

FELLOWSHIP HOUSING 101

(by Felix A. Martinez, Class of 2003 – Updated November 26, 2012)

The purpose of this guide is not to tell you where to live but to help you make the decision yourself... wisely!

First, the timing of placement week and the beginning of the fellowship year are unfortunately too far apart to effectively search for and secure a place that week. If you are not familiar with DC, you should take that week as an opportunity to learn about the city and its environs so you can decide where in general you would like to live for that year.

Another important thing is that if you do not come from a major metro area, be prepared for rental sticker shock. Your \$800 dollar, two bedroom apartment in Smallville, USA is a cardboard shack by the Greyhound depot in DC.

Important facts to newcomers: buying wine and beer is cheaper in DC than in Maryland and Virginia but overall, taxes are higher in D.C. The cheapest income tax rate is Virginia, then Maryland. Sales tax in VA and MD is the same (5%).

The three most important considerations when you look for housing should be:

- 1) How easy is it to get to work?
- 2) Will you treasure going out regularly in the evenings?
- 3) How much open space do you need?

We will try to tackle these first and then give some general tips on finding that place of your dreams!

The Commute

Where you choose to work should weigh heavily into where you live. Moving around the metro DC area is not really that bad as long as your commute does not involve driving on the beltway. However, parking for your car once you get to work can be scarce and very expensive. The best advice is to live within walking distance to the Metro (either bus or rail) or walking/biking distance to work. The DC area is getting more and more biker friendly, and most office complexes will have some sort of gym/exercise room where you could shower (better yet workout!) before work if need be.

Buses in the District can sometimes be very slow and infrequent/unreliable. But they are cheaper than the train. Take a few test trips if possible. Also, find out where the road bottlenecks are and try to avoid having to commute through them (for example, heading south into DC through Columbia Heights). Heading into DC from the suburbs can be especially slow during rush hour, but if you're heading out of DC towards Silver

Spring during rush hour, the buses are often surprisingly quick (reverse commuting rocks).

DC Bike Share is a good deal, but commuting can be difficult if all bikes near you are taken or there are no parking spots (especially downtown). There are lots of bike paths out in VA where you would never have to ride on the road to get anywhere, less so in DC. Regardless, many people bike in DC and don't have issues.

Come winter, biking might get tricky so the metro will be your next best friend. The metro is very accessible from most of the “cool” neighborhoods to live in DC, but you need to consider that it does get crowded during rush hour. Usually your best bet is to minimize the number of stops you will need to take to get to work. On the other hand, if a longer commute doesn't bother you, it can be a nice place to sit (if you start from one of the first stops) and read a book or the newspaper.

Notes:

- *Many people in downtown (even up at Silver Spring) do not own a car. You can always take a cab from the grocery store or rent a car if you want to get away for the weekend.*
- *Parking anywhere in DC is a nightmare, some fellows have spent at least \$500 on getting vehicles switched to DC plates, getting a parking permit, tickets, etc. If you have a car it would be extremely worthwhile to find a place with a parking spot.*
- *Motorcycles can park for free in the SS campus parking lot. E-mail Felix for more info if you are planning on riding to work (felix.martinez@noaa.gov).*

Going Out in the Evenings

If you are interested in experiencing the culture of DC, you need to be wise about where you move to. The perfect example is if you work at NOAA in Silver Spring (SS) it makes sense to live nearby to minimize the commute and take advantage of cheaper housing than in DC proper. However, you will most likely miss most of the nightlife. Getting out of work at 5:00 to head downtown for happy hour in the middle of the rush and then head back later “happy” but tired to the suburbs to wake up early the next morning will get old fast. Even on the weekends, after a weeklong worth of bureaucracy, the trek down to DC will be unappealing. Guaranteed you will only visit DC when some relative or friend visits you from out of town!

Open Space

Given the rental rates in the DC area, space can be a major consideration. Rents for 1-2 bedrooms in DC can range from ~ \$1500 to well over \$2000 in a luxury place. Cheaper places in DC can be found in the form of studios and “English Basements” (more on this

later). However, you will be hard pressed to find anything for less than \$1000 in the nicer neighborhoods.

If you need space you will most likely need roommates to get a large place. You can then find places for \$850-\$1200 per person. Living out in the suburbs is an option to find more affordable larger places, but then you need to consider the commute and social life issues.

A word of caution when looking for a place with roommates is that a limiting factor is not *bedrooms* but *bathrooms*. A 3 bedroom house or apartment will most likely only have 2 full bathrooms, so you must be prepared to share!

The typical dwellings in DC are apartment buildings and row-houses that are either single homes or are split into apartments. Out in the 'burbs you can find a larger selection of apartment types, town-homes, and single family homes. To put rents in perspective, you can pay outside the beltway for a 3-4 bedroom single house what you pay downtown for a 1 bedroom apartment!!

What in the world is an "English Basement"? Many row-houses in downtown DC have large walk-in basements that are half sunken in. They are typically converted into separate rental units. They are either studio or 1 bedroom units. Most will have plenty of windows and depending on their location some will get plenty of light. Although they are set for one person, their rent rates tend to be fairly high for the nice ones.

So what is the best strategy?

First sit down and be honest with what your priorities are.

Do not let actual rent be the main consideration (a \$1800 apartment where you will not have to commute will in the end be cheaper than a \$1500 that requires daily metro rides and / or driving).

Search in the web for ads a few days before coming for placement week so you are familiar with what your choices might be.

<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/realestate/rent/>

<http://washingtondc.craigslist.org/>

www.padmapper.com is map-based app/site that uses craigslist and a few others

crimemap.dc.gov will give you an idea how "active" a neighborhood is. In terms of crime, awareness of your surroundings is the key.

<http://www.spotcrime.com/dc/washington> does the same for when Crimemap is down

Stay a couple of days after placement week to look around the areas you might be interested in.

The best strategy is to make heavy use of craigslist, set up 3-5 appointments per day for a few days, inquire about whatever information you would need to know to make your decision (neatness, use of common space, boyfriend/girlfriend/visitors, pets, social lives, personality questions, etc) and aggressively pursue places that are a good fit once you've seen a handful and met all the roommates. Don't expect good deals to last long, and don't try to find the *perfect* place.

Note: If you know a real estate agent in your hometown, they might be able to tap into the "Multiple Listing Service" and find out information for you ahead of time. The MLS listing will have a description of the house, most often a photo, and the contact info of the agent.

You could also take advantage of the "calls for roommates" from people in the fellows loop. You will soon start getting some of those forwarded to you by the fellowship manager.

The down and dirty

So where are the good places to live in DC?

Like any big city, the DC metro area has both good and bad neighborhoods. They are also much intertwined. Rule of thumb is visit, look around and pay attention to what the neighbors' places look like.

Buy a street guide of the DC area before you do anything else so you can write notes of the neighborhoods as you walk, drive around (Rand McNally's Thomas Guide is the best). The guide will also come in handy when you start moving around DC to do things

What follows is not a comprehensive listing of desirable areas, but it should give you a good idea.

DC:

Capitol Hill – obviously close to the congressional offices. It is very neighborhoody with Victorian architecture and has many bars and restaurants to go out to. It is also the home of the Eastern Market (an eclectic place to shop). Somewhat safe but don't leave your bike outside, easy access to the Metro

Chinatown/Mount Vernon Triangle – Mostly consists of high-rises. Walkable to the Capitol (or Army Corp of Engineers headquarters!) and very metro friendly. The neighborhood lacks character, and it can be like living in a hotel, but it is a very convenient location and very easy to get to more interesting places. Prices seem pretty similar to Capitol Hill.

Dupont Circle – this is a very hip area with lots of bars, boutiques, and restaurants. It has plenty of apartment buildings along the main streets and Victorian row-houses on the side streets, has relatively easy access to the Metro, close to the National Zoo and Rock Creek Park.

Adams Morgan - More expensive, there is a very active nightlife as well as shops and restaurants. Parking can be bad on the weekends. There are lots of bus lines that run through here frequently, but anywhere you live will likely be a 15-30 minute walk to a metro.

Woodley Park to Tenley Town (along the Red line) – these areas are similar to Dupont Circle, but not as hip and becoming more residential. It is safe to live, but starts getting far from most workplaces, calling for longer commutes.

Georgetown – the name says it all. Real cool place to live but a very pricey neighborhood. It is very eclectic with lots of things to do, but no direct access to metro. A cab or bus can take you to the closest metro stop. Will require a roommate!

Columbia Heights – once considered off limits, Columbia Heights is now a hotspot for young professionals. With a Target, Best Buy, Chipotle, Starbucks, DSW Shoes, and Bed Bath and Beyond built on top of the Metro stop, this area has gone from neglected to bustling. Lots of great restaurants and nightlife in the area as well. Just don't venture too far from the Metro for your housing – the further east and north you go, the sketchier the neighborhood, and the less likely you'll want to be walking home from the Metro late at night.

Do NOT live east of Georgia Ave. NW

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Mt. Pleasant – Located just to the west of Columbia Heights, Mt. Pleasant has more trees, and the neighborhood is divided between families and young people sharing rowhouses. Very beautiful and more safe than surrounding areas. There are some restaurants and shops along their main street. You can find some very cheap places to live here though you will have to share with a bunch of other people, likely.

Petworth - Petworth is what Columbia Heights was 5-10 years ago. It is in the process of gentrifying, there are some shops and restaurants, but not as many as Columbia Heights.

U Street - lots of nightlife, shops, restaurants, etc. and as a result can be very expensive though we've heard of some good deals. Less of a neighborhood feel because it can be touristy.

Woodley Park to Tenley Town (along the Red line) – these areas are similar to Dupont Circle, with a more residential feel. Woodley Park is a pleasant tree-line neighborhood right near the happening Adams Morgan and Dupont Circle. Woodley Park also has easy access to the bike trails of Rock Creek Park, and is <15min by bike from the National Mall. It is safe to live, is slightly further on the red-line, calling for longer commutes (>30min from Woodley Park).

Catholic University/Brookland – Super fast commute to both Silver Spring and downtown (so both Leg. and Exec. fellows can live there). Not much in the way of nightlife, but it's so close to Bloomingdale, Chinatown, Columbia Heights that you can get anywhere you want very quickly. It's a good compromise between living close to work and living close to downtown.

Bloomingdale - Located east of Howard University, from about 3rd St NW to North Capitol and north of Florida Ave, it is very convenient to U St and the Hill, and is more centrally located than Brookland while rent is cheaper than U St and other neighborhoods. Additionally, it has its own up and coming center, a farmers market, yoga, a few restaurants, a great bar, etc.

Suburbs: (Maryland)

Silver Spring (SS) – around the NOAA campus there are several apartment buildings and condo/duplex type places within easy walking or biking distance. The immediate N and NW of SS downtown are relatively safe. As you move N and NW past the beltway, there are some nice oldish neighborhoods where retired folks are mixed with younger families (Kensington, Wheaton, Forest Glen). The Wheaton town center has lots of ethnic markets and mom and pop restaurants, but can get sketchy at night.

Takoma Park – just S of SS is this cool enclave of nice old homes. It is kind of artsy with a few restaurants and shops. Nice Farmer's Market Coop. Does have some sketchy areas so beware, visit first.

Bethesda / Chevy Chase – it starts getting to be a bit far from downtown DC and a long metro ride to SS (you need to loop down and around on the Red line). You could commute to SS by car, bus, or bike. It has a nice downtown to go to eat and an Art Film theater complex. It also has a cool Farmer's / Flea Market place to visit. It has two nice public pool places to swim, an outdoor complex and an indoor complex with an exercise room. The neighborhoods mostly single-family homes are nice, but pricey. There are some town-home complexes in the area.

College Park – home of University of Maryland, has somewhat of a college town feel and the rent is lower. There is an REI store and a cool organic foods grocery store. It is, however, a longish commute to both DC and SS.

Hyattsville – between DC and College Park, this town is an up-and-coming area. Houses are still a bit cheaper than the rest of the other suburbs (but not likely to last too long). It has a few nice places to grab a bite and beer (i.e., Frankiln's, Busboys & Poets). The commute is shorter than from College Park.

Rockville – typical suburban area with lots of brand new housing, malls, etc. It's the end of the line for the Red line and quite a long commute on the metro. Bus and car, as well as MARC train, commuting is possible to SS.

Suburbs: (Virginia)

Alexandria / Arlington – both are for the most part commuter heavens for DC. Both are serviced easily by the metro but will be long (time wise) commutes (get some good books!). They have plenty of shopping / restaurant districts. Alexandria has a quaint historic district.

Arlington (Clarendon area) is a great place to live if you work in downtown DC - walkable, lots to do, and easy commuting by metro and bike.

Where NOT to go

As we said before, like in all big cities some areas of DC can be really sketchy. East of Capitol Hill as you go beyond the Eastern Market neighborhoods, things go downhill pretty quick.

It is only fair to say that lately, there have been active neighborhood renovation projects in DC so that some areas traditionally labeled as bad are not anymore, with the benefit of prices being still comparatively low.

In the end...

Don't sweat too much finding a place, keep an open mind and think that you can move somewhere else later. However, don't choose to quickly, not getting along with your roommate and / or a crappy place can make a year seem to last a lifetime!!

Pleasant surprises...

If you like to take in some greenery or exercise to detox from the urban madness, there are plenty of things to do right after work, especially in the extended summer hours.

- Brookside Gardens in the Wheaton Regional Park has a very beautiful collection of trees, flowers, and aquatic plants, with benches to sit down and let your karma re-energize. The Park itself has a few trails to run or hike as you wish in relative safety. For more info on the park go to: <http://www.mc-mncppc.org/parks/brookside/>.

- Rock Creek Park is a hidden gem below the bustling streets of DC. A National Park in DC proper with miles of trails to hike, bike and even horse-back ride. Beach Drive between Military and Broad Branch roads is closed to cars on weekends and holidays for bicycling, hiking, jogging and rollerblading. Take the usual safety precautions during dawn and dusk hours. For more info on the park go to: <http://www.nps.gov/rocr/>.
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- The Patuxent Wildlife Research Center is also within drivable distance for a nice hike. The north tract is “wilder” and popular with bird watchers but the trails are restricted because it used to be part of Ft. Meade. For more info on the park go to: <http://patuxent.fws.gov/>.
- The C&O Canal offers plenty of miles of trails (easy and strenuous) plus kayaking in the Potomac (both flat and white water). For more info on the park go to: <http://www.nps.gov/choh/>.
- Great Falls Park (Virginia side) has good trails and decent rock climbing. There is also a very active kayaking community that paddles here. For more info on the park go to: <http://www.nps.gov/gwmp/grfa/>.
- There is an active cycling community in DC with daily rides along Rock Creek Park or out in the country during the weekends. For more info on cycling go to: <http://www.waba.org/>.
- There are also plenty of masters swim clubs throughout the area, but workouts are mostly late at night (~ 8:30ish). Terrapin Masters (my team!) at U. of Maryland has reasonable evening workouts (6:30PM). To check out all team go to the USMS website: <http://www.usms.org/links/usmsclubs.htm>.
- Glen Echo Park, although a National Park, is oriented towards the arts. It offers classes during four terms yearly on everything: ceramics, jewelry, photography, drawing, painting, and dancing. The catalog is available on their website. For more info on the park go to: <http://www.nps.gov/glec/>.
- The United States National Arboretum is a little haven of nature within the DC limit. Easy to get to with a car or bike, but not Metro accessible. <http://www.usna.usda.gov/>
- H-Street – while it’s not metro accessible, it’s worth an effort to check out!
- Waterfront (particularly Georgetown)
- The Meridian Park Drum Circle - gathering every Sunday throughout the year, from ~2pm until way past dark.
- DC Sailing - memberships from \$150, get you access onto both dinghies and 19' Flying Scots to sail on the Potomac River every weekend throughout much of the year. \$300 membership gets you unlimited, free rentals (\$50 an afternoon otherwise). They also do match racing and regattas (for an additional fee depending on event).
- Intramural Sports Leagues - chances are there's a (semi)competitive league doing your favorite thing all year long. Season fees generally start around \$75 for 8-10week leagues. Hideous league t-shirts as a bonus!
zogsports.com, dcsocialsports.com, dccityball.com

- You don't have to leave the mountains and woods behind when you move to DC. Potomac Appalachian Trail & Mountaineering Club have regular day trips around DC and longer trips (ice climbing anyone?) beyond. Visit <http://www.patc.net/PublicView/> and <http://www.potomacmountainclub.org/>

WEEKEND DESTINATIONS

Assateague - 170 miles east. GET ALL YOUR SUMMER RESERVATIONS LOCKED IN THE FIRST DAY THEY OPEN the reservation system. they fill up in approximately 2 days from April - October. reserveamerica.com

Shenandoah Valley - 90 - 150 miles west. Beautiful. Horse country. Antiques. Vineyards. Hidden Knauss campgrounds.

Harper's Ferry, WV - 70 miles west. Beautiful. Excellent tubing/floating in the summer. Don't pack glass bottles.