

Chapter 21: Washington (1974-1975)

There is something good and motherly about Washington,
the grand old benevolent National Asylum for the helpless.

Mark Twain, *The Gilded Age* (1869)

Washington isn't a city, it's an abstraction.

Dylan Thomas



I finished library school in the late spring of 1974. Now I needed a job. I decided to move to Washington to look for one, for two reasons. First, there was a heavy concentration there of the kind of libraries I was hoping to work in. And second, Joel Solkoff was living there and offered me a place to stay while looking for a job and settling in. As I had no money to speak of, this was a very welcome offer. Also Washington was an interesting and beautiful city, which I had long wanted to know better. If Joel had lived in Omaha, I doubt I would have gone there to look for a job.

So Joel picked me up in New York in his car and we drove down to Washington. I installed myself on his living room sofa and began a methodical search for work. I compiled a list of all the libraries I could find (from print sources, there not yet being any Internet), with contact information. My first choice was to be an academic librarian in a college or university. But as I soon learned, this required a subject degree, usually an M.A., as well as a library degree. I had a subject degree, but it was a J.D., and that meant I would be channeled into law library work. I did not accept that at the start, and included on my list all the local academic libraries and “special libraries” (meaning libraries devoted to particular subjects) in Washington. I included not only government libraries (for example the Department of the Interior’s reference library) but private ones (for example the Carnegie Endowment’s international affairs library). I was not much interested in public libraries, where the jobs were in any case governed by rigid civil service regulations. And although I had taken most of the rare books curriculum at library school, I wasn’t all that interested in rare books or archives either.

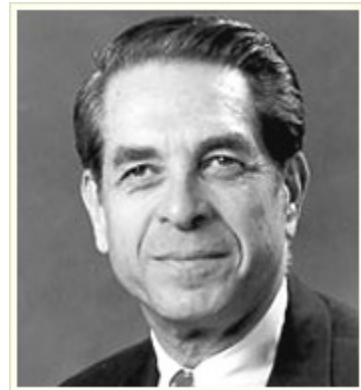
Then I called every library on the list, tried to find someone to talk with, introduced myself, said I was looking for work, and asked if they had anything available. Most said no, but some said maybe, send me a résumé. Even when people said no, I asked them if they could suggest where I might look. Having said no at first, people wanted to have something to say yes to, so they often made suggestions, which I added to the list. When A suggested B, I called B and always said I was calling at the suggestion of A, which at least got me through. After I sent out a résumé I followed up with another phone call.

and sometimes got an interview. I kept meticulous records and kept narrowing it down until I got an offer I could accept.

- I had used this same technique to get my summer job at Kennedy & Rhine, and used it again later to get a library job in San Francisco, although there I also went to the law librarians' brown bag lunch meetings, which in Washington I did not yet know about. These are the only three times I have ever searched for a professional job.

I don't think I included law firm libraries on my list at the start, as law libraries were not my first or even second choice of a place to work. But as I found my other choices limited by the need for a subject master's degree, by civil service procedures, or just by a shortage of openings, I made another list for them. I started with every private law firm in the city with more than 30 lawyers, which was a lot of firms in a lawyer-intensive town like Washington. And I was diligent about asking people if they knew of openings elsewhere.

Eventually I was referred to a firm called Cohen & Uretz. It was not on my original list, because it had only 11 lawyers. Also it was a tax firm, which was a little awkward because I had not taken taxation in law school and knew nothing about the subject. But they needed someone. And I was a lawyer, which gave me a great advantage – law librarians who are also lawyers are among the élite of the profession, rare because so few lawyers want to work in such a low-paying position. I interviewed there with a young partner from Mississippi called Lester G. (“Ruff”) Fant III. He liked me and my background. He said Cohen & Uretz was a small Democratic law firm (law firms in Washington are defined by party), and I replied that I was a small Democratic lawyer. This made a hit. So I was taken to see the founder, Sheldon S. Cohen (right), who had been Commissioner of



Internal Revenue under President Johnson (Uretz was dead by then). Cohen asked me what salary I wanted. I said I'd like to be a GS-12, which was the entry-level professional classification in the federal civil service. He said OK, and I was hired at the salary of a GS-12. It wasn't very much money. More on my work at Cohen & Uretz appears in Chapter 24.A.

Joel lived on Capitol Hill, at 630 East Capitol Street, in an apartment occupying the first floor of a red brick town house. See Map V. Capitol Hill is one of the most beautiful urban residential districts in

Washington, or for that matter anywhere in the world. Washington is divided into quadrants, with the Capitol at the center, and East Capitol Street divides NE from SE. Looking down the street, the enormous white Capitol dome (illuminated at night) appeared right in the center. It was a dramatic view, especially at night. The Supreme Court building stood on one side of the first block of East Capitol Street, and the main building of the Library of Congress was across the street from it. There were some other important buildings on East Capitol Street, notably the Folger Shakespeare Library at Second Street, and then after a couple of blocks it became entirely residential, two-story brick buildings (and a few frame ones, see right) mostly dating from about 1890, running all the way to Lincoln Park at 11th Street. The sidewalks were of brick, and there were tall, broad, leafy trees on both sides. At night when the trees are full the streetlights shine through the canopy of leaves. Capitol Hill on a humid summer night after it has rained is one of the most magical places in the world.



After I settled in to my job, I moved out of Joel’s house to a room in a house in the 400 block, nearer the Capitol (No. 630 was between Sixth and Seventh Streets). This was a wide, majestic three-story brick house with a bow front; one of the floors was set back a bit so the bow formed an open balcony within an arch. That was my room – it was only a room, and the bathroom was down the hall, but it ran the width of the house and met my needs amply. You could lean over the balcony rail and see the Capitol at the end of the street. I was living in that room when Nixon resigned.



One fun thing about Washington is that national stories are local stories, and Washington was in a pitch of excitement the first week in August, when Nixon fell.

Later I moved twice more – I forget why. The first time was in the other direction, but still on East Capitol Street, to a very funky apartment on the top floor of a creaky old house at Tenth Street, just down from Lincoln Park. This had a full balcony and I used to sleep outside on it – it is the open structure in the middle house at right. But it had no doorbell, so I got a real



bell, hung it on my balcony, and dropped an attached cord to street level so I would know if someone came to see me.

After a short stay there I moved one more time, to an apartment in a house on Fourth Street SE. This was just off Massachusetts Avenue next to Stanton Park, a nicer park than Lincoln was. This house, made of wood rather than brick, was next to a school basketball court, and had an overhanging porch in the back which I used to sleep on. It was, I soon discovered, infested with cockroaches, and at that time I was sentimentally reluctant to kill them. If you don't kill cockroaches they multiply (they multiply even if you do kill them), and soon the place was crawling with them. I changed my policy on killing cockroaches when I woke up one morning with one in my mouth. Yuk!

But I didn't move yet again because I was by that time preparing to leave for Taiwan. I was getting restless at Cohen & Uretz. There was not enough to keep me busy there, but nevertheless it was a full-time job. I could easily have done this job on a part-time basis – I was their first librarian and they only had 11 lawyers – but I did not realize then that this was an option. As I had wanted a sinecure and now more or less had one, I should have been contented, but I wasn't. At about this time (Spring 1975) Adam had a friend at Vassar whose father was the head of the English Department at a college in Taiwan. He was looking for native speakers to teach conversational English there. This was Dr. Fook Tim Chan, the college was the Feng Chia College of Business and Engineering in Taichung, and I tell more about this in Chapter 22.

Anyway Adam was interested, and through his daughter Dr. Chan offered him a job at his college. Then Adam decided not to go, which left the job open, and with his permission I wrote to Dr. Chan (there were no e-mails in those days) proposing myself instead. Dr. Chan said that was fine and offered the job to me, at a higher salary because I had more degrees, plus of course round-trip passage to Taichung. I agreed to go, and then it just became a matter of getting my visas, quitting my job with adequate notice, and leaving. Letters I wrote during the months between the decision to go and actually going show this was a very difficult time for me – as Joel put it my mind was already in Taiwan but my body was still in Washington. I imagined I was going to begin a sojourn overseas that would last for decades of glamorous expatriate life – actually I was back in a year.

Although my time there was short – only about a year – I grew to appreciate Washington. The climate is awful – horribly hot humid summers and cold miserable wet winters. But in every other way it is superb. Physically it is one of the most beautiful cities anywhere – fine long avenues and pleasant leafy side streets, stately buildings all over town from the mansions of Embassy Row with their colorful flags to the quiet streets of Georgetown and Capitol Hill, magnificent public buildings, statues and monuments everywhere, spacious parks, more trees per square mile (I have heard) than any other city, lots of great museums (many of them free), in my day a good city both for driving and for public transit (even better for transit now that the Metro has been built). Also Washington

attracts exceptionally smart people from all over the country and the world. If it were not for the climate I might have stayed, or returned there after I got the expat thing out of my system.



I remember tripping on LSD on the Capitol grounds one lovely steamy summer night, falling asleep on the lush grass in the Capitol park. (Sleeping on the Capitol lawn may not be possible today, but in 1974 access to the Capitol and other government sites was quite casual.) I also remember tripping on the White House grounds (left) – every year these were open to the public under the auspices of the Washington Garden Club.¹ I went there in a taxi, already flying on acid, and spent a fabulous afternoon

among the trees and lawns and flowers (left). Then I left in a another taxi for a wedding, still tripping. I visited the White House on public tours several times and got to know it fairly well, for an outsider – years later Andy Schwartzman arranged a VIP tour for me, which included the West Wing and a look inside the Oval Office.

I saw President Ford twice on the street, once in a motorcade and once speaking in front of the Department of Labor Building on Constitution Avenue, which I was passing by in a taxi. Taxis were very cheap in those days, regulated as they were by Congressional committees. I also saw President Nixon – I made it a point to see him in the flesh while he was still President by obtaining a ticket for a Naval Academy commencement he was scheduled to attend. This was in summer 1974 – he was already far gone in the Watergate scandal. I remember seeing his enormous Marine helicopter come down over the Annapolis stadium and land just out of sight, and then watching him walk onto the field. It was a military audience, so they cheered him. But the cheers did not last for the whole walk to his seat on the 50-yard line, and the last minute he walked in eerie silence. The commencement was terrific, with great music – I love a good military ceremony – and it was thrilling to see the ritual at the end when the graduates throw their hats in the air.

When I lived on East Capitol Street and worked at Cohen & Uretz, at 1730 M Street NW across from St. Matthew's Cathedral, my bus ride to work passed the seats of all three branches of government. We went down East Capitol to the eastern edge of the Capitol grounds, with the dome right in front of us and the Library of Congress on our left. Then the bus turned right on First Street, directly in front of the Supreme Court building, and continued down Constitution and Pennsylvania Avenues, passing right in front of the

¹ I may not have this name exactly right.

White House (in those pre-terrorist days that block of Pennsylvania Avenue was not closed to traffic).

In my Capitol Hill days Joel and I used to eat in some relatively cheap restaurants on Pennsylvania Avenue, not far from the Eastern Market on 8th and C SE After Cohen & Uretz moved to 1775 K Street NW, I used to eat lunch sometimes at Sholl's Colonial Cafeteria at 20th and K – a famous Washington institution (now gone) with great food at amazingly low prices.

Washington is a great cultural center, and I was a regular visitor at the National Gallery (the main building, built by Paul Mellon – I. M. Pei's famous East Wing was not yet built). I also went often to the Phillips Collection (no relation), a wonderful intimate museum with great Impressionist paintings, the Smithsonian museums on the Mall (fewer in number than they are now), and especially the National Portrait Gallery in the old Patent Office at 7th and F Streets NW, still one of my favorite places in Washington. Other favorites were the Organization of American States building at 17th and Constitution NW, a magnificent structure with palm trees in the lobby (the parrots who lived in them flew around uncaged); the National Geographic Society at 17th and M, around the corner from my office on M Street; Woodrow Wilson's house at 23rd and S Streets NW; the U.S. Botanic Garden greenhouse on Independence Avenue just southwest of the Capitol; the noble public library at Mount Vernon Square NW (no



longer a library); the gruesome Army Medical Museum, where General Dan Sickles used to come to visit the leg he lost at the Battle of Gettysburg, still on view there in my day; Arlington National Cemetery, a great place for an acid trip; the National Cathedral, ditto; the Folger Shakespeare Library; the Capitol, where I had gallery passes for both houses and used to watch the

Senate or the House in session from time to time; and many others.

I used to go to the National Press Club sometimes while Joel was a member there. It was then a wonderful old-fashioned sort of place, with a well-used bar and brown paneling and worn-out leather sofas and tiny offices with glass doors (used as Washington bureaus by small newspapers and magazines), a fusty old library and a great view of the city from a picture window. Through Joel I also had occasional privileges at the Library of Congress. I visited often in the heraldic section of the stacks,



open to scholars then. I used the reading room too (above), one of the world's great interior spaces.

I joined the line outside the Supreme Court building the night before the argument in the Watergate tapes case, the decision in which was to end Nixon's chances of survival. It was a long night and I slept for a while in the bushes outside the building, but was brusquely awakened by Connie Chung, then a Washington reporter for CBS television news, who wanted to interview me. I was not amused.

Joel's boyhood friend Lee Avery was in Washington at the time – in fact that's one reason Joel was living there, which as noted was one of the main reasons I went there myself. Lee was in his high Episcopal period then, and I remember going with him to St. Mark's Episcopal Church on Capitol Hill (3rd and A Streets NE) on Christmas Eve 1974. Through Lee and his gay network we met Paul B., a Republican operative but an amusing fellow nevertheless, and Bill H., who was our pot connection and gave fabulous parties, with great food and great flowers and great dope, in his house in Georgetown.

I look back on my Washington period as a very happy time, even though I was kind of anguished in the period in 1975 between deciding to leave and actually leaving. It gave me a taste for the place which I still have – I was a diligent tourist when I lived there, and visited almost every year in the 1980s and 90s, while Adam lived in Washington. After that I went less often, but now that I'm retired and have the time I go back every couple of years.

