

Home Rule from Below:

The Cooperative Movement in Washington, D.C.

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Washington, DC, has had a long history of cooperatives. This paper examines DC's cooperative history from the 1800s as a form of what I call "home rule from below." Even before formal home rule began in 1975, DC residents sought to build autonomous spheres – a kind of commons -- in which to govern themselves and forge a new society, very much different from the formal government controlled by segregationist congressmen. Upon becoming mayor in 1979, Marion Barry brought this home rule from below into District government, which expanded the number and kinds of cooperatives in the District. Those forming cooperatives today will likely be interested in the community model envisioned by Cornelius "Cornbread" Givens, a member of the Barry administration, in which each community would have producer cooperatives, consumer cooperatives, credit unions, low-income housing cooperatives, a local charity providing social services funded by cooperative profits, and a community-wide cooperative organizing this cooperative system. The latter scandals of the Barry administration and the arrival of the 1995 Control Board undermined home rule from below and allowed elites to exploit cooperative structures, divorced from Cornbread Givens' community model, for their own benefit, thus creating limited home rule from above.

In the 1970s, home rule built on and expanded many already existing grassroots strategies to create areas of autonomy and local control in Washington, DC.¹ While autonomy and control of District government is a central element of home rule, here I wish to examine the ways that DC residents sought to build autonomous spheres, gain control over life, and forge new resources in the District beyond formal government. I specifically study the cooperative movement in DC as a form of home rule that goes beyond formal government, what I call “home rule from below.”

Cooperatives represent just one part of the commons or commonwealth. The commons are resources held in common, such as nature but also the social activity of production, the social activity of community engagement, and, more generally, the collective spaces, goods, and experiments in living that we create together. As Hardt and Negri (2009) point out, in the current stage of knowledge-based capitalism, capital increasingly exists outside the commons and seeks to privatize it to make profits. Thus private property is fundamentally different from the commons. According to Hardt and Negri, public property is also fundamentally different from the commons because public property represents state domination and constituted powers from above, “which not only guarantees capitalist exploitation and defends the rule of property but also maintains and polices all identity hierarchies” (ibid.: 355). In contrast to the constituted power of state sovereignty, the commons expresses constituent or constitutive power, which has the ability to create a new politics or new political order. As a form of constituent power, cooperatives provide an avenue to create a new political world, which pre-home-rule

¹ DC-based political scientist Michael Fauntroy (2010) has defined home rule as “a government status in which authority and responsibility for management of a unit of government (e.g., state, city, county, territorial) falls to that unit of government, subject to the parameters set by a superior unit of government” (p. 23, emphasis added). Home rule thus assured DC some level of self-government. However, Congressional intervention in DC government continues today, thus limiting home rule and leading Fauntroy (2003) to ask whether DC has home rule or house rule, rule by the U.S. House of Representatives.

Washington, DC required. Importantly, following Nancy Fraser (2009), for home rule to be realized fully, the residents of DC needed to maintain and strengthen simultaneously political representation, economic empowerment, and cultural recognition. Cooperatives provided a forum for these three elements to co-exist.

Long before home rule began in 1975, the cooperative movement in Washington, D.C., established consumer, workers' productive, financial, and housing cooperatives.² African Americans in particular had long supported cooperatives, as a means to create economic, political, and cultural freedom.³ They also might greatly benefit from self-government because the District was primarily governed by segregationist congressmen like John L. McMillan of South Carolina, who chaired the DC committee from 1948 to 1972 (Fauntroy 2003: 7-8), and by neighborhood associations composed mostly of white residents (Travis 2010: 46). Rather than wait for society to change and offer equal participation in political and economic life, African Americans in particular formed cooperatives in DC and across the country to forge a new society. Yet, a wide range of people supported cooperatives for similar reasons. With home rule, Mayor Marion Barry's government brought this home rule from below into the government and created new structures to support city-wide community development based on cooperatives, which led to their further proliferation throughout the city. As suggested by Hardt and Negri, the constituted powers of formal government over time undermined home rule from below. This paper explores the history of cooperatives in Washington, DC, in the twentieth century and how, unfortunately, real estate agents and developers were able to exploit these structures for their

² In 1973, Congress passed the Home Rule Act, which led to elections for mayor and city council in November 1974 and the swearing in of the new government in January 1975. The Home Rule Act also allowed for the election of advisory neighborhood commissioners.

³ As Jessica Gordon Nembhard (2009) has argued, "African Americans have used cooperative economic development as a strategy in the struggle for economic stability and independence" (p. 186). In 1907, W.E.B. Dubois spoke in favor of a wide range of cooperatives and alternative economic institutions. Cooperatives would remain a key institution in the toolbox of African American social movements.

own benefit, thus fundamentally altering home rule from below into a more limited home rule from above.

Cooperatives before Home Rule

Washington, DC has had a long history of cooperatives. In 1880, the Rochdale Cooperative Society of the District of Columbia began, and by 1894 had 6,000 members. This consumer cooperative provided members access to low-priced goods through contracted dealers and did not run stores until much later.⁴ DC also had a few other registered cooperatives, such as the Cooperative Ice Company of the City of Washington. During the 1870s to 1890s, across the nation, cooperatives formed primarily among farmers, most famously assisted by the National Grange Association, which supported the use of the Rochdale Principles (Chaddad and Cook 2012: 176). In tandem, the Knights of Labor organized workers' cooperatives and the Sovereigns of Industry began organizing consumer cooperatives for urban workers. However, the District lacked cooperative laws to recognize cooperatives, which might control who could use the name "cooperative" and which might encourage new cooperatives to form. As a result, any cooperatives functioning in DC had to incorporate in another state, most often in Virginia, or register as a corporation. If they incorporated in Virginia, they were required to hold their meetings there, and, since Virginia law only recognized farm cooperatives, the Virginia government did not allow non-farm cooperatives to use the word "cooperative" in their name.⁵ The expansion of cooperatives would have to wait for further developments.

⁴ "Cooperative Society, One that is Successful in the District of Columbia," *Sacramento Daily Union* 87(99), June 16, 1894, p. 7.

⁵ Hearings on S. 2013, District of Columbia Cooperative Associations, "A Bill to Amend the Code of the District of Columbia to Provide for the Organization and Regulation of Cooperative Associations, and for other purposes," April 16, 18, 19, 1940. Housing cooperatives often incorporated in Delaware. Michigan enacted the first cooperative law in 1886, followed by Wisconsin, Kansas, and Pennsylvania in 1887 (Chaddad and Cook 2012: 177).

The cooperative movement in DC gained great support from people like Arthur Capper, a Kansas senator who headed the District of Columbia Committee upon his arrival in DC in 1919 and was a nation-wide supporter of cooperatives.⁶ Capper successfully sponsored the Capper-Volstead Act of 1922 and later acts legalizing cooperative marketing and producers' associations. These laws allowed farmers to form cooperatives to market their own goods, rather than being at the whim of larger corporate distributors.⁷ Capper sought to encourage non-farm cooperatives as well. Upon his arrival in DC, he submitted a Senate bill (S. 3066) to allow the formation and incorporation of cooperation in DC itself. In his report accompanying the bill, Capper wrote, "The organizations, cooperative in character, in the whole United States run up in number into the thousands, and 33 of the States of the Union have provided special laws facilitating their institution, the District of Columbia being one of the relatively few backward jurisdictions."⁸ He also voiced his hope that Congress would allow DC residents to create cooperatives functioning according to the Rochdale Principles. While Capper successfully helped farming cooperatives across the country, Senate Bill S. 3066 that would allow cooperatives in DC did not pass until 1940.

In spite of this legal problem, cooperatives became widespread in DC as a result of the collapse of the economy during the Great Depression.⁹ The Federal Emergency Relief Act of 1933 encouraged the formation of cooperative and self-help associations "for the barter of goods

⁶ Arthur Capper differed significantly from the later chairmen of the DC committee. For example, Capper was the first President of the Topeka branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and on the national board of the NAACP for over 30 years

⁷ Capper-Volstead Act of 1922 and of 1926 providing for cooperative marketing and producers' association. These acts have been called "the Magna Carta of Cooperative Marketing" (Socolofsky 1962: 151), which reflects Linebaugh's later view about the commons in his *The Magna Carta Manifesto: Liberties and Commons for All*.

⁸ "Incorporation of Cooperative Associations in the District of Columbia," Senate Report No. 310 accompanying S. 3066, Submitted by Mr. Capper, Dec. 2, 1919.

⁹ The Federal government's Emergency Relief Administration supported some cooperatives, which could only exchange but not sell their goods. Hearings on S. 2013, District of Columbia Cooperative Associations, "A Bill to Amend the Code of the District of Columbia to Provide for the Organization and Regulation of Cooperative Associations, and for other purposes," April 16, 18, 19, 1940.

and services.”¹⁰ The Federal Emergency Relief Agency provided grants and surplus government buildings and materials to these associations. Cooperative production was to provide employment and encourage barter of produced items, such as pillow cases and dresses, and services, such as barbering. In July 1934, the Federal Emergency Relief Administration established a Division of Self-Help within the District of Columbia Emergency Relief Administration. In less than a year, 13 self-help cooperatives had been established and more were to come (Parker 1935). For example, civil rights activist Nannie Helen Burroughs established the Northeast Self-Help Cooperative, later renamed Cooperative Industries, Inc., in Lincoln Heights, a cooperative that served approximately six-thousand people in far northeast DC between 1934 and 1938.¹¹ The government also supported the Greenbelt cities and their cooperatives (MacKean 2013).

The cooperative movement had a momentum of its own. As mentioned above, African Americans became quite involved in cooperatives, especially during the 1930s. Cooperative Industries, Inc., was an African American cooperative. In 1934, African Americans also formed the Capitol Cab Company, which, according to *Ebony* in 1962, was “the largest cooperatively owned taxi fleet in the world” with 1,500 taxicabs.¹² In 1934, a group of DC residents also formed the Washington Consumers’ League, which two years later created the two cooperative groups. First, the Rochdale Stores were cooperative groceries located in Takoma Park, Bethesda,

¹⁰ Division of Self-Help Cooperatives, Federal Emergency Relief Administration, “Manual of Rules and Policies concerning Self-Help and Non-Profit Cooperatives Eligible to Federal Aid,” Revised - Dec. 1934. Library of Congress manuscripts.

¹¹ National Park Service, <http://pdfhost.focus.nps.gov/docs/NHLS/Text/91002049.pdf>
Nannie Helen Burroughs. 2001. *A Register of Her Papers in the Library of Congress*.
<http://lcweb2.loc.gov/service/mss/eadxmss/eadpdfmss/2003/ms003010.pdf> For more details on these cooperatives, see Gordon Nembhard (2014).

¹² “World’s Largest Co-op Cab Co.” 1962. *Ebony*, p. 48.

Georgetown, Cleveland Park, Mount Pleasant, and Falls Church.¹³ They produced 400 Co-op branded foods and had 700 members. Second, Konsum was a gasoline and oil cooperative, which started as a single rented pump at a private gas station and became a cooperative gas station at 21st and Virginia Ave, NW.¹⁴ In 1938, the Washington Bookshop, also called The Bookshop and the Bookshop Association, formed as a cooperative, which sold books and records at a discount, but also functioned as an interracial social club, art gallery, and lecture hall (McReynolds and Robbins 2009: 76-77). The 1930s greatly increased the number of cooperatives in DC.

In 1941, the Washington Bookshop could change its name to the Washington *Cooperative* Bookshop because, just a year earlier, Congress (with the help of Senator Capper) passed the DC Cooperative Association Act (S. 2013). The DC Cooperative Association Act provided cooperatives with a legal structure, including one vote for every member. After three years as a buying club, the Frederick Douglass Co-operative became a Rochdale Store in Southeast DC. A wide range of housing cooperatives in DC also formed in the 1940s. Importantly, this new law allowed cooperatives from across the country to register in DC.

The Washington Bookshop also became one of the examples of subversive organizations in DC, attacked by the House on Un-American Activities Committee (McReynolds and Robbins 2009: 76-77). By 1945, the House was holding hearings on whether cooperatives were un-American and a “threat to private enterprise in the United States.”¹⁵ In the increasingly oppressive environment of the 1950s, very few cooperatives formed in the District.

¹³ Hearings on S. 2013, District of Columbia Cooperative Associations, “A Bill to Amend the Code of the District of Columbia to Provide for the Organization and Regulation of Cooperative Associations, and for other purposes,” April 16, 18, 19, 1940.

¹⁴ Konsum had a second gas station in Mt. Pleasant, but it soon went out of business.

¹⁵ The hearings began in April 1945. U.S. Congress. House. Select Committee on Small Business. 1946. *The Competition of Cooperatives with Other Forms of Business Enterprise*. Washington, DC: Government Printing Office.

The 1960s brought an upswing in cooperative formation. The civil rights movement supported a wide variety of cooperatives because people and especially those marginalized from mainstream, white society could take control of their economic lives and create an alternative to liberal, individualist consumer society. Many civil rights activists brought cooperative practices and ideas from around the country to DC, as I discuss in the next section. The proliferation of different kinds of cooperatives in the District could forge a new kind of society, including a society based on broad civil, economic, and political rights.

During the 1960s, many food cooperatives and buying clubs formed because inflation made food too expensive for many low-income people and because grocery stores had moved out of the city, leaving what we now call “food deserts.” DC became an innovator in this area by opening food cooperatives in public housing projects. In 1966, community organizers on Capitol Hill worked with Greenbelt Consumer Coop and later with the Anacostia Buyers Club to create a food buying club involving the poor.¹⁶ In 1970, with the help of Black Markets, Inc., community organizers at the Friendship House started the nation’s first food co-op in public housing, MLK Cooperative Store No. 1.¹⁷ As a nice, unexpected connection with the past, MLK Cooperative Store No. 1 was located in the Arthur Capper public housing project, named after the now

¹⁶ Over several decades, Greenbelt, MD, had developed an extensive cooperative system, which helped to form new cooperatives.

¹⁷ GWU Special Collections, Friendship House Association Records, MS2142, Box 60, File 1, “Arthur Capper Consumers’ Fed., 1969”; “Food Co-Op Opens at Capper Housing.” *DC Gazette*, February 1970, p. 3. Another MLK Food Cooperative was supposed to exist on North Capitol Street, near the Central Post Office, or within Sursum Corda public housing. Green, Eric. “Some Co-Ops Make It, Some Don’t.” *DC Gazette*, May 17, 1972.

deceased Kansas senator, who had helped DC legally recognize cooperatives.¹⁸

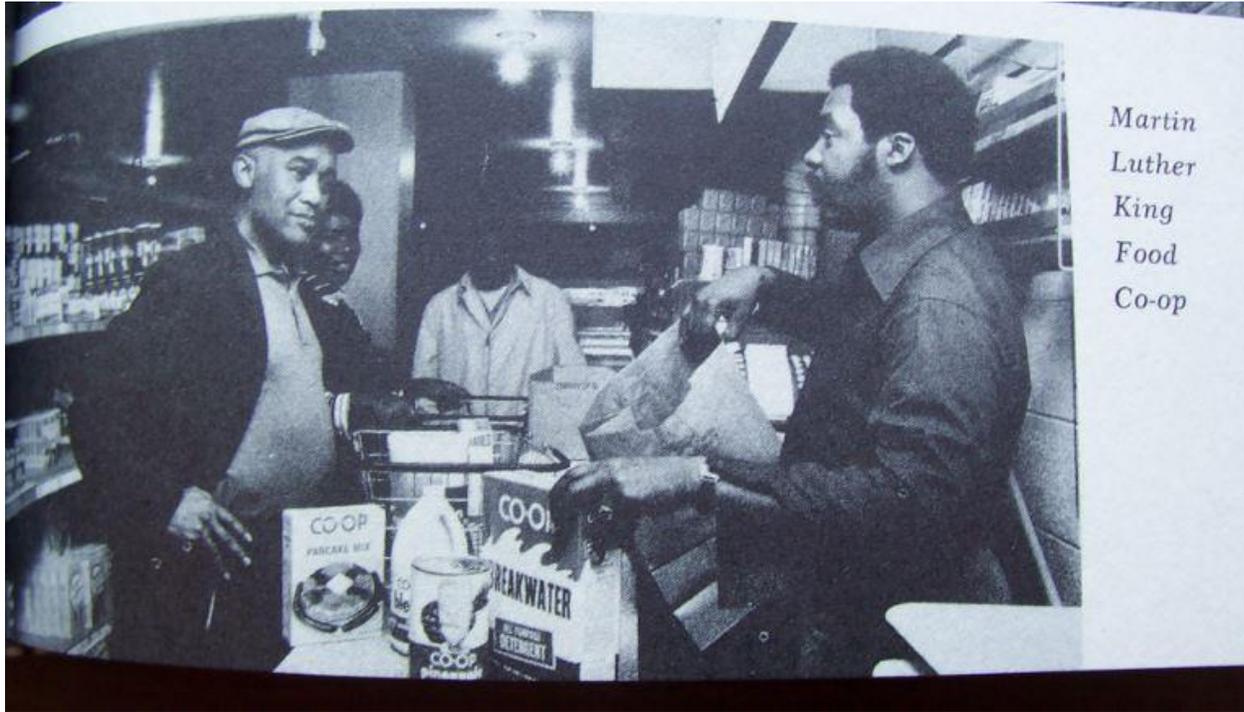


Figure 1: Martin Luther King Food Co-op in Arthur Capper Public Housing (photo by Roland Freeman in Smith 1974: 106)

In addition, DC has had a long history of credit unions, a kind of financial cooperative. By 1967, the DC Credit Union League listed 172 credit unions with over 380,000 members. Cooperatives also formed their own credit unions. For example, Capitol Cab had its own credit union, which provided financing for new and current taxi drivers. Friendship House had its own credit union, which still has a sign on 8th St SE. Credit unions provide essential funds, which, before the expansion of finance in the late 1970s, were difficult to acquire by mainstream routes. Thus, credit unions and other non-bank forms of finance made cooperatives possible.

By 1975, DC residents had formed a broad range of cooperatives. These cooperatives provided spaces for autonomy and control, a form of political and economic *self-governance*, since *self-government* had until that point been impossible in DC. This home rule from below did not merely recreate an imagined liberal, individualistic consumer society, but rather imagined a

¹⁸ MLK Cooperative Store No. 1 may have remained in business until 1995, but I am checking on this.

new society based on what Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (2011), Huron (2012), and others have called “the commons” or “commonwealth,” the collective spaces, goods, and experiments in living that we create together. Home rule in government would complement and build on this home rule from below.

Cooperative-Based Home Rule

Starting from his first days as mayor in 1979, Marion Barry brought this home rule from below based on cooperatives into the DC government.¹⁹ In the Mayor’s Office, Barry established the Energy Office, which brought in people working to set up energy cooperatives, especially around heating oil, like Jack Werner from United Planning Organization (UPO). The Energy Office initiated energy cooperatives and supported food cooperatives around urban gardening.²⁰ Jerome S. Paige worked on housing cooperatives and was brought in to the DC Department of Housing. Cornelius “Cornbread” Givens came in to head the umbrella Commission on Cooperative Economic Development, which I discuss below. In these ways, Barry brought home rule from below into the DC government and realized a new wave of cooperatives in Washington, DC.

As mentioned earlier, civil rights activists and organizations supported cooperatives. Civil rights activists shared cooperative “best practices” as they moved around the United States, and many of them brought their ideas to Washington, DC.²¹ People like Cornbread Givens helped to create cooperatives in DC and across the country. Givens was a national advocate for cooperatives, who moved to DC when Marion Barry became mayor. Givens was born in

¹⁹ I have no information about any cooperative policies by the first Mayor, Mayor Walter Washington.

²⁰ Personal conversation with Jack Werner.

²¹ For example, Ella Baker advised SNCC. She was one of the founders and the executive director of the Young Negroes’ Cooperative League formed in 1930 (Ransby 2003: 82-83).

Newark, NJ. He worked in unions and then owned his own construction company and became the first African American to run for mayor in a major city, Jersey City, in 1965. In the late 1960s, he became a leader in the Poor People's Campaign, which he helped form into the Poor People's Development Foundation (PPDF).²²

Incorporated in the District in October 1968, the PPDF sought to help specifically poor communities develop cooperatives.²³ They first worked with farmer cooperatives of Southern tenant farmers in 1971. These cooperatives had formed because, in response to the Voting Rights Act of 1965, Southern tenant farmers had decided to register to vote and were, in retaliation, evicted from their tenant farms. Cooperatives were seen as the way to help these tenant farmers survive and also realize the Voting Rights Act and civil rights more generally. Cornbread Givens worked to connect Southern farmer cooperatives with food/consumer cooperatives, farmers markets, health food stores, and collective warehouses, which he set up around Newark, NJ and New York City. Members of the PPDF trucked food up to Newark and New York City to be sold in farmers markets and health food stores.²⁴

During the 1970s, Cornbread Givens worked to put cooperatives on the national Democratic Party platform and on "The National Black Agenda for the '80s."²⁵ Givens envisioned an entire community development plan in which each community would integrate:

²² Library of Congress, Manuscript Room, Civil Rights During the Carter Administration, 1977-1981, Part: 1 Papers of the Special Assistant for Black Affairs, Section B, Microfilm: 23,401, Reel 17. Letter from Cornbread Givens of PPDF to Mr. Hamilton Jordan, White House Chief of Staff, Aug. 17, 1979.

²³ Library of Congress, Manuscript Room, Civil Rights During the Carter Administration, 1977-1981, Part: 1 Papers of the Special Assistant for Black Affairs, Section B, Microfilm: 23,401, Reel 11. "Statement of Capability," PPDF, Feb. 12, 1980, p. 1.

²⁴ PPDF worked with the Archer County Small Farmers Cooperative Association of Archer County, Florida, the New Communities Farm in Leesberg, Georgia, a land trust of more than four thousand acres, the Eastern Georgia Small Farmers Cooperative Association in Waynesboro, Georgia, and the Sea Island Small Farmers Cooperative Association on John's Island, South Carolina. PPDF then helped set up a natural food store, The Urban Vegetable, in New York City. Ibid., "Statement of Capability," PPDF, Feb. 12, 1980, p. 2.

²⁵ Library of Congress, Manuscript Room, Civil Rights During the Carter Administration, 1977-1981, Part: 1 Papers of the Special Assistant for Black Affairs, Section B, Microfilm: 23,401, Reel 11. Workpaper on the National Task Force for Cooperative Economic Development, Prepared by Cornbread Givens, Pres PPDF, 1328 NY Avenue, DC.,

- producer cooperatives (particularly important for job creation)
- consumer cooperatives
- credit unions
- low-income housing cooperatives
- a local charity (funded by profits from the other cooperatives and would develop social action programs like schools, hospitals, and child development centers)
- all of this would be organized by a community-wide cooperative²⁶

In general, Givens understood these cooperatives as working together as a system, with some making profits to fund the “local charity” to realize “social action policy,” such as health care. In addition, institutions at the national level would assist these community plans, such as the National Consumer Cooperative Bank, for which Givens successfully advocated in 1978.²⁷

Givens brought this community development model based on cooperatives to DC.

According to the PPDF, Mayor Marion Barry “has indicated that he will use his good offices to establish Washington, D.C. as [a] ‘demonstration’ city for cooperative development.”²⁸ At a February 1980 conference, Mayor Barry said:

In Washington, as in every other major urban center in America, we have entire sections of our city which have been abandoned and neglected by the mainstream of economic activity...Although private enterprise has neglected or abandoned some areas of our city, we must not give up the fight. It is time for the citizens of these areas themselves to become owners and providers of the basic services needed for daily life. The cooperative movement is just what is needed to provide this opportunity. Within the next month or two, I will announce the formation of a D.C. Commission for Cooperative Economic Development. This Commission will have as its very practical mission the initiation and organization of an

March 5, 1980. [1976 Democratic Party Platform: We shall encourage consumer groups to establish and operate consumer cooperatives that will enable consumers to provide themselves marketplace alternatives and to provide a competitive spur to profit-oriented enterprises.]

²⁶ Library of Congress, Manuscript Room, Civil Rights During the Carter Administration, 1977-1981, Part: 1 Papers of the Special Assistant for Black Affairs, Section C, Microfilm: 23,472, Reel 17. File: Poor Peoples Development Foundation, Inc. [O/A 6493], Statement of Testimony by the Poor Peoples Development Foundation, Inc. and the Poor Peoples' Cooperative Bank Implementation Commission on the National Consumer Cooperative Bank before the Inter-Agency Task Force on the National Consumer Cooperative Bank Act, January 9, 10, 11. Presented by Mr. Cornbread Givens, Mr. Frank Shaffer Corona, Ms. Ennis Frances, Ms. Phyllis Brooks. Feb. 9, 1979. Appendix.

²⁷ In 1978, Congress passed a law to create National Consumer Cooperative Bank, for which he had advocated and which exists today at the NCB.

²⁸ Library of Congress, Manuscript Room, Civil Rights During the Carter Administration, 1977-1981, Part: 1 Papers of the Special Assistant for Black Affairs, Section B, Microfilm: 23,401, Reel 11. “Statement of Capability,” PPDF, Feb. 12, 1980, p. 3.

effective network of coops in areas of our city which currently lack basic services...Initially, I think the Commission will help stimulate coop food markets in low and moderate income areas of Washington. Later, the Commission will help stimulate and put into effect energy cooperatives, cooperative housing, cooperative shopping centers, cooperative auto repair centers, and whatever else is lacking and needed in areas of our city which are not serviced by our private economic market.²⁹

By May, Barry had established the District of Columbia Mayor's Commission on Cooperative Economic Development and envisioned cooperatives as way to create jobs and to solve the inner-city food crisis. According to Givens, the Commission was "the very first Commission of this kind anywhere in the nation."³⁰

Barry established the Commission on Cooperative Economic Development specifically to support the formation of cooperatives in housing, food, and home heating oil.³¹ Cornbread Givens, the chair of the Commission, emphasized that these cooperatives would help serve the needs of the poor.³² The Commission was mandated to identify needs for cooperatives in different parts of the District, provide technical support, and develop legislation and support structures for cooperative economic development. The Commission held conferences to train people in cooperative business, such as one on October 2-5, 1980 and another on July 15-16, 1982.

With city-wide support of food cooperatives, DC residents began forming new ones during the 1980s. Arthur Capper public housing project was no longer the only project with a food cooperative. By 1986, at least five other projects had food cooperatives all run by their

²⁹ Library of Congress, Manuscript Room, Civil Rights During the Carter Administration, 1977-1981, Part: 1 Papers of the Special Assistant for Black Affairs, Section B, Microfilm: 23,401, Reel 11. *PPDF newsletter*, Vol. 1, No. 1, March 1980.

³⁰ DC Archives, "Community Cooperative Economic Development, 'Blueprint for Action' 1981-1983.

³¹ "Consumer Cooperatives Commission," *Washington Post*, June 26, 1980, p. DC2.

³² In an amended Mayor's Order (Appendix I), you can see who was on the Commission, including Cornbread Givens. The Commission met regularly until around 1986, but it was formally abolished in 1998.

<http://msa.maryland.gov/megafile/msa/speccol/sc5300/sc5339/000113/016000/016697/unrestricted/20130639e.pdf>

residents, most supported by PPDF: Arthur Capper, Barry Farms,³³ Kenilworth Parkside,³⁴ senior public housing buildings the Horizon House³⁵ and Judiciary House,³⁶ and, possibly, Sursum Corda.

initiatives to better serve the senior citizens in public housing.



Figure 2: Judiciary Senior Citizens Food Cooperative (photo from NCHA 1985 Annual Report, p. 18)

Here are the food cooperatives formed in and after 1975:

Home-Rule Era New Food Cooperatives

<i>Name</i>	<i>Year Started</i>	<i>Location</i>
City Garden	1975	Mt. Pleasant
Fields of Plenty	1977	Adams Morgan
Shepherd Street	1980	NW DC
Chakula	1981	Howard University
Fort Davis	1981	Fort Davis
Cornucopia	1981	Capitol Hill (Walter St, SE)
Takoma Park-Silver Spring	1982	Takoma Park, Silver Spring ³⁷
Horizon House	1982	12 th and M St, NW
Judiciary House	1984*	Judiciary Square
Kenilworth Parkside	1986*	Ward 7
Barry Farms	1986*	Anacostia

Earlier food co-ops

³³ The co-op accepted food stamps. Sugarman, Carole. "Gladys Bunker & the Fresh Ideal: Co-op Brings Fruit & Vegetables to Low-Income in Anacostia," *Washington Post*, Dec. 10, 1986.

³⁴ "Gladys Bunker & the Fresh Ideal: Co-op Brings Fruit & Vegetables to Low-Income in Anacostia," *Washington Post*, Dec. 10, 1986.

³⁵ "Co-op Food Market Opens," *Washington Post*, December 21, 1982, B6.

³⁶ NCHA 1984 Annual Report, p. 17.

³⁷ Yes, this is a Maryland cooperative, but a very important one in the minds of most readers.

Glut	1969	Mt. Rainier ³⁸
MLK No. 1	1970	Capitol Hill/Navy Yard
* estimated.		

In 1980, seven families began the Shepherd Street Collective, a food buying club, which expanded and formed the Community Based Buying Clubs (CBBC) to help other similar groups form and improve their buying power.³⁹ CBBC held People’s Market Days, in which Agricultural Teams, Inc., an African-American-owned farming cooperative in North Carolina, brought food directly from their farms to sell at different locations in DC. Cornbread Givens’ PPDF obtained corporate and government funding for new storefront cooperatives abandoned by supermarket chains.⁴⁰ In general, Cornbread Givens planned to use food cooperatives to make profits to fund community needs, as in his community development model.

The Commission was also mandated to encourage the development of housing co-ops. DC had long experienced gentrification and displacement, from the 1930s and 1940s in Georgetown and soon after on Capitol Hill, but the economic crisis of the 1970s brought large-scale evictions and homelessness in DC.). The new District government passed some of its earliest laws to stop displacement (Huron 2012: 63-65; Wells 2013). The Condominium Act of 1976 required that developers stop the conversion of affordable apartments into condominiums, which led to the complete moratorium on conversions in 1978. The Real Property Transfer Excise Tax of 1978 was the country’s first urban tax on land speculation, “the shorter the period of time the investor held the property, the higher the tax on the property” (Huron 2012: 66). The Rental Housing Sale and Conversion Act of 1980, more popularly called Tenant Opportunity to

³⁸ Yes, this is a Maryland cooperative, but a very important one in the minds of most readers.

³⁹ McCall, Jerry. “Co-op Way to Stalking Cheaper Produce,” *Washington Post*, December 22, 1982, pp. DC1-DC2.

⁴⁰ “Through the efforts of the Commission \$150,000 CDBG money and another \$100,000 private banking money has been committed to stimulate low income storefront food coops.” “Governor’s Taskforce on Food and Nutrition,” Interim Report, November 1984, p. 169:

<http://msa.maryland.gov/megafile/msa/speccol/sc5300/sc5339/000113/016000/016697/unrestricted/20130639e.pdf>

Purchase Act or TOPA, gave tenants the right to purchase their buildings if they went on the market (Huron 2012).

With home rule, housing activists put forth cooperatives as a means to end displacement. In 1979, the Metropolitan Washington Planning and Housing Association (MWPHA) set up a Coop Housing Services Program to assist apartment tenants in the conversion process to cooperatives and set up a revolving loan fund for these conversions. Low-income residents soon began to use TOPA to buy their buildings and create long-term affordable cooperative housing. MWPHA also helped develop a network of tenant groups and housing cooperatives, such as the Columbia Heights Federation of Housing Cooperatives and Sojourners Housing Ministry in the 14th Street Area. Furthermore, Ministries United to Support Community Life (MUSCLE) formed in 1977 and began to provide similar assistance to buildings with at least fifty percent of the tenants qualified for Section 8 housing (Paige and Reuss 1983: 57-58).

Low-income residents formed limited-equity cooperatives (LEC).⁴¹ LECs limit the resale value of cooperatives, so that they remain affordable; involve shares in the cooperative, rather than private ownership of units; and require tenant participation in management.⁴² While New York City had more LECs in absolute numbers, Washington, DC, had more proportional to its population (Huron 2012: 66-67). By late 1980, tenant associations created 17 LECs with a 1000 units and twenty more tenant associations were in the process of buying their buildings to turn into LECs. By 2012, Huron (2012) reports at least 86 LECs with over 3,000 units in DC (p. 66).

⁴¹ [Wells 2013 on land trust in Columbia Heights]

⁴² In 1983, the city had to pass an emergency bill to allow them to legalize housing cooperatives with non-Rochdale voting. The DC Cooperative Association Act requires one person, one vote, according to Rochdale Principles. The emergency act was all rather strange because the law was about allowing proportional voting, rather than Rochdale voting. DC Cooperative Housing Association Proportionate Voting Emergency Act of 1983 permits proportional voting. Nov. 1983, "Emergency Action Averts Co-op Housing Voting Crisis," p. 3.

DC residents also started a small number of worker cooperatives. In 1979, the Women's Community Bakery Collective moved from Hyattsville, MD, to Capitol Hill. The Bakery made about 500 loaves of bread per day, as well as rolls, granola, cookies, muffins, and cakes, which resulted in a half million dollars in business each year (Landman 1993: 51-52). Supposedly, it closed in 1992 only because the main members wanted to try something else. Finally, credit unions continued during home rule.

Home rule provided an environment open to expanding the social, political, and economic world of the commons. DC residents created new cooperatives and other experiments in common property. However, at the same time, home rule remained limited. First, the Congress continually intervened in DC government, which limited home rule. Second, during the 1970s, cities across the United States suffered from the loss of federal funding and economic crisis, which made city governance extremely difficult and changed the nature of city governance. Cooperative economic development had to compete with many other priorities and then suffered from the problems of the Barry administration. The District went into a transitional state.

The Cooptation of Cooperatives and Home Rule from Above

In 1985, Ivanhoe Donaldson pleaded guilty to embezzling DC government funds. Some of these embezzled funds moved through Cornbread Givens' PPDF (Jaffe and Sherwood 1994: 166-168). While Givens did not go to jail, he lost the city-wide support for cooperatives and the momentum of PPDF: "It knocked us out...It set back the whole effort. We were on a roll. It just winded down....I'm still disappointed in Donaldson. He has never apologized."⁴³ In this same period, worldwide neoliberal policies spread, policies that supported free market competition and

⁴³ Cherkis, Jason. "Dreams and Cornbread: This civil rights movement legend has never left the grass roots," *Washington City Paper*, Nov. 5, 1999. <http://www.washingtoncitypaper.com/articles/18433/dreams-and-cornbread/>

private property. In this shifting environment, cooperatives could be used in isolation from the Givens' broader community model to dismantle home rule from below and to support a new kind of home rule from above.

In 1988, the NCHA closed the Ellen Wilson public housing project, located on Capitol Hill at 7th and I St., SE, for major renovations and moved out all of the 129 families living there.⁴⁴ Veterans, including some who had lived in Ellen Wilson, soon squatted in the vacated buildings and called for the rehabilitation of the languishing public housing project. These veterans came into contact, through a DC community organizer, with a wealthy Bostonian interested in supporting a construction cooperative.⁴⁵ They put together a plan to develop a Cooperative Builders Yard, a cooperative that would train veterans in construction in Southeast DC. The cooperative rented land, but then the veterans were displaced from their housing in Ellen Wilson and the construction cooperative was not realized.⁴⁶

At the same time, Ellen Wilson residents excitedly supported the possibility of housing cooperatives. For home rule to be realized fully, the residents of DC needed to maintain and strengthen simultaneously political representation, economic empowerment, and cultural recognition. Cooperatives particularly supported economic empowerment, which expanded within the context of political representation and cultural recognition. Instead, in this transitional period in DC, housing cooperatives could be isolated from this broader model, as well as from Givens' community model with its focus on the lowest-income residents of the District.

⁴⁴ Lang, Laura. "Dream City, *Washington City Paper*, April 16, 1999.

<http://www.washingtoncitypaper.com/articles/17108/dream-city>

⁴⁵ Personal conversation with Dominic Moulden.

⁴⁶ In 1992, the veterans began renovating the buildings themselves. I am not certain if the construction cooperative was realized for a short time. This project was envisioned at least 10 years earlier. In 1981, Cecil Byrd, a member of the National Black Veterans Organization, sought to work with the Cornbread Givens' Commission on Cooperative Economic Development and proposed a Housing Rehabilitation and Energy Training Cooperative for Vietnam Veterans. DC Archives, Minutes of MCCED meeting, Jan. 14, 1981 and March 19, 1981 as well as "Community Cooperative Economic Development, 'Blueprint for Action' 1981-1983." Nov. 1981.

From all accounts, the Ellen Wilson redevelopment started out quite inclusive. The main organizational groups – Ellen Wilson Neighborhood Redevelopment Corporation (a Community Development Corporation [CDC]) and the Ellen Wilson Community Advisory Council – brought public housing residents from Ellen Wilson and from neighboring Arthur Capper and Carrollsburg to the table with homeowners and business people. Church leaders and members understood the redevelopment of Ellen Wilson as a step towards social justice that would truly improve the lives of Ellen Wilson residents (Blagburn n.d.). They put together a plan to use HOPE VI funds for Ellen Wilson’s redevelopment. While they had fears about the promises not being realized, residents across Capitol Hill took part in the planning for a new Ellen Wilson housing development.

Once the plans were submitted to HUD, the situation shifted and resulted in almost none of the former Ellen Wilson residents living in the new mixed-income development. Blagburn (n.d.) argues that Ellen Wilson residents were organized, but they were not connected to influential elites or influential neighbors, who could make certain that the plans were realized and promises kept. Many homeowners and business people rejected the redevelopment plan and could press for numerous changes.⁴⁷ As one newspaper article noted in 1995, “The size of the grant has increased as plans have changed. And the income levels are much, much higher than those of the people who used to live at Ellen Wilson or of D.C. public housing residents in general, which are generally below 12 percent of the median income.”⁴⁸ The developers incorporated cooperatives but now in a limited way. HUD had long supported limited-equity cooperatives. In 1985, a former HUD employee had created Telesis, which soon specialized in

⁴⁷ For example, the Sousa Neighborhood Association and National Capital Bank’s James Didden both rejected the proposals. Maryann Haggerty, “Public Housing Renewal Plan Strikes a Nerve,” Washington Post, E1, Sept, 23, 1995.

⁴⁸ Maryann Haggerty, “Public Housing Renewal Plan Strikes a Nerve,” Washington Post, E1, Sept, 23, 1995.

converting public housing to cooperatives. In contrast to calls for cooperatives as a way to create real home rule, the developers understood limited-equity cooperatives in a very limited sense. In the words of one developer, “While there will be a ‘homeowners’ cooperative board’ of residents, neighbors and public agency representatives, the on-site management company will dominate, choosing ‘tenants’ and enforcing so-called proper conduct.”⁴⁹ A cooperative tenant council would organize “housekeeping-type chores.”⁵⁰ No one spoke about these cooperatives as part of a broader community model as Cornbread Givens had. In the end, it is not clear that any former Ellen Wilson residents were allowed to return to the development.⁵¹

In contrast to the public housing residents, the Capitol Hill business community could realize a neighborhood vision without public housing for several reasons. First, the business community was organized *and* had connections to realize its interests. President Bush appointed Jack Kemp as the director of HUD from 1989-1993, where Kemp sought to realize his conservative libertarian views and his programs to sell public housing to its tenants and create enterprise zones. In 1989, a neighbor of the Ellen Wilson project, Karl Zinsmeister, wrote a letter to Capitol Hill Restoration Society president:

I think a meeting with Kemp and assistants is probably the most important step for us (though I think we ought to meet with the DC people first). I’ve worked a lot in the Kemp wing of politics and I can tell you this project ought to ring all the right bells for him right now: private sector involvement in solving social problems, fostering tenant empowerment and demanding individual responsibility, using market-based solutions to minister to human needs, property privatization, etc. etc. This makes a lovely little test case on its merits, and being

⁴⁹ Meeting with developer Marilyn Melkonian reported in Bill Rice, “Impossible dream for Ellen Wilson public-housing site,” *The Hill*, Sept. 6, 1995.

⁵⁰ “Statement of the Coalition to Save Ellen Wilson,” probably attached to “Letter from Karl Zinsmeister to Jim, April 3, 1989” in footnote #29.

⁵¹ “Although the original project planners intended to give priority to those who lived in the former Ellen Wilson dwellings, the Townhomes was not completed until more than a decade after Ellen Wilson was abandoned. By then, most former residents could not be located or had moved on. Invitations were then extended to people living in the nearby Arthur Capper project. However, Jones was one of the few Arthur Capper residents who was able to pass the Townhomes’s screening process and save enough money for the initial down payment.” Jessica Schulberg, “Built to replace Ellen Wilson housing project, townhouses are a mixed-income model,” *Washington Post*, Nov. 3, 2013.

located so conveniently for presidential walk-throughs. We ought to start thinking about a strong meeting with Kemp soon... We should also start thinking about economics soon. *My back-of-the-envelope tells me the Ellen Wilson site is worth maybe 15 million dollars.*⁵²

A small group organized around the local National Capital Bank, the Capitol Hill Restoration Society, local real estate agents and businesses, as well as politically connected neighbors like Zinsmeister to realize a neighborhood without the public housing residents.

Second, changes in city finances worldwide helped this small group. As Kripper (2010) has argued, during the 1970s, financialization “allowed for the state to avoid a series of economic, social, and political dilemmas that confronted policymakers beginning in the late 1960s and 1970s” and made financial activities a dominant sector of the U.S. economy (p. 2), as well as of all core economies. By the 1980s, there was an enormous supply of credit in the US economy due to 1) deregulation and removal of restraints on the flow of credit, 2) high interest rates imposed in the early 1980s, and “unprecedented foreign capital inflows into the U.S. economy” in part due to policies in Japan (ibid.: 52). In addition, “the wider availability of credit enables investors to purchase assets with borrowed funds, pushing the price of assets higher” (ibid.: 54). The availability of investment funds made the redevelopment imaginable to local groups.

Third, in 1995, the Congress created the DC Control Board, which further undermined home rule from below. The Control Board was organized because “A combination of accumulated operating deficits, cash shortages, management inefficiencies, and deficit spending in the current fiscal year have created a fiscal emergency in the District of Columbia.”⁵³ The

⁵² Emphasis inserted. GWU Special Collections, Capitol Hill Restoration Society, MS2009, Box 70, File 16, “Ellen Wilson Correspondence, 1989-1990,” Pat Schauer. Letter from Karl Zinsmeister to Jim, April 3, 1989.

⁵³ The Control Board’s official name was the District of Columbia Financial Responsibility and Management Assistance Authority. For the entire text of the bill that created the Control Board: H.R.1345, District of Columbia

five-person Control Board could override decisions by the Mayor and the city council and implemented a broad reorganization of the District government. Specific to Ellen Wilson, the DC Housing Authority went into receivership, headed by David Gilmore. Gilmore removed the obstacles to the Ellen Wilson plan, maintaining the cooperatives in their limited form.⁵⁴

The Control Board undermined cooperatives more broadly. The Control Board abolished the Commission on Cooperative Community Development in 1998, officially ending the integration of home rule from below into the DC government. By this point, several cooperatives had closed. In 1992, the Women's Community Bakery Collective on Capitol Hill had shut its doors. The Arthur Capper food cooperative closed in the mid-1990s, and David Gilmore sought to give the public housing project's land to the Marines as a "gift." Through these and other strategies, DC political and economic elites limited home rule to a technocratic home rule from above. For home rule to be realized fully, the residents of DC needed to maintain and strengthen simultaneously political representation, economic empowerment, and cultural recognition, not just housing cooperatives and other cooperatives in isolation.

Conclusions

Before home rule, DC residents sought to build autonomous spheres, gain control over life, and forge new resources in the District beyond formal government. Here I have looked at the cooperative movement in DC as a form of home rule from below. DC residents had to struggle continually to maintain a broader sense of home rule than that imagined by many DC

Financial Responsibility and Management Assistance Act of 1995 (Enrolled as Agreed to or Passed by Both House and Senate), <http://thomas.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/z?c104:h.r.1345.enr>:

⁵⁴ Gilmore: "Due to the effect of federal rules in the past, public housing units went to those most in need, such as the homeless. That would not be the case at the new project, where persons with up to 115% of the area median income would occupy the units." Bill Van Den Toorn, "Ellen Wilson Developers Grilled," *Washington's Hill Rag*, Sept. 22, 1995.

elites. With the economic and governmental crises of the 1970s and 1980s, this home rule from below has been undermined, replaced by limited forms of governmental rule, or, in other words, limited home rule from above. In 1995, the DC Control Board removed the vestiges of home rule from below within DC government, using elements like housing cooperatives in isolation and in extremely limited form to realize this removal.

However, the cooperative movement continues today in Washington, DC. Last year, a group of people interested in cooperatives put on a day-long conference on cooperatives with about 200 participants. The group maintains a website with a co-op directory, showing the wide range of cooperatives in DC today and more cooperatives to come: <http://coopdc.org/> It is not clear that these cooperatives view themselves as home rule from below, as part of broader community model like that of Cornbread Givens, or as part of the long history of cooperatives, though some individuals may remember these earlier movements. It is hoped that this paper may provide a history to link today's cooperatives with a broader form of home rule from below.

Appendix I

Mayor's Commission on Cooperative Economic Development

Originating Agency: Office of the Mayor

- 1) These people will serve until June 1, 1983: Cornbread Givens, Emma C. Mimms, James D. Vitarello, Bruce Bryan, Ruth Jordan, Sylvia Correa, Caroline Cullen Ramsay, George Clarke.
- 2) These people will serve until June 1, 1982: G. Mujahid A. Beyah, Stam Straughter, Hank Albarelli, George A. Didden, Carol Ann Phillips, Larry F. Weston, William Washburn III, Leo M. Bernstein.
- 3) These people will serve until June 1, 1981: Sterling Green, Gwendolyn King, Richard Tolliver, William J. Barrow III, Bettye J. Mobley-Washington, Toni D. Schmiegelow, Raymond H. Brown, Blenna A. Cunningham.
- 4) These people are government members and serve at the pleasure of the mayor: Julian C. Nicholas, Edward Meyers, Jack Werner, Herbert Simmons, Marie Nahikian.

Cornbread Givens is Chairperson and serves at the pleasure of the Mayor.

District of Columbia Register, Mayor's Order 80-260, October 22, 1980

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