Downtown’s U Street Corridor:

For Historians and Foodies Alike

I’m an unabashed foodie. Point me toward Vietnamese pho, Thai green or red curry, Indian lassi, Swiss rosti potatoes, Greek taramasalata, and I’m so there, plate in hand. I’m not saying it has to be foreign, although that’s often a good thing. What I enjoy isn’t prissy or expensive food, or food that I can’t identify or even pronounce without a translator. No, I’m talking about real, honest food with an imaginative flair.

What goes best with good food? Well, to balance the indulgence, I go in search of something new, information to make me think, reconsider, maybe set me back on my heels (mentally speaking). Don’t get me wrong: I like the familiar, returning to what I’m comfortable with, but there’s something energizing about what Paul Harvey used to call “the rest of the story.”

That’s how I came to visit Busboys and Poets Restaurant and the African American Civil War Memorial and Museum. I’d read the description of the restaurant: a “place to take a deliberate pause and feed your mind, body and soul” and was aware that it had three locations in the D.C. area. I chose its flagship location in what’s referred to as the U Street corridor, an area long known as the cultural center of a vibrant African American community. Until the 1920s, when New York’s Harlem overtook it, it was home to the largest urban African American community in the United States. The restaurant’s name is a tribute to Langston Hughes who worked as a busboy before he became a noted poet. Owner Andy Shallal, an Iraqi artist, established it in 2005, shaping it into a community gathering place. Along with the social activist portraits and the quotations on the walls, the restaurant houses a bookstore and offers space for poetry readings, music, lectures, films, and private events. The food consists of eclectic, imaginative offerings ranging from burgers and sandwiches to vegan entrees. Sweet potato fries? They’ve got ’em. Tofu? Ditto. Portions are generous, service is friendly and prompt. It’s a welcoming place that reminded me of my college years and long hours nursing a cup of coffee. Now it’s a latte and WiFi!

After that, I explored the African American Civil War Memorial and Museum, which defines its mission thus: “[to] preserve and tell the stories of the United States Colored Troops and African American involvement in the American Civil War.” The memorial, Spirit of Freedom, is a bronze sculpture that portrays three infantrymen and a sailor in battle-ready posture. Central to the memorial is the Wall of Honor, listing the names of more than 200,000 African American soldiers. This is what I meant when I used the phrase, “set me back on my heels.” The numbers blew me away: 3.5 million soldiers fought in the Civil War; in 1861, there were 4.2 million African Americans living in the U.S., 3.8 million of whom were enslaved; around 179,000 African American men served in the Union Army, 37,000 of whom died in the conflict, yet black Americans couldn’t vote until 1870. Those numbers and the information displayed at the museum led me to explore several websites to try to understand a bit more about the Civil War and about its tangled, complicated history. I was struck by the quotation from Abraham Lincoln: “Without the military help of the black freedmen, the war against the South could not have been won.” As I write this, I’m aware that February is Black History Month. Prolong the celebration by visiting one or both of these sites. They offer much to enjoy, ponder, and learn.

The restaurant’s website is www.busboysandpoets.com (202-387-7638), and www.afroamcivilwar.org (202-667-2667) is the museum’s site.