



beyond the monumental precinct of the National Mall, and in many ways, Washington still fails to close the gap between the Federal Government and the largely black city that surrounds it. There are of course countless complex reasons for this but, in terms of the city's physical design, one feature stands out: it has proven difficult for the national government to support and execute a grand aesthetic throughout a city of its size. Washington's development has always been piecemeal; as a result, while the capital was intended to celebrate the nation's greatness, it has always exposed its shortcomings as well.

The boldness of the original plan for the Federal City is particularly striking if we consider how paltry a thing the nation was in 1791. It was financially crippled by the Revolutionary War, run by a disputatious Congress that was deeply ambivalent about centralized power, and peopled by a citizenry spread across a vast area who traveled little and so had no reason or chance to develop a national consciousness. L'Enfant and Washington envisioned the new capital not as the company town for federal employees that it might be considered today, but as a thriving center of commerce alongside the national government—a New York City and an Albany all in one.

L'Enfant designed a complex network of streets, avenues, and canals that would reach out and tie the capital to the hinterlands beyond. George Washington predicted that the Potomac River would be a major inland route to the nation's western lands and that the capital would be a gateway to that traffic. An early engraving of the city and its ten mile square district depicts this optimistic view, by emphasizing the presence and power of the Potomac and the Anacostia Rivers as if the reason for the capital's location is

to take advantage of their strategic juncture. (See Figure 1, front cover.)

In contrast to the few meandering routes in the environs beyond, the capital's dynamic system of streets furthermore suggests the ideal way the nation's landscape could be rationally ordered. They echo John Jay's claim in the *Federalist* that the elastic federal infrastructure, combined with the water routes nature provides, could conquer the continent.

At the same time the Federal City's layout was designed to lure citizens to it in order to acclimate them to the new national organization. In his explanations appended to his plan, L'Enfant explained that the radiating avenues connected the branches of government—the Capitol, the President's House, and the Judiciary—to outlying "state squares" and so physically demonstrated the new federal organization and its logical balance of powers. L'Enfant dynamic network of streets created a physical model of the Constitution and would thus help citizens bond

with the heretofore abstract nation. Moving through this magnificent space would convert citizens to it. The avenues leading directly to public squares decorated by statues of national heroes from a particular state would, L'Enfant maintained, "invite the youth of succeeding generations to tread in the paths of those sages or heroes whom their country had thought proper to celebrate."<sup>1</sup>

Thomas Jefferson warned that the Federal government should not build a lavish capital for itself—that was what monarchies did—and proposed a small village with a modest grid-street plan as being both seemly and representative of the nation at the time. But L'Enfant argued that if the capital was to be a success, if it was to win the hearts and minds of the citizenry and flourish, it had to be big. It had to give concrete evidence—not of the fledgling nation as it was—but of the great empire it would become.

The city's grand scale, L'Enfant pressed, would be its most practical feature. It was

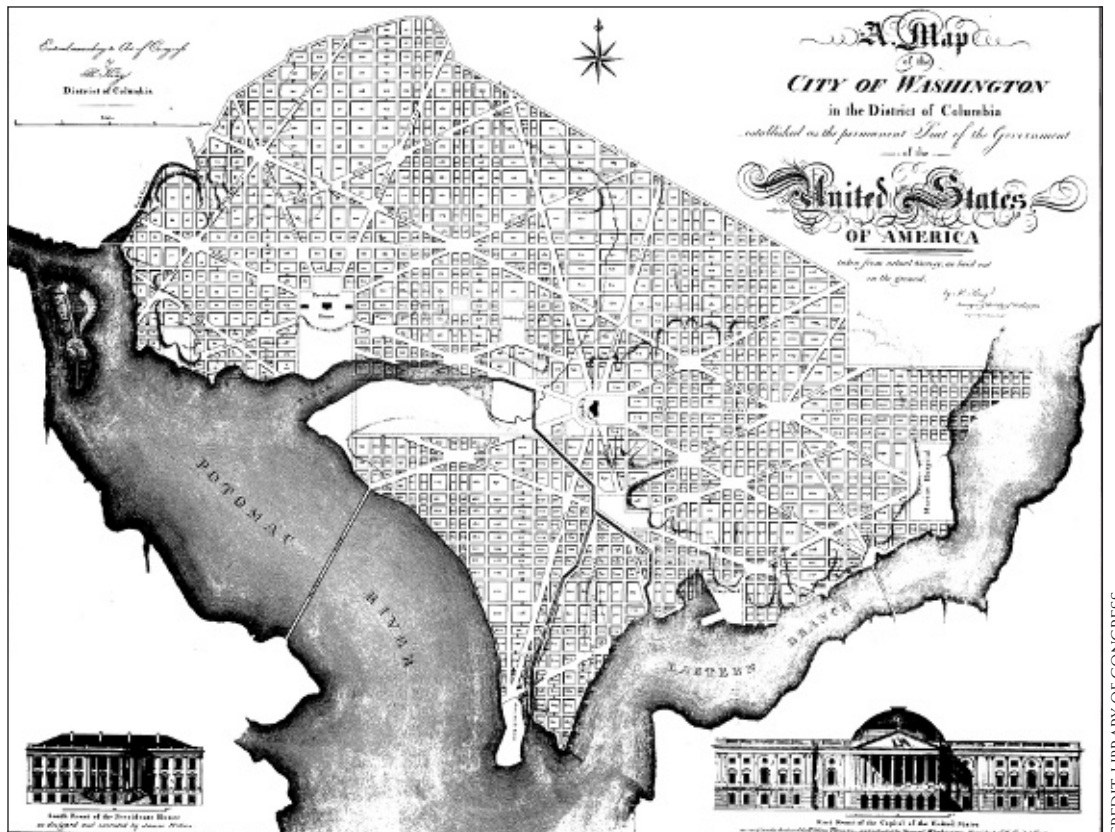


Figure 2: Geographical, Statistical, and Historical Map of the District of Columbia. Engraved by Young & Delleker, 1822.

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simple political psychology. Advertise the plan for a grand capital to the citizenry and you will generate excitement in it. This was to be a new city, an early 19th century boomtown, a lucrative joint venture between commerce and politics, in which any citizen might reasonably make his home. The grand plan ingeniously tied personal to national interests—by buying a lot in the capital, citizens would support the nation, and in turn prosper as the city, and nation, flourished. The best way to get citizens to love their country, L'Enfant assured Washington, was through their pockets. Indeed, George Washington had speculated heavily in western lands along the Potomac and a grand capital city would fuel the settlement of those lands. George Washington sided with L'Enfant. A handkerchief map of the Federal City was printed and widely disseminated—perhaps the most inventive means used to tie the national to the personal and gain access to the citizens' pockets. A large map, advertised as “a very handsome ornament for the parlor or counting room,” was printed with the actual lots listed that citizens could buy.<sup>2</sup> (See Figure 2, page 6.)

Such grand city plans have been executed when a Baron Von Hausmann or Robert Moses existed to drive them through. The development of Washington, D.C., however, fell to an endless parade of temporary power holders and to Congress, which had mixed feelings about a strong central government and a capital that seemed to many more suitable for a monarchy than a republic. As a result the capital suffered through its first 100 years with haphazard development and became more famous for its failures than its success. Travelers wrote withering accounts of the city that aspired to be an “American Rome.” One visitor reported in 1806 that, apart from a few public buildings and residences, “the remainder of this boasted city is a mere wilderness of wood and stunted shrubs, the occupants of a barren land. Strangers, after viewing the offices of state, are apt to enquire for the city, while they are in its very centre.”<sup>3</sup> The speculative enthusiasm that was supposed to fuel the city's development failed to take hold; the Potomac proved to be far less navigable than

Washington had hoped, defeating the dream of the capital to be a port city.

Washington D.C.'s beleaguered state led to ironies beyond imagination. Cheap slave labor was relied upon to build much of the capital of a nation dedicated to liberty. The city's few grand marble buildings were connected by mud-filled streets, for which Congress refused to issue the funds to improve. A grand Washington Monument was finally begun in 1848 to punctuate the largely barren mall where cattle grazed, but funds dried up and the monument stood a half-finished stump for 40 years. The size of the capital was arguably too large for the Congress to develop as a whole, and so its progress was always piecemeal. More than the nation's future eminence, the capital exposed the realities of its political conflicts and economic instability. This became most painfully obvious during the Civil War, when Washington was the main hospital center for the wounded soldiers. For lack of any place more practical to put them, these soldiers were crammed for some time into the halls of the Capitol and the Patent Office Museum—a space that once boasted of the nation's industrial expansion now advertised a nation coming apart at its seams.

When we look at the impressive National Mall today, this history is hard to imagine. Millions and more millions of dollars later, Washington looks like a success. Today's Mall is the result of the 1902 McMillan plan, which created the Lincoln Memorial on landfill that doubled the size of the Mall (the Potomac River used to come up to the foot of the Washington Monument), making it a vast expanse suitable for a nation which, after acquiring the Philippines and Puerto Rico, dreamed of empire. But for some critics, the expanded Mall defeats the everyday monumentality so crucial to L'Enfant's plan, and instead pushes the national and the personal further apart. As critic Norma Evenson has noted, L'Enfant planned for a monumentality that was integrated into everyday life, as in Paris, where one might pass by the Arc de Triomphe on the way to the drugstore.<sup>4</sup> In contrast, it is inspiring, but wearying to walk the two mile length of the Mall. Still,

we can take pleasure in the fact that for some at least the Mall is an everyday and not exceptional space, as evidenced by the soccer players who routinely hold their matches in the shadow of the U.S. Capitol.

We can't hope to bump into President Obama as we wait for our burgers, but it is to buck this fact that First Lady Michelle Obama has been visiting D.C.'s public schools. As she explains, she guessed the mostly black students who live nearby feel pretty isolated from the Federal City: “You know, you're living 10 minutes away from the power of this nation and the world—the White House, the Capitol, all those buildings... And I wanted to be a part of opening the doors and taking off the veil and saying, this is what's going on there. And one of the best ways... for me to do that is to come and see you all... and eventually have you guys come see me in the White House.”<sup>5</sup>

Recently, students from nearby Bancroft Elementary School have been working in the new White House Organic Garden. All that formal monumental space in Washington may ultimately distance us from the national government, but it does at least leave plenty of room for surprise. ■

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<sup>1</sup>Kite, Elizabeth S. *L'Enfant and Washington 1791-1792*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1929. Page 65.

<sup>2</sup>Reps, John W. *Washington on View: The Nation's Capital Since 1790*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1991. Page 66.

<sup>3</sup>Reps, page 60.

<sup>4</sup>Evenson, Norma. “Monumental Spaces” in *The Mall In Washington, 1791-1991*. 2<sup>nd</sup> edition. Richard Longstreth (editor). New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002. Page 32.

<sup>5</sup>Feldman, Linda. “Michelle Obama Reaches Out to DC High School Students,” *The Christian Science Monitor*. March 19, 2009. (<http://features.csmonitor.com/politics/2009/03/19/michelle-obama-reaches-out-to-dc-high-school-students>).