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The Smithsonian’s Anacostia Community Museum Opens the Exhibition “East of the River: Continuity and Change” in Commemoration of its 40th Anniversary

The Smithsonian’s Anacostia Community Museum presents the exhibition “East of the River: Continuity and Change” on view until Nov. 9, 2008. This major exhibition traces the history and development of the communities far southeast of the Anacostia River from early history to today through a revealing examination of the impact of land use and development on the demographics of the area.

“East of the River” is a follow-up on the museum’s earlier exhibition and publication, “The Anacostia Story: 1608-1930,” developed by historian Louise D. Hutchinson 31 years ago and complemented by educational programming coordinated by Zora Martin [Felton], that focused on the history of individuals, families and neighborhoods in far southeast. This exhibition revisits far southeast to explore what has transpired since the end of “The Anacostia Story” and takes a deeper look at the region’s history and evolution; its various inhabitants and how they came to be here; the internal and external forces that caused its decline; and those that are now convening to determine its future.

Opening on the occasion of the museum’s 40th anniversary, “East of the River” is as much a story of the evolution of one particular urban region as it is of many such communities across the nation. There are peculiarities to this story, however, which are specific to this region.

Change is the watchword in the history of this region: Beginning, in this exhibition, with the arrival of the first Europeans and the resulting alteration in the lives of the Native Americans, change continues with the development of new communities, such as Barry Farm and Uniontown, and accelerates with the growth of modern infrastructure that redefines land use. It transforms the area with the concentration of dense housing complexes after World War II. Equally as powerful is the continuity of local traditions despite the changes, as exemplified by the history of civic activism, strong families, and dedicated community and religious leadership.

The first two sections—“The First Anacostians” and “Encounters with Adventurers”—discuss the early habitation of the far southeast region, focusing on the Nacotchtank people from whom the name “Anacostia” was derived and their interaction with such Europeans as explorer and mapmaker Captain John Smith and beaver fur trader Captain Henry Fleet. Much of the Native American life and contact with Europeans is shown

through drawings of the late 1500s by explorer John White and artifacts from archeological digs in the area. Through warfare with other Native Americans and Europeans, the Nacotchtank subsequently lost power and land. A video provides details about Native American life and languages.

The next three sections—“Early Settlers,” “The Village of Good Hope” and “Anacostia”—cover the resettlement of the area by Europeans; the acquisition of large tracts of land for individual ownership; investment and development; and the introduction of the African slave trade.

In the late 1700s, the District of Columbia was established to include what was then Maryland and later became far southeast Washington. The Navy Yard was constructed, spurring a flurry of land development. Maps and records show the ownership, subdividing, sales and re-sales of large tracts of lands—the names of which, such as Barry Farm, St. Elizabeth and Marbury, endure today—among prominent owners to maximize their profits and later develop into thriving communities and plantations. The first major settlement, the Village of Good Hope, developed along an access road to Maryland, creating a prominent business area. The creation of Uniontown (later re-named Anacostia) is described as having initiated additional real estate speculation in the region because it was promoted as a desirable suburban community providing easy access to downtown. Among the items featured are memorabilia from Frederick Douglass’ home, “Cedar Hill,” which he acquired when an investor, scrambling to recoup losses from Uniontown’s failure to boom, was forced to sell his home.

The “The Civil War Era” section and the two that follow—“Barry Farm” and “Modernization”—discuss important developments in the region, including the Government Hospital for the Insane (later called St. Elizabeths) and several forts and military installations. Also established is the residential community of Barry Farm in 1867 for emancipated Africans in the area and blacks immigrating from the south. At the war’s end, initiatives to assist formerly enslaved Africans with home ownership and education were implemented spurring the emergence of middle and working class whites and blacks.

Early African American landowners in Barry Farm, such as Reverend William Hunter, who helped establish Macedonia Baptist Church in 1866, and land, property and business owner Eliza Spottswood Shippen, are highlighted in these sections as is the role of prominent churches in providing social and political support to the community. The impact of improved bridges, trolley cars, new residential communities and flourishing business development is examined as the region is modernized. Perspectives on far southeast are featured in video interviews with such individuals as Ward 8 Councilmember Marion Barry and former Mayor Anthony Williams.

The downturn for the far southeast region is documented in “East of the River Transformed” and through the next two sections—“Integration” and “Decline of Neighborhoods.” Examined is how the development of housing stock quite different from the type historically built in the area was encouraged at the

end of World War II through various local and federal urban renewal initiatives dramatically altering the landscape and radically changing the residential demographics. Desegregation of public schools eventually sparked de-enrollment of white students from public schools and eventually white flight in the 1960s. Strong but separate neighborhood associations—black “civic” associations and white “citizens” associations—each grappled with their community’s issues. The devastation wrought by federal housing development initiatives and local zoning laws promoted uncontrolled growth, haphazard growth and discouraged home ownership. Many of the largely black residents of the region were bereft of adequate social and recreational services, often unemployed, and the community was plagued by drugs and crime.

It was in this environment, in 1967, that the Smithsonian’s Anacostia Neighborhood Museum was established in the old Carver Theater as the first such federally funded entity in the nation. The museum rededicated itself as a museum of African American history and culture within a year of its operation, developing exhibitions and public programs focusing on the heritage of African Americans and social issues.

The final section, “Today and Tomorrow,” highlights the rapid change currently underway in the far southeast as high housing costs in the rest of the Washington and more vacant land make it one of the most affordable areas in the district. Reflecting a more balance view, zoning and investment planning for redevelopment promote single family homeownership, shopping centers, recreational facilities and a new soccer stadium on Poplar Point, resulting in more cultural and racial diversity in the region. Video interviews feature debate on proposed projects and the role of community input. This section also expands to include a special focus on the distinctly Washington, D.C., phenomenon of “go-go” music. Originating in far southeast, the early “go-go” composers and musicians—the Junkyard Band and Chuck Brown, known as the “godfather” of the genre—are featured. In recognition of the museum’s anniversary is a wall of accomplishment that lists all 159 exhibitions mounted by the museum and images from some of the most memorable.

Renamed the Anacostia Community Museum in 2006, the museum opened in southeast Washington in 1967 as the nation’s first federally funded neighborhood museum. Today, it is recognized as a national resource, creating critically acclaimed exhibitions, engaging public programs and innovative community documentation initiatives. The museum’s collection features significant holdings in African American art, religion, photography and family and community history dating back to the 1800s. Located at 1901 Fort Place S.E., Washington, D.C., the museum is open from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. daily, except Dec. 25. Admission is free. For more information about the museum, the public may call Smithsonian information at (202) 633-1000 or (202) 633-5285 (TTY); for museum tours, call (202) 633-4870. Web site: <http://anacostia.si.edu>.

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