury Resolution for three years. The bookbinders called for more, proposing legislation that limited rents to a “reasonable” income for landlords. Another union, the National Federation of Federal Employees, had also been investigating the question of “rent extortion” in the District, which it alleged was ongoing despite the Saulsbury Resolution, as part of its larger campaign against “profiteering in the necessities of life.” The pressure was on.⁶

In the summer of 1919, Senator L. Heisler Ball (R-Delaware), a member of the Committee on the District of Columbia, launched an investigation into the rent profiteering that had taken place in the District over the previous year. Investigators found 3,200 cases of “rent extortion” during the war and pandemic. As the *Washington Post* reported on the hearings, “More stories of Washington rent profiteers, whose avarice was not softened by the plight of widowed mothers, grieving for sons slain in battle, and of yet others, whose demands knew no mercy when the influenza epidemic swept the Capital City, were laid bare before the Senate investigators yesterday.” Ball declared that he believed something needed to be done to control rents in Washington. In the end, he did something major: he led the passage of an act which established a three-person commission to “fix and determine fair and reasonable rates and rentals of dwellings, apartments, hotels and business properties in the District of Columbia upon complaint of either landlord or tenant, or upon its own initiative.” This was rent control. And it was the first time any city in the United States got it.⁷

The Ball Rent Act was immediately challenged by the real estate industry and, despite agitation on the part of unions and tenants, this first version of rent control expired in Washington in 1925. But it set important precedent. Rent controls came and went in the District over the decades. In 1975 DC's newly elected limited home rule government, under furious pressure from highly organized tenants, passed a new rent control law, a version of which we still have today.⁸

In 2020, we're again in the midst of a housing crisis overlaid with a devastating pandemic. The

immediate fight is to prevent mass evictions: while as of this writing the District has an eviction moratorium in place through December 9, 2020, the months of back rent are piling up, and thousands of jobless and ill tenants, many of them unable to access unemployment benefits, are fearful they'll never be able to repay that debt—and will thus ultimately lose their housing. Simultaneously, tenants are fighting to create a stronger version of rent control, devoid of the loopholes and exceptions that currently riddle the law. We need controls on rent in order to prevent, as the *Times* reporter put it, the “inhumanities and cruelties . . . of greedy landlords.”

But ultimately, what we need is a new system for housing: a system that rejects, as one union put it in 1919, “profiteering in the necessities of life.”

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Notes

1. Steven J. Diner, *The Regulation of Housing in the District of Columbia: An Historical Analysis of Policy Issues* (Washington: Department of Urban Studies, University of the District of Columbia, 1983).
2. Joint Resolution to Prevent Profiteering in the District of Columbia, Pub. Res. 65-31, 40 Stat. 593 (May 31, 1918); “Tenants Now Free to Stay at Old Rents,” *Washington Herald*, June 1, 1918.
3. “Influenza Kills Here,” *Washington Post*, Sept. 22, 1918; “Number of Cases Shows Plague Here on Increase,” *Washington Times*, Oct. 8, 1918; Gilmore, “Washington’s Lost Month: the 1918-19 Spanish Influenza Epidemic in the District of Columbia,” *InTowner*, Oct. 1, 2018.
4. “72 Dead from ‘Flu,’ Record for District,” *Washington Post*, Oct. 11, 1918.
5. Bill Price, “President to Receive Plea to Curb D.C. Rent Sharks,” *Washington Times*, Oct. 8, 1918; “Woman Turned out of House,” *Washington Herald*, Oct. 8, 1918.
6. “Rent Law Holds Until Senate Ratifies Peace,” *Evening Star*, Mar. 28, 1919; “Urge Saulsbury Law Extension to Curb Rents,” *Washington Herald*, June 19, 1919; “C.L.U. Advocates Stabilized Rents,” *Evening Star*, June 17, 1919; “The Federation’s Campaign,” *Evening Star*, July 16, 1918.
7. “Tragedy of Tenants,” *Washington Post*, Aug. 28, 1919; Food Control and the District of Columbia Rents Act, Pub. L. No. 66-63, 41 Stat. 297 (Oct. 22, 1919), quoted in Diner, *Regulation of Housing*, 12.
8. Diner, *Regulation of Housing*; D.C. Code §§45-1631 to 1674 (Supp. IV 1977), superseded by Rental Housing Act of 1977, Act No. 2-118, 24 DC Reg. 5334 (1977); Margery Austin Turner, “Moderating Market Pressures for Washington, D.C. Rental Housing,” in Keating, Teitz and Skaburskis, eds., *Rent Control: Regulation and the Rental Housing Market* (New Brunswick, NJ: Center for Urban Policy Research, Rutgers University, 1998), 110-124.