

## Geography at the Edge

**T**he AAG Annual Meeting in April will be, not just anywhere in Washington, D.C., but within a stone's throw of the Fall Line. It's an auspicious location, as the Fall Line is one of those places at the intersection of physical and human geography.

The Fall Line has long been a poster child for the influence of the physical environment on human settlement. At the Fall Line, the unconsolidated deposits and lower elevations of the Coastal Plain physiographic province meet the metamorphic rocks and higher elevations of the Piedmont. It marks the inland extent of navigable waters that were transportation lifelines of the 13 colonies, and the inland extent of the easy-to-cultivate Coastal Plain soils. Geographer Ellen Churchill Semple (in 1903) described the historically strategic importance of the 100-foot line of elevation, essentially the Fall Line, for overland transportation along the east coast of the U.S., noting that it enabled travelers, commerce, and armies to circumvent the difficulty of North-South overland movement across the swamps and rivers of the Coastal Plain. For early settlers, knickpoints on Fall-Line rivers presented, not just impediments to navigation, but opportunities to harness water power. Hence, numerous towns, including Trenton, Baltimore, Richmond, Raleigh, Columbia, Macon, and Washington, D.C., grew along this line of hydro-powered mills and break-in-bulk commerce.

### The Actual Fall Line

In my childhood in the D.C. area, the "Fall Line" was a visible and often-mentioned element of the landscape. From below, it is the hill rising northwest of Florida Avenue; from above, it's a long hill with a big view. We talked about it on the way "downtown," visited Great Falls of the Potomac River, and frequently hiked along the towpath of the C&O (Chesapeake and

Ohio) canal, built to extend commercial navigation westward of the Fall-Line and Appalachian rapids of the Potomac River.

Because rivers focus the erosional power of flowing water, Great Falls of the Potomac has migrated upstream of the Fall Line boundary. Likewise, Rock Creek has already descended to Coastal Plain elevations as it passes below the hotels that will house our meeting, even though the actual physiographic province boundary is a short distance to the southeast. In the National Zoo (near the hotels and worth a visit), you can walk down to the elevation of the Coastal Plain from the Piedmont.

Some would argue that certain phenomena are exaggerated in Washington. The Fall Line achieves higher relief here than in some of its other cities, but it did so quite naturally before government and politicians arrived. The highest point (over 420 feet) in Washington, D.C. is at Fort Reno, north of the conference hotels on an ancient river terrace perched on the Piedmont. The freshwater springs that emerge along the rock surface at the base of the terrace were an important water source for Washington before the city's demand for water grew to require it to be pumped from the Potomac River.

Below the Fall Line, Washington, D.C. is built on old river terraces, low-lying land, and newly created land. The Coastal Plain portion of the city is remarkably low—the benchmark on the west side of Capitol Hill is at only 12 feet above sea level. Today's riverscape differs from the one recorded in pre-1900 paintings of the city. The area around the Tidal Basin and other "land" near the river were artificially formed in the first decade of the 20th century, when the

National Mall was extended westward by fill to produce land for the Lincoln and Jefferson Memorials. Thus, Washington D.C. is a "built environment" by virtue of its land as well as its structures. For geographers, then, Washington D.C. offers a fine example of a place that exists where it does for influ-

ences of the natural landscape on human settlement, while also exemplifying the remarkable vision, earth-moving, and hydraulic engineering capacity of those people who altered the landscape.

### Figurative Fall Lines

In metaphorical terms, there is much to be said in favor of meeting on an edge.

From an edge, one can see the resources and opportunities offered by both sides. When an edge separates highland from lowland elevations, the view from above adds perspective to what lies below (no political jokes here, as even the land on the Piedmont side of the Fall Line is "inside the beltway").

The discipline of geography benefits from having less center and more edge than many disciplines. We have the vantage point from which to view new developments and gaps on multiple fronts, gain broad perspectives on places and issues, and draw on resources and forge collaborations from all sides. Thus, it is fitting that we will meet on the uphill edge of the Fall Line. We thank the AAG staff, whose offices are down on a Coastal Plain terrace, for having chosen this venue on a physiographic edge for our annual meeting. We will surely use it to literal and figurative advantage. I hope you will join us at the Fall Line. ■

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**AAG Annual Meeting, April 14-18, 2010, Washington, D.C.**

For details and to register, visit [www.aag.org/annualmeetings/2010](http://www.aag.org/annualmeetings/2010).