Washington D.C.
The Growth of a Capital City

Washington D.C. did not exist at the founding of our new country in 1776. It was rolling farmland at the crux of two rivers. America’s early government met in various places across the new country, and in 1790, Thomas Jefferson and Alexander Hamilton came to a compromise (the Residence Act) to establish the seat of government in a 100-square mile district along the Potomac River. President George Washington was able to choose the boundaries to be surveyed for this new capital. Andrew Ellicott and Benjamin Banneker surveyed the area chosen by the President, and plans for the new City of Washington were drawn up by Pierre L’Enfant in 1791. L’Enfant’s plan for the city included wide avenues, a central Mall, and small open spaces at intersections for memorials and statues.

The area chosen included a port along the Potomac, was diamond-shaped, and spanned 10 miles on each side. The federal buildings were built on the Maryland portion of the land, where they still are today. The Virginia section of the original area surveyed included Alexandria, a city whose citizens did not want to lose their Virginian status and lose the ability to vote in presidential elections (a right that was not given to D.C. residents until the 23rd amendment was passed in 1961). The Virginian section of the capital was given back to Virginia through a retrocession in the 1840s, leaving the capital only in Maryland. (cont’d page 2, see Washington)

Did you know that the Washington Monument could not be built where it was originally intended?

Plans for the construction of the large obelisk monument had the monument sitting exactly due south of the White House and exactly due west of the Capitol. This location would complete a triangle that was first proposed in L’Enfant’s plan for the capital. Ultimately, the monument was built at a spot 390 feet away from the proposed location. Why? That location was near the shoreline of Tiber Creek, which once went through the city. The ground was too unstable to support the large structure.

There is a marker on the proposed location called the Jefferson Pier. Thomas Jefferson surveyed the land in 1793 and marked the location with a wooden post. A permanent marker was installed in 1804, but was destroyed in the 1870s. The current marker is a replacement created in 1889 (seen right, photo taken in 2017).
Tiber Creek, which once ran along the north side of the National Mall, was incorporated into the Washington City Canal. The canal was created in 1815 with the idea of having Washington City be an industrial center. By the 1860s, the canal was a health and safety hazard, with all of the city’s sewage flowing into the canal and piling up near the Executive Mansion. It also wasn’t uncommon for people to fall into the canal, and knowing how to swim was not as widespread as today.

The Washington City Canal started to be filled in in 1870. In February 1881, melting snow caused the Potomac to flood up to the Capitol. Parts of the river and flats were filled to prevent another major flood, beginning in 1882 and finishing in 1890. Tiber Creek now runs under the Mall. The area that was dredged became East Potomac Park and added 628 acres to the city, creating the spaces today for many monuments and memorials.

Washington D.C. today is 68.34 square miles, with more than 7,000 acres of parkland, much of which is run by the National Park Service.

This drawing is of the construction of the Washington Monument in 1850. The river in the image is now a walking path around the monument. (Smithsonian)

**Timeline of the President’s House**

1792: Cornerstone was laid
1800: President John Adams moves into the unfinished house
1801: President Jefferson adds colonnaded terraces
1814: British set fire to the home during the War of 1812
1817: President Monroe moves into the rebuilt house
1824: The South Portico constructed
1829: The North Portico constructed
1881: President Arthur installs first elevator
1901: “White House” officially named by President T. Roosevelt
1902: “Roosevelt Renovation” creates West Wing
1909: President Taft creates the first Oval Office in the West Wing
1929: Fire damages part of the West Wing and President Hoover rebuilds
1934: President F. Roosevelt has the West Wing redesigned
1942: East Wing completed
1948: President Truman begins reconstruction of entire interior
1952: Reconstruction completed
1961: Mrs. Kennedy redecorates to have historic furnishings
1961: Congress declares the White House a museum

Harriet Beecher Stowe
born June 14, 1811

Harriet Beecher Stowe (1811-1896) was a best-selling author who published over 30 books. During her writing career she had a wide variety of publications including stories, essays, textbooks, and novels.

Her best known work is the anti-slavery novel, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852). Stowe said, “I wrote what I did because as a woman, as a mother, I was oppressed and broken-hearted with the sorrows and injustice I saw, because as a Christian I felt the dishonor to Christianity – because as a lover of my country, I trembled at the coming day of wrath.”

James A. Garfield read *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* several times during his life, and mentions doing so in his personal diary.

This copy of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* is in the Parlor at James A. Garfield NHS.

For more information about James A. Garfield NHS:
www.nps.gov/jaga

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James A. Garfield NHS
8095 Mentor Avenue
Mentor, Ohio 44060
(440) 255-8722
jaga_interpretation@nps.gov