

# UNFINISHED REVOLUTION



## MARYLAND'S GIFT TO THE NATION: A Capital City

By Kate Whitmore and James H. Johnston



MONTGOMERY  
HISTORY



Montgomery County, Maryland marks its 250th anniversary on September 6, 2026. To commemorate the occasion, Montgomery History presents *Unfinished Revolution*, a project to share important stories from our past that combine to tell a more complete and inclusive history of this county. The numerous authors commissioned for this project explore topics related to the history of Montgomery County that either address events that took place from the 1960s forward or fill in gaps by addressing subjects that have been underrepresented or left out of the existing published historical narrative. In embracing the theme of an “Unfinished Revolution,” we bring focus to the still-unmet promise of 1776 while rotating its vision to align with our shared journey toward the future.

Montgomery History—the county’s historical society—has been serving residents and the region through its research library, adult programs, educational activities, publications, exhibits, and conferences since the organization was founded in 1944. Its mission is to collect, preserve, interpret, and share the histories of all county residents and communities.

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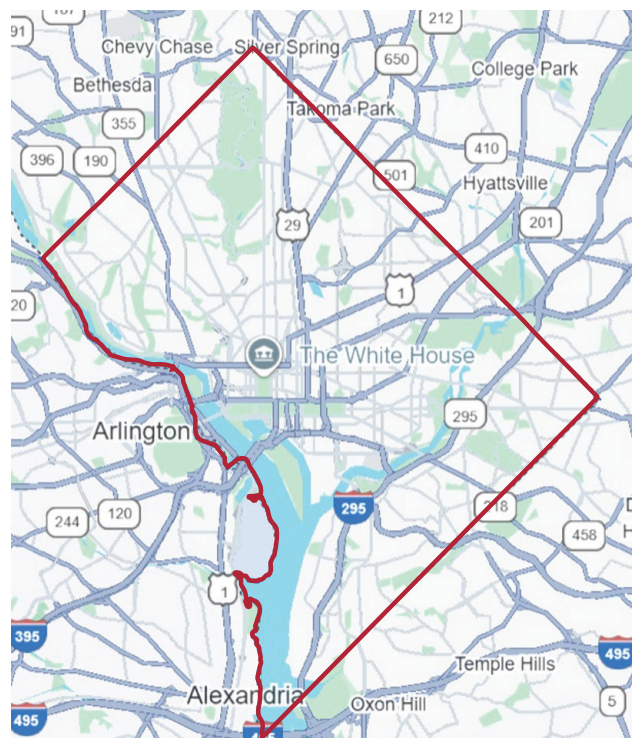
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Major cities have founding myths. The twins Romulus and Remus were suckled by a wolf before founding Rome. St. Petersburg was a swamp that was filled in by the bodies of serfs sent to build it. The goddess Athena won a competition with Poseidon for the name of the Greek capital by offering the city an olive tree. And Washington, D.C. was a worthless swamp that was selected for the capital of the United States because it was close to George Washington's Mount Vernon.

Residents of Montgomery County, Maryland should likewise not make the mistake of divorcing their county's history from that of the District of Columbia. The decision to locate the capital of the United States on the banks of the Potomac River is the most important event in Montgomery County history. It distinguishes the county from the seventeen other counties in the nation named after the Revolutionary War's Richard Montgomery, including the county next to Philadelphia, a runner-up in the competition for being the capital. In one way or the other, the county's proximity to the seat of government explains how most people today came to reside there. A majority of county residents earn their living from the federal government, its contractors, its lobbyist and trade associations, and in servicing those who do. An estimated 13.34% of county residents of working age are employed by the federal government.<sup>1</sup> The expected economic benefit and prestige of hosting the capital was what led to the intense competition among the states for that privilege in the late 18th century. What follows is an account of how it was decided to put the capital where it is and how this decision has affected Montgomery County and the District of Columbia, particularly Georgetown, which predated both.



Maryland's contribution to the District of Columbia shown in red. Boundaries are Virginia shore, Western Avenue, Eastern Avenue, Southern Avenue. (Google Maps image, annotated by the authors)

# Introduction

Throw these myths and mistakes aside. The District of Columbia was chosen as the seat of government because of a compromise between northern and southern states and because the then-existing port of Georgetown, Maryland, was expected to become a commercial hub and a gateway to the interior. The country's founders planned for a capital that would be a stunningly beautiful federal city.

The word "cession" is applied to the process of giving up governance. As of December 1800, Congress rather than the Maryland legislature would pass laws governing the new District of Columbia. The Founders were, however, far from prescient when they mandated that the capital should be controlled by the federal government. A principal reason for this decision was to ensure Congress could meet in safety, but the Founders never spelled out precisely how they intended a federally-controlled district to function. As a result, the District of Columbia has been battered back and forth by the political winds of a capricious Congress.

The Constitution of 1787 had called for a permanent capital of up to ten miles square. Four years later, President George Washington selected sixty-nine square miles of Maryland and thirty-one square miles of Virginia to be ceded to the federal government. Maryland did not donate the land for the federal city. The federal government would need to purchase it from private owners. And of course, a whole city needed to be constructed. Maryland has greatly benefited from the gift of its portion to the federal government, but Virginia was unhappy enough to take back its gift. It "retroceded" in 1846. Meanwhile, although slavery was a factor influencing the location of the capital, its impact on African Americans was never considered, and there is a story in that.

About a third of Maryland's share, roughly 22,145 square miles or 14,173 acres, came from Montgomery County. The rest came from Prince George's County.<sup>2</sup> As it turned out, the federal government never needed Montgomery County's gift because the federal city, where the government buildings would be, was built on Prince George's portion. Montgomery County's loss amounted to about 4 percent of its 330,000 acres. New Hampshire Avenue today traces the boundary between the two Maryland counties. All of the District of Columbia west of the avenue was once Montgomery County. This includes such famous neighborhoods as Georgetown, Cathedral Heights, the Palisades, Northwest Washington, Uptown, Cleveland Park, Tenleytown, Friendship Heights, Chevy Chase, Takoma Park, Dupont Circle, Kalorama, Adams Morgan, and Petworth. Georgetown University, American University, the University of the District of Columbia, Sibley Hospital, and Rock Creek Park also lie within Montgomery County's cession. Georgetown was the only urban area at that time. Today, some 1,082,273 people live in the 330,000 acres of Montgomery County while an estimated 321,000 live in the 14,173 acres ceded to the District of Columbia.<sup>3</sup>

## Georgetown

Georgetown sits at the head of navigation on the Potomac River. It is located on the fall line, the last upriver place an ocean-going ship can reach. Three other East Coast ports, Philadelphia, Baltimore, and Richmond, are also sited on the fall line. Just east of Georgetown was Rock Creek, which had carved a 40-foot-deep hole in the Potomac River bottom where ships could drop anchor without worrying about being grounded by changes in the river's depth. In the early 1700s, Scotsman Ninian Beall arranged for ships to sail upriver to his Rock of Dunbarton tract to pick up tobacco bound for England. Other planters followed suit, and the site became a regular port. In 1751, sixty acres of the Rock of Dunbarton were incorporated in Maryland as the town of Georgetown in what was then Frederick County.

At the start of the American Revolution in 1776, Maryland carved Montgomery County out of Frederick County. Georgetown was the county's largest settlement. Indeed, when Georgetown and the other parts of the county were finally turned over to the federal government in 1800, the population of Montgomery County fell from around 19,000 in the 1790 census to 16,000 in the 1800 census.





Georgetown's waterfront as seen from Mason Island, November 13, 1865. (Library of Congress)

Georgetown was politically independent from Montgomery County. It had a mayor and city council, police force, and system of taxation, whereas the county had no administrative offices. The administrative functions, primarily taxation to support the courts and build roads, were performed by justices of the peace. While the state courts were in Rockville, making Georgetown part of the county in legal matters, Montgomery County itself played no role in session.

Georgetown, however, was the center of wealth for Montgomery County. Port towns like Georgetown, Bladensburg, Alexandria, and Port Tobacco had been created as places to do business, not to live. They were run by commissions led by the tradesmen themselves, generally large property owners.<sup>4</sup> Bladensburg in Prince George's County, a flourishing port town on the Eastern Branch (Anacostia River), was Georgetown's principal competitor in the tobacco trade. However, the Anacostia suffered from silting from the runoff of tobacco fields, and the boggy roads from Bladensburg to the rich farm lands in Montgomery County were not nearly as good as the high road out of Georgetown to Rockville. This road—High Street then, Wisconsin Avenue today—followed an ancient trail along a dry ridgeline used by migratory animals and Native Americans since time immemorial. It was gradually widened and improved for trade with the rich farmlands to the north and west. Farmers brought goods to the port either by wagon or, in the case of tobacco, by rolling the hogsheads packed with the “stinking weed.” Tobacco crumbled and was ruined if subjected to excessive jostling, and Georgetown became the nearest port for Montgomery County farmers as the port at Bladensburg became unusable.

During this time, England required hogsheads of tobacco to be inspected before leaving American ports, and so, since even before its founding, Georgetown had an inspection station. By 1790, its exports had increased enough to warrant building a third inspection house. The following year, George Gordon, one of the town's founders, replaced his warehouse at the foot of High Street with a much larger and more solid structure.<sup>5</sup> Thomas Johnson, the first Governor of Maryland, wrote to George Washington in 1791 claiming that Georgetown ranked as the greatest tobacco market in Maryland, if not the Union.<sup>6</sup>

Tobacco merchants and real estate developers like Charles Beatty, William H. Dorsey, John Laird, Frances Lowndes, and Robert Peter became extremely wealthy. As it prospered, Georgetown gradually replaced not only Bladensburg but even Annapolis as the commercial and social center of the tobacco planting counties north of the Potomac River.<sup>7</sup> And Georgetown would take center stage when the time came to choose a capital for the new United States.

# Choosing a Capital

The Continental Congress had led a peripatetic life during the American Revolution. It had convened in four different cities during the war to avoid capture by the British and in three more after the war. In 1783, with peace at hand, a permanent capital or seat of government was on the agenda. Congress was in no hurry, though. Professor Kenneth R. Bowling in his *The Creation of Washington D.C., The Idea and Location of the American Capital* lists forty-nine cities and towns that were seriously proposed, and still more were at least suggested. Only after the Constitution was ratified and new elections were held did the new, constitutional Congress again take up the subject in its first session in 1789.<sup>8</sup>

The public and congressional debate over where to locate the permanent capital was long and convoluted, but five important factors emerged in the discussions. First was geography. Second was money and localism. Third was sectionalism, both between the northern and southern states and between the established East Coast and the burgeoning western hinterlands. Fourth was the differing notions about the role of a national government. Fifth and most important was George Washington.

Georgetown was in the running from the very beginning. It was one of the few sites that had support from two states. Marylanders favored it, of course, although Baltimore and Annapolis were also considered. The influential Virginians supported it too. They preferred a capital in their state, specifically in Williamsburg or Alexandria; however, they didn't expect northern congressmen would agree since these towns were too far south. But Georgetown, just across the Potomac River in Maryland, was the next best site.

In May 1784, even before the Constitution was adopted, a congressional committee arrived in Georgetown to look at an undeveloped tract along the Potomac in Maryland immediately north of town. The committee concluded this site was not suitable but authorized Georgetown real estate developer Charles Beatty to survey two possible sites along Rock Creek, writing:

: At Georgetown, however, a little to the northward of the buildings, is a rising ground somewhat broken, but  
: pleasantly situated, and commanding good water as well as other prospects. At Funkstown, about a mile and a  
: half on the river below Georgetown, there's also a district which commands fine prospects. Some part of it is low,  
: but the residue is high and pleasant. The committee have ordered a plan of each of these districts to be taken and  
: transmitted to Congress.<sup>9</sup>

Geography favored Georgetown. It was in the middle of the thirteen states, roughly equidistant to New Hampshire in the north and Georgia in the south. Moreover, it was expected that if new states in the west were added, Georgetown would be more convenient for representatives from those than the northern cities along the East Coast.

There was also the overly optimistic belief that Georgetown's location on the Potomac River gave it a bright future. If the Potomac could be made navigable upriver, it would become a water-highway into the interior of the country. No other port on the East Coast had that potential. But Little Falls and Great Falls just upriver from Georgetown were challenging obstacles in the 18th century, and the several rapids farther up the river were additional complications.

When engineer John Ballendine called a meeting in Georgetown in the fall of 1774 to discuss improving the river, all the important men in Maryland and Virginia attended.<sup>10</sup> In search



Bridge at Little Falls of the Potomac River, above Georgetown, 1797.  
(Maryland Center for History and Culture)



of financial backing, the engineer then traveled to Britain where he asked for Benjamin Franklin's assistance. Franklin provided him a letter of introduction, mistakenly saying that Americans were already bringing produce from the rich lands along the Ohio River down the Potomac to Alexandria, and the trip required only forty miles of overland carriage.<sup>11</sup> This was wild exaggeration. The overland carriage, from Pittsburgh to the Potomac at Cumberland, Maryland, was and is 115 miles; and even today, floating goods down the Potomac from Cumberland to Alexandria is impossible.

Ballendine's plan for improving the Potomac was derailed by the American Revolution, but he sold George Washington on the idea. Ten years later, with the Revolution over, Washington became president of the Potowmack Company, intending to implement Ballendine's plan by opening the river to navigation between Georgetown and Cumberland. Washington's vision was grand. In a letter to the Marquis de Lafayette at the end of the Revolution, Washington fantasized a tour through all the eastern states, then going to Canada and taking the St. Lawrence River to the Great Lakes and Detroit before floating down the Mississippi River to New Orleans, from where he would sail to Pensacola and return overland through Georgia and the Carolinas to Mount Vernon. It was a trip he never made, but he obviously hoped to see for himself what riches might become available if the Potomac were to be made navigable.<sup>12</sup>

In Washington's thinking, Georgetown would be a major transportation center, the gateway to the west. Granted, from Cumberland to Pittsburgh was 115 miles, not Franklin's forty, but at Pittsburgh the Ohio River connects to landings on all the major rivers between the Appalachian and Rocky Mountains. Thus, Georgetown was seen as possibly connecting the East Coast to the central one-third of today's United States by water if and when the Potomac were opened to Cumberland.<sup>13</sup>

Money and localism also played a role. Georgetown was a backwater compared to the big potential capitals of New York, Philadelphia, and Baltimore, and it was not nearly as charming as Annapolis. Dozens of smaller cities and towns threw their hats in the ring or had proponents who did. Landing the capital would pay huge financial dividends to real estate developers and businessmen and bring prestige to politicians.<sup>14</sup> Williamsburg, for example, offered Congress its capitol and governor's palace, which had become vacant after the state's capital was moved to Richmond, and would throw in \$250,000 to build thirteen hotels, one for each state's delegation.<sup>15</sup>

Typical of the disdain in the big, northern cities for a capital on the Potomac was this newspaper poem entitled "The Waiting Girl in New York to Her Friend in Philadelphia." The Conococheague Creek referred to is a winding waterway, beginning in Pennsylvania, running through Hancock, Maryland, and emptying into the Potomac at Williamsport in that state. It would be, in 1802, the final upriver landing for George Washington's Potowmack Company. "Conococheague" is an Anglicization of an Indian word that is typically translated as "many-turns-river."<sup>16</sup> While there are other translations, this poem uses the tongue twister to suggest the capital was to be moved to a wild, untamed hinterland.

Well Nanny, I'm sorry to say since you writ us,  
That Congress and court have determined to quit us,  
And for us my dear Nanny, we're much in a fret,  
And hundreds of houses will be to let.

\* \* \*

My master looks dull and his spirits are sinking  
From morning till night he is smoking and thinking,  
Laments the expense of destroying the fort  
And says our great people are all of a sort.  
He hopes and he prays that they may die in a stall,  
If they leave us in debt for the Federal Hall.  
In fact he would rather saw timber or dig,  
Than see them removing to Conogochague,  
Where the houses and kitchens are yet to be framed,  
And the trees to be filled and the streets to be named.<sup>17</sup>

Sectional differences over the placement of the capital proved almost insurmountable. Northerners were repelled by the thought that the capital of the new nation, for which they had spilled their blood, might be in a slave-holding state, whereas southerners wanted no part of a Congress that met in a northern city, like Philadelphia or Boston, which were filled with abolitionists. Pennsylvania law, for example, allowed enslaved persons who had been in the state for six months to declare themselves free.

There were larger, divisive, political issues as well. Those who wanted a strong central government were called “federalists” and would later form a political party with that name. They felt the capital should be large enough to house a government bureaucracy that was up to the job. The federalists also wanted the capital to be controlled by Congress rather than a state government.

This latter sentiment stemmed from an incident in Philadelphia in June 1783, while Congress was in session. Congress shared space with the Pennsylvania legislature in the State House, now known as Independence Hall. A group of disgruntled soldiers in Lancaster had set out for Philadelphia, planning to take grievances over back pay and pensions to their state legislators face to face. When they learned of the mob’s approach, the congressmen urged the Pennsylvania legislators to call out their militia, but they did nothing. The mutinous soldiers took control of the city, and for hours a mob of several hundred surrounded the State House where both Congress and the Pennsylvania legislature were meeting. Historian Andrew A. Zellers-Frederick describes the situation: “The soldiers, though refraining from physical violence, threatened congressmen and [Pennsylvania] councilmen alike. In one instance, a soldier pressed a bayonet to a congressman’s chest. These menacing gestures apparently made a deep psychological impression on the members of the national government.”<sup>18</sup>

Members of both legislative bodies fled, with Congress reconvening in Princeton, New Jersey. The Pennsylvanians finally called out their militia, and General George Washington dispatched soldiers from New York. Upon learning of these decisive actions and the overwhelming numbers against them, the rebels disbanded. Several were arrested, tried, and convicted, but they were pardoned without punishment.

The traumatic experience stuck in congressional memory. It made such an impression on New York Congressman Alexander Hamilton that in 1788 he devoted an entire newspaper epistle, “Concerning the Militia,” now Federalist Paper No. 29, to argue that the federal government itself needed authority to call up state militias “in times of insurrection and invasion.”<sup>19</sup>

On the other hand, Virginia Congressman James Madison, who was also there during the riot, did not even mention calling in the military for protection as a reason for giving the federal government control of the capital in his own Federalist Paper No. 43.<sup>20</sup> He asserted rather that exclusive legislation over a capital was “a power exercised by every legislature of the Union, I might say of the world.” This wasn’t true. Madison had never set foot outside the colonies. All other major governments of the world at that time were controlled by monarchs, who did whatever they wanted with their capital cities.<sup>21</sup>

Madison’s views on the topic were wrong in other respects as well. He envisioned a compact capital city, much smaller than the 100 square miles President Washington selected three years later. He analogized federal control over the District of Columbia to the kind of authority a military commander might exercise over a fort or a gunpowder magazine. He thought residents of the ceded areas would be given a say—that is, allowed to vote on the matter of cession—and said “they will have had their voice in the election of the government which is to exercise authority over them,” implying not only home rule and a vote for president but also representation in Congress. Home rule and a vote for president were almost two centuries in the future, and voting representation in Congress is still denied residents of the District of Columbia.

Congress had to get serious about choosing a capital once the new Constitution was adopted in 1788. It called for a permanent capital and gave Congress the power: “To exercise exclusive Legislation in all Cases whatsoever, over such District (not exceeding ten Miles square) as may, by Cession of particular States, and the Acceptance of Congress, become the Seat of the Government of the United States.” This provision, now shortened to “exclusive legislation” over



the capital, stemmed from the June 1783 riot in Philadelphia. Congress didn't want to be helpless again.

The Constitution was not ratified until June 1788, and the first president, George Washington, and a new, constitutional Congress, were elected later in the year. They took office in early 1789. The first session of Congress had its plate full in organizing the federal government and didn't get around to the matter of choosing a new capital until fall.<sup>22</sup>

By then, the already-pronounced sectional dispute between northern and southern states was aggravated further by the need to select both a permanent capital and a new temporary capital. This was because southern states did not like New York City, where they were meeting, and did not want to continue to meet there even on a temporary basis until a permanent capital was chosen and constructed. They wanted Georgetown or somewhere else on the Potomac River. New York was fine as a temporary capital for the northern states, but their preferences for sites for the permanent capital were along the Delaware River, such as Philadelphia, or along the Susquehanna River in Pennsylvania or northern Maryland, or in Baltimore.<sup>23</sup>

Meanwhile, although George Washington had taken no public part in the debate, Congress clearly knew what his preference was since he was, after all, the most respected man in the United States. Biographer Ron Chernow writes:

It was also universally known that he supported a Potomac capital. "It is in fact the interest of the President of the United States that pushes the Potomac," [Pennsylvania Senator] William Mclay protested in his diary. "He by means of Jefferson, Madison... and others urges this business."<sup>24</sup>

Washington had been deeply involved with the regions of the Potomac upriver from Georgetown from an early age. His older half-brother, Lawrence, whom he idolized, had invested in the Ohio Company, which held land in the Ohio River valley. At age sixteen, Washington was hired to survey George Fairfax's lands in western Virginia and traveled through the upper Potomac watershed.<sup>25</sup> In his early twenties, he led several expeditions there during the French and Indian War. He served as aide-de-camp to British General William Braddock and was present when Braddock was killed in an ambush while attempting to take the French fort Duquesne near the present Pittsburgh. Washington led the combined British and Virginia force to safety after the fight. And of course, he had been president of the Potowmack Company that was attempting to make the river navigable.

At the beginning of the second session of Congress in 1790, attention focused on the country's finances. The old Continental Congress had financed the Revolutionary War by selling bonds to investors. Now, the new government not only had to pay interest on those bonds but also had to come up with a way to retire the principal. Treasury Secretary Alexander Hamilton submitted a plan to



Tudor Place in Georgetown, home of Martha Parke Custis Peter, granddaughter of First Lady Martha Washington. (Photo by James H. Johnston)

## Georgetown Founders

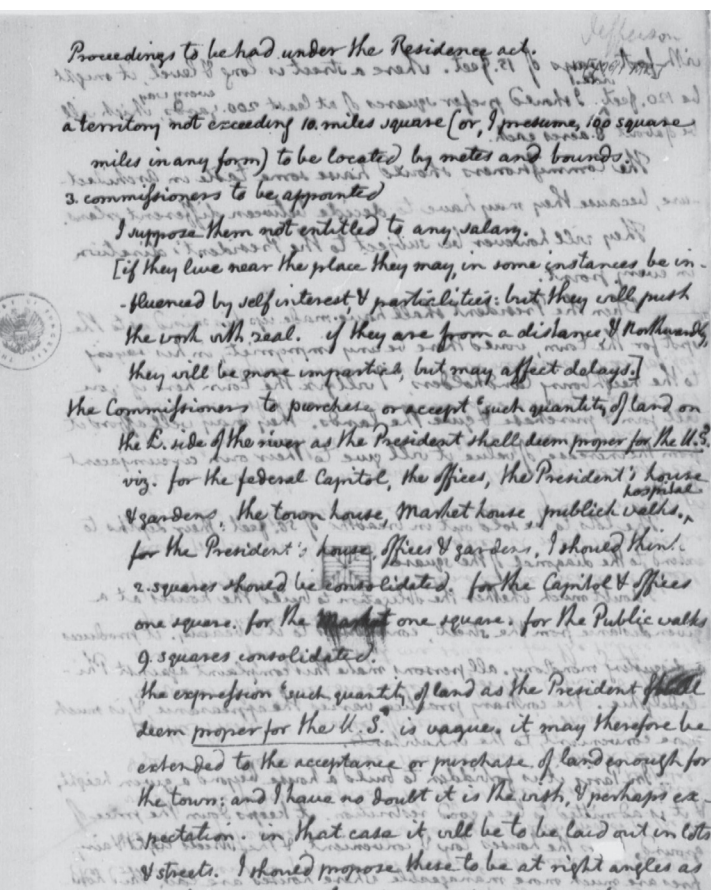
### THE WASHINGTONS

In their time, George Washington and his family were as close to royalty as the United States has ever had. Being a Washington was like being a Windsor, Tudor, or Stuart in England. Although his home was at Mount Vernon, Washington spent time in Georgetown between 1783 and 1788 in his capacity as president of the Potowmack Company, planning the in-river canal from Georgetown to Williamsport. He also was there overseeing the laying out and acquisition of land for the capital during his presidency. The person of George Washington was, in short, familiar in Georgetown.

In 1802, his grandnephew George Corbin Washington moved to Georgetown and five years later married Elizabeth Ridgely Beall. She was the daughter of Thomas Brooke Beall, the grandson of Ninian Beall, the original patent holder of the land upon which Georgetown was founded, The Rock of Dunbarton. Thus, when George Corbin married Elizabeth, he succeeded to his father-in-law's large house, now known as the Beall-Washington House on R Street across from Oak Hill Cemetery.

George Corbin's son, Lewis William Washington, inherited the house. As a result, starting from when George Corbin moved to Georgetown in 1802 until Lewis William moved away more than fifty years later, this branch of the Washington family lived continuously in Georgetown.<sup>124</sup>

A few blocks west of Lewis William's house was another member of George Washington's "royal family." She was Martha Parke Custis Peter, the wife of Thomas Peter who owned Tudor Place. Martha was George Washington's step-granddaughter, the granddaughter of his wife Martha Custis, and she inherited from both George and Martha. Her brother, George Washington Parke Custis, lived across the Potomac in what is now known both as the Custis-Lee House and as Arlington Cemetery. Thomas Peter was the son of the wealthy Georgetown merchant Robert Peter. Tudor Place was, and is, the most elegant residential property in Georgetown. And so, for more than fifty years, the wealthy families of Georgetown regularly hobnobbed with the regal Washingtons.



Original of Thomas Jefferson's handwritten version of the Residence Act, August 29, 1790 (Library of Congress)

just spoken with the president and was distraught. He felt that the whole concept of a unified, federal government was at risk if Congress failed to assume the states' war debts. Jefferson, an antifederalist, and Hamilton, a federalist, were often at loggerheads. However, knowing that Hamilton could control a majority of northern votes and that Virginia Congressman James Madison, Jefferson's good friend, was the most influential of the southerners in Congress, Jefferson invited the two men to have dinner with him that night. Scholars date the dinner to June 20, 1790. Hamilton agreed to throw his support to the South's desire for Georgetown for the permanent capital, and in exchange Madison would lend his support to Hamilton's proposal for assumption.<sup>30</sup>

On July 16, 1790, President Washington signed into law the Residence Act. It authorized him to select as much as a ten-mile square site (100 square miles) on the Potomac as the permanent capital and provided that the temporary capital would be moved from New York City to Philadelphia for ten years.<sup>31</sup> Five days later, the Senate passed the assumption law, by which the federal government would take on \$21.5 million in state debts, and the House passed the bill on July 24.<sup>32</sup>

The Residence Act reads in part:

- Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States of America in Congress assembled,
- That a district of territory, not exceeding ten miles square, to be located as hereafter directed on the river Potomack
- [Potomac], at some place between the mouths of the Eastern-Branch [Anacostia River] and Connogochegue
- [Conococheague Creek] be, and the same is hereby accepted for the permanent seat of the government of the
- United States: Provided nevertheless, That the operation of the laws of the state within such district shall not be
- affected by this acceptance, until the time fixed for the removal of the government thereto, and until Congress shall
- otherwise by law provide.<sup>33</sup>

do this. He also recommended that, since the states had issued similar bonds to pay for the war, the federal government should assume responsibility for the state bonds. This was referred to as "assumption."<sup>26</sup>

Assumption was controversial. The federalists generally favored it since only a strong federal government could take on the debt, while antifederalists generally opposed it for the same reason. But the alignments weren't perfect. Some federalists from states that had little debt thought it unfair since their states didn't benefit from assumption. Likewise, antifederalists from states that would benefit from assumption might favor it.<sup>27</sup>

As for choosing a capital, the divide between the North and South also continued. Delegates from southern states felt the more populous, northern states controlled Congress. A capital in the north would give them even more power. The anti-slavery sentiments of Quakers in Philadelphia made that city particularly repugnant to the slave states.<sup>28</sup> On the other hand, northerners feared that a capital on the Potomac, where slavery was practiced, would undermine the very ideals of the new United States.<sup>29</sup>

Then, as though a magician had waved his wand over the squabbling congressmen and senators, poof, the matter was resolved. Playing the role of magician was Secretary of State Thomas Jefferson. The iconic version of a complex series of events is that Jefferson ran into Secretary of Treasury Hamilton in front of President Washington's mansion in New York. Hamilton had



The Conococheague flows into the Potomac at Williamsport some sixty miles as the crow flies from the Anacostia, but since President Washington was given the power to decide exactly where the capital would be located, almost everyone expected it would be near Georgetown. However, Washington was careful not to disclose his plans. He feared that speculators would rush to buy the land and thus drive up the price the federal government would have to pay for what might be needed for government buildings. So secretive was he that when he made his personal examination of potential sites, he made sure to include Alexandria in Virginia and the distant Williamsport and Sharpsburg in Maryland as well as Georgetown.<sup>34</sup> No one could be certain what the cunning Washington had in mind. Throughout his military career, George Washington had laid out many a camp for his soldiers and seemed to view his duties vis-à-vis the new capital in much the same way. He knew the area well of course, having lived there his whole life; nonetheless, he still mounted his horse and rode the land. He had a bold vision and apparently planned to use the full ten-mile square allowed in the Constitution.<sup>35</sup>

On January 24, 1791, six months after the Residence Act was passed, Washington announced his decision. He seemed to feel that the constitutional unit of measure, “miles square,” should be interpreted literally, and so he made the capital district a square, with sides ten miles long, but rotated forty-five degrees. On a map it looked like a diamond, with the top corner in Maryland and the bottom in Virginia. The result put both Georgetown and Alexandria in the District of Columbia.<sup>36</sup> Why Washington included the two cities is not clear. His fondness for acquiring land may explain it. Perhaps, as far as land was concerned, if you gave him an inch he would take a mile. Or, he may have believed that including the two port cities in the new capital would make it more vibrant. If so, he was not prescient.

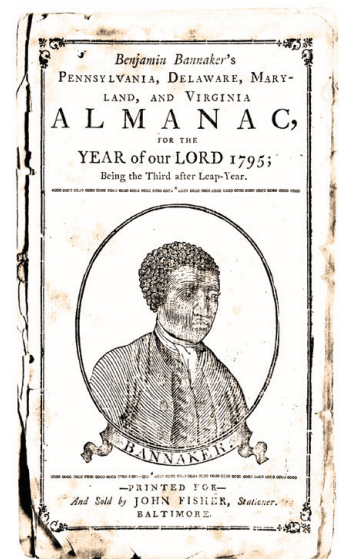
## Building and Governing the District of Columbia

The constitutional provision for a seat of government and the Residence Act of 1790 were just the beginnings of the debate and lawmaking over exactly what needed to be done to create a capital and what exactly was intended. Although the Constitution called for Congress to hold exclusive legislation over the capital, the intent was elusive, and there were no precedents. In monarchies, the king ruled over everything, including his capital city, if he wished, but the United States was the first constitutional democracy in history.

The national government was seated in Philadelphia for ten years while the Capitol, White House, and other government buildings were constructed on the Potomac River site. Until the move, if not longer, Maryland and Virginia laws were to remain in effect for the territory ceded from those states.<sup>37</sup>

Early in 1791, a team, appointed by Jefferson and led by surveyor Andrew Ellicott and including African American astronomer and mathematician Benjamin Banneker, surveyed the location selected by Washington, laying markers, cut from Aquia Creek sandstone, at one-mile intervals. As Washington had instructed, the first boundary stone was placed on April 15, 1791, near the Jones Point Lighthouse, marking the southern point of the diamond-shaped District of Columbia just below Alexandria. The last one was installed near Upton Hill in Arlington in 1792. Thirty-six of the original forty stones remain today.

Congress acquiesced in George Washington’s proclamation implicitly amending the Residence Act to include the thirty-one square miles comprising Alexandria city and part of Fairfax County. But because of the intense wrangling that had preceded its passage, the president was unable to persuade Congress itself to revisit and amend the original Act.<sup>38</sup>



Front cover of Banneker's 1795 almanac (Maryland Center for History and Culture)



Original Boundary Stone No. 6 on Southern Avenue in Prince George's County (Photo by James H. Johnston)

Once the decision was made, Maryland and Virginia ceded sovereignty over their lands to the federal government. Maryland threw in \$72,000 for the erection of public buildings, and later loaned another \$250,000. Virginia contributed \$120,000 to the same end.<sup>39</sup> However, by law in 1791, Congress provided that the government buildings should only be erected on the land ceded by Maryland.<sup>40</sup>

The federal city—in what is known as the L'Enfant plan, roughly the area from the Anacostia to Rock Creek and from the Potomac to just above Dupont Circle—would not include the existing cities of Alexandria and Georgetown and was only a fraction of the entire District of Columbia. The Capitol, White House (called the “President’s House” then), government buildings, the Mall, and other public areas would occupy an even smaller area within the federal city. The president was to be assisted by three commissioners in any further site selection, in the acquisition of the land, and in putting up the buildings.<sup>41</sup>

By later law, the District of Columbia was divided into two counties: Washington County on the Maryland side of the Potomac and Alexandria County on the Virginia side. Washington County would include the federal city, to be called Washington City, and the separate Georgetown. Alexandria County would include the city of Alexandria. There were large areas in both counties that did not lie within the cities.

To design a plan for the federal city, President Washington chose Pierre L'Enfant, a Frenchman who had been an engineer in the Continental Army. It was a grand plan, envisioning a federal city that would grow into the huge space over time like a child grows into an older sibling's clothes. The initial buildings would be a magnificent Capitol perched on Jenkins Hill, and an equally fitting White House for the president on another hill about two miles away, with buildings in between.<sup>42</sup>



L'Enfant's original plan. Tiber Creek would become part of a canal linking Georgetown to the Anacostia to avoid a difficult stretch of the Potomac. (Library of Congress)



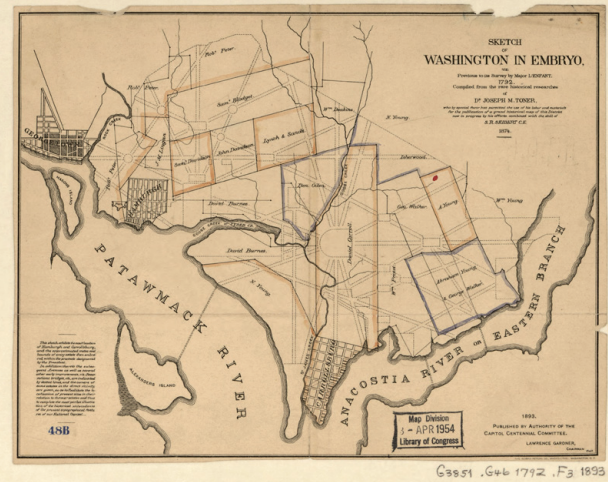
Also between the Capitol and White House was Tiber Creek, which gave rise to the myth of the capital being built on a swamp. The ground on its banks became waterlogged in heavy rains, but L'Enfant had a reason for including it in his plan. The capital would need the Tiber's water for drinking—since the Potomac at Washington is brackish—for fighting fires, and for the fountains he planned. Eventually though, the city needed far more water than the Tiber could provide, and it was channeled into an underground sewer, still present today but out of sight. Today, the District of Columbia's water is brought down from the Potomac miles above the fall line where the river is free of salt.<sup>43</sup>

The acts of cession by the two states only gave up to the federal government the right to make laws for the District of Columbia. Ownership of the land for the federal city, some 6,111 acres, was in private hands, and the president would have to acquire whatever property the federal government wanted for buildings, roads, and parks from those owners.<sup>44</sup> Maps from the period around the time of cession are misleading. "Carrollsbury" and "Hamburgh" shown on maps weren't actual towns although their owners clearly had lofty ambitions by having their properties surveyed and divided into lots.<sup>45</sup>

The federal government had limited funds for the purchase, but, fortunately, George Washington had long experience in the business of buying and selling land. One technique was to have agents buy the land in their own names, thus hiding the fact that it was for a vast federal city since that fact would drive up the price. Benjamin Stoddert, an aide to Washington during the Revolution and a Georgetown, was among Washington's agents.

Washington applied another technique: He made the owners an offer they couldn't refuse. At a meeting called for the purpose in March 1791, he told the landowners that if they sold half their land to the federal government at a set price and temporarily donated the other half, most of the donated land would be returned to them when the capital was built. With the capital completed, the land returned to them should be worth far more than it had been. However, if they did not accept his offer, the federal city might be located elsewhere, in which case their land would not be worth nearly as much. In the end, all 6,111 acres were signed over to the federal government, which paid the owners for the land it used for government purposes. It returned to the owners a pro rata share of the properties it didn't use.<sup>46</sup> In theory, the owners did well for themselves.

Washington had a free hand in this since he personally owned more land than he was handling for the government. He had a total of 70,000 acres, mainly in Virginia and Ohio, compared with the 64,000 acres of the District of Columbia. Mount Vernon alone spread out over 8,000 acres, appreciably larger than the 6,111 acres acquired for the federal city.<sup>47</sup> The acreage taken for public purposes in L'Enfant's plan, e.g., the parks, streets, and government buildings, was even less.



Sketch of Washington "in embryo," previous to its survey by Major L'Enfant. Note presence of "Carrollsbury" and "Hamburgh," never realized. (Library of Congress)

## Georgetown Founders

### THE CARROLLS

Probably no single family was as intimately linked to the establishment of the new federal city as the prominent Carrolls of Maryland. The extended family, related by blood or marriage, had multiple members of various generations bearing the names Charles or Daniel. To avoid confusion and set themselves apart, some of them assumed additional surnames linked to their properties.

Charles Carroll Jr. inherited a large tract of land in what is now southwest D.C. from his father, Daniel Carroll of Duddington. As soon as the boundaries were established and the embryonic city layout was clear, Carroll Jr., who, like his father, had been known as "of Duddington," renamed himself Charles Carroll "of Carrollsbury." Carrollsbury existed only on paper and never boasted much more than a mansion. In 1791, A local wag noted: "If Carrollsbury ever was inhabited, its people had fled or jumped into the river before that day."<sup>125</sup>

The Forrest-Marbury House in Georgetown bears a plaque that commemorates the meeting on March 29, 1791, hosted by prominent Georgetown Uria Forrester and attended by George Washington and "the owners of Carrollsbury and Georgetown," to reach agreement to sell half of their land for the creation of the new federal district.<sup>126</sup>

Charles Carroll of Carrollton, the Maryland senator and signer of the Declaration of Independence and Constitution, and Charles Carroll of Carrollsbury were cousins. Daniel Carroll, the commissioner in the affairs of the permanent seat of the government, was known as Daniel Carroll of Rock Creek. His brother John—luckily the only John, thus not in need of an additional surname—was the first Archbishop of Baltimore and founder of Georgetown College, which later became Georgetown University.<sup>127</sup>

The two main government buildings, the Capitol and the White House, were ready for occupancy in November 1800, and Congress assumed its constitutional prerogative of passing laws for the District. A cautious Congress did no more at this time than pass a law saying the laws of Virginia and Maryland in effect as of the first Monday of December would become the laws of their respective parts of the District of Columbia, unless and until replaced by acts of Congress. The local government officers in those parts would continue in office until removed and replaced by the president.<sup>48</sup>

Congress moved into the new Capitol building, and President John Adams, who was a lame duck at this time, having lost reelection to Thomas Jefferson, moved into the new White House. These two branches of government were in the hands of the Federalist Party (today's Republican Party), but the opposition Republican Party (today's Democratic Party) had won the November 1800 elections. This meant that in March 1801, when the new Congress and president took office, those two branches would be controlled by the Republicans.

So, in February 1801, the Federalists passed two important laws while they still controlled Congress and the presidency with the intent of keeping the judicial branch in Federalists' hands.

The first was the Judiciary Act. It created six federal circuits composed of trial courts and courts of appeals, significantly increasing the number of federal judges. This gave President Adams the opportunity to fill the judicial branch with Federalists before leaving office.<sup>49</sup>

The second was the Organic Act of 1801, which laid out the structure of the government for the entire District of Columbia. Alexandria and Georgetown remained governed by their existing corporate forms, but Washington and Alexandria Counties would be governed by new justices of the peace, appointed by the president under the Judiciary Act. No provision was made for the governance of the city of Washington. It would continue to be governed by the president, who would soon be the newly-elected Thomas Jefferson, the three commissioners created to build the capital, and whatever justices of the peace the president might appoint. Congress didn't get around to creating a "superintendent" for Washington city until 1802.<sup>50</sup>

## The Justices of the Peace and the Supreme Court in *Marbury v. Madison*

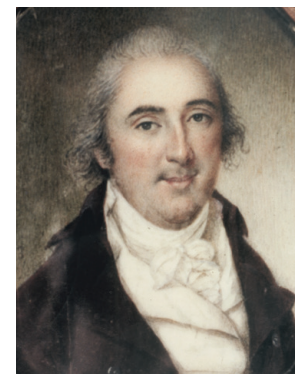
This seemingly trivial provision about justices of the peace gave Supreme Court Chief Justice John Marshall, a Federalist, the opportunity to make the most important decision in the Court's history. The Federalists had rushed confirmation of all the new judges and justices of the peace to take place before Jefferson took office in March 1801. As one of his last acts, President Adams signed their commissions. These were simply pieces of paper certifying each man's appointment. But because all of this was done at the last minute, some of the commissions were undelivered by the time the new, Republican president, Thomas Jefferson, took over in March 1801. When asked what to do with the undelivered commissions, Jefferson, angered by the Federalists' court-packing, issued orders not to deliver any of the remaining commissions.

### THE CARROLLS (cont.)

Daniel Carroll the commissioner was irked by his like-named nephew by marriage, Daniel Carroll of Duddington. This latter Daniel was among the largest landholders in the planned city and his property encompassed all of what became Capitol Hill. He was the city's first brickmaker and eagerly speculated in real estate. Despite being informed of L'Enfant's plans regarding the layout of the city, he constructed a mansion in the middle of the proposed New Jersey Avenue. Outraged, L'Enfant had it demolished in the dead of night. This rash act did not sit well with George Washington, who admonished L'Enfant and made sure Daniel Carroll of Duddington was compensated. Carroll soon built another mansion within the approved lines. The incident was one of the factors leading to the end of L'Enfant's usefulness. It also fueled accusations of self-dealing and nepotism against Daniel Carroll the commissioner.<sup>128</sup>

Whether true or not, the reputation of Daniel Carroll the commissioner was tarnished, leading him to resign in 1795. He died a year later, never getting to see the federal city he helped realize. But another nephew, Robert Brent, became Washington, D.C.'s first mayor. His brother was Charles Carroll of Bellevue (today's Dumbarton House) who aided Dolley Madison in her flight from the White House when the British burned it in 1814.<sup>129</sup>

Daniel Carroll of Duddington, the ambitious nephew, died without realizing the great wealth he had hoped to garner by his many real estate investments. Adding to his bad luck, Carroll's Row, a row of houses he had built that stood at the location of the current Library of Congress, fell into disuse and dilapidation before being torn down.<sup>130</sup>

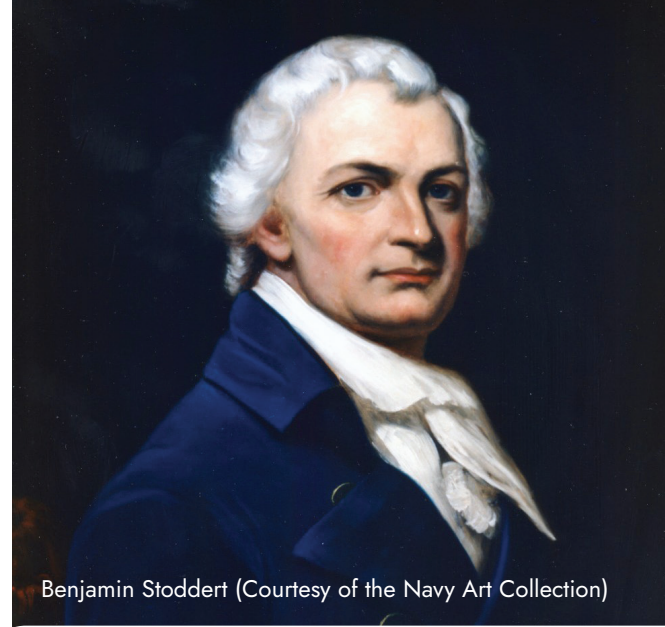


William Marbury, by James Peale, 1798 (Maryland Center for History and Culture)

William Marbury was one of those who didn't get his commission, his piece of paper. The wealthy Georgetown resident was a staunch Federalist who disliked Jefferson and who had special reason for wanting to be a justice of the peace. At first blush, the job was a minor one. In criminal cases, a justice of the peace had the power to decide whether an accused person should be jailed pending trial, but he would not preside over the later trial. A judge would do that. In civil cases, the justice of the peace acted as a small claims court.

But, under the Organic Act, justices of the peace in Washington County, for which Marbury wanted a commission, also served on a "levy court" as provided by Maryland law. Levy courts had the power to impose taxes and build roads with the money.<sup>51</sup> They were basically the local government for Washington County, in effect the county councilmen. Not by coincidence, Marbury was on the board of directors of the Bank of Columbia in Georgetown. The bank's founder, Benjamin Stoddert, was another of Adams's justices of the peace and the man who had served as agent for the federal government in purchasing the land that would make up the District of Columbia.<sup>52</sup> The bank had loaned money to real estate speculators who hoped to make money buying land in the new capital and selling it as the capital grew. These speculators would benefit from having roads built to their properties. As a justice of the peace, Marbury could render significant help to the bank's customers, which of course helped the bank.

Therefore, both out of pique and for business reasons, Marbury proceeded to sue Secretary of State James Madison, the official responsible for delivering the commissions, asking for an order that Madison deliver the commission. However, it would take the Supreme Court two years to decide the matter. Finally, in 1803, Chief Justice Marshall handed down the decision. He readily agreed that Marbury was entitled to the commission, but went beyond this issue to hand down a seminal ruling. Marbury had filed the case in the Supreme Court, as provided by a law of Congress. This law, Marshall ruled, was in conflict with the Constitution, which generally makes the Supreme Court an appellate court, not a trial court. Marshall continued by declaring that although the Constitution did not specify which branch of government had the power to declare laws unconstitutional—in England it was Parliament—it was inherent in the Constitution that this power was vested in the Supreme Court. And so, the case *Marbury v. Madison*, about a seemingly insignificant federal justice of the peace who would have been appointed by the governor of Maryland prior to cession, established the principle that the Supreme Court is the branch of government that determines constitutionality. As for Marbury, the Chief Justice said he was free to refile his complaint with a federal trial court. He never did.<sup>53</sup>



Benjamin Stoddert (Courtesy of the Navy Art Collection)

## Georgetown Founders

### BENJAMIN STODDERT

Benjamin Stoddert, originally from Charles County, Maryland, served as secretary of the Continental Board of War during the Revolutionary War and as the nation's first Secretary of the Navy. He also was one of the founders of the Bank of Columbia. In 1786, he bought property in Georgetown and went into the tobacco trade with another former Revolutionary War officer, Uriah Forrest, and John Murdock. Stoddert succeeded in gaining the trust of George Washington enough to become one of the president's confidential agents in the rampant real estate speculation connected with the founding of the national capital.

He worked actively to make Georgetown part of the new federal seat of power. Acting secretly as Washington's agent, Stoddert acquired lots for the future use of the federal government while pretending that they were for private use. Stoddert and his partners also purchased land within the ten-mile square but outside the boundaries of Washington City, where they assumed there would be lively demand for larger parcels. In 1795, they patented a 1,282-acre tract of land north of Georgetown and east of the road to Montgomery Court House (Wisconsin Avenue) which they foolishly named *Pretty Prospects*.<sup>131</sup>

The potential value of the property in which Stoddert and his partners speculated hinged on where the residential, commercial, and governmental development of the new city would take place. George Washington had worked with Pierre L'Enfant to choose sites for the Capitol and president's house. He appeared to favor the new city's growth toward the east of these principal federal landmarks and went so far as to purchase lots and construct houses adjacent to the future Capitol.<sup>132</sup>



# Georgetown in the District of Columbia

In 1800, when the District of Columbia was officially created, Georgetown was its crown jewel. It is not hard to imagine the reaction from Georgetown’s residents ten years earlier when news arrived that this part of the Potomac would be the designated seat of government. The tantalizing money-making prospects led local profit seekers as well as out-of-town opportunists to plant their flags. Georgetown necessarily benefited at first since it was an established town with a port and had an urban infrastructure immediately adjacent to the planned federal city.<sup>54</sup> Meanwhile, Alexandria, another thriving port town in the ten-mile square, was at a disadvantage due to its downstream location in the territory designated in the Residence Act and to its being separated from the federal city by the Potomac River.

Georgetown’s population increased modestly in the decade after cession, but by 1810 it had jumped substantially and continued to grow at a robust rate. Aside from the obvious factor of a growing federal workforce, the increase also may have been due to more commerce at the port. Another reason was the arrival of manumitted, or freed, Blacks who previously had been enslaved on the tobacco fields of Maryland. Once farmers began growing wheat, they no longer required as much labor and did not want to pay to maintain enslaved workers and their families year-round.<sup>55</sup> Still, Georgetown’s growth paled in comparison to the even more intense development occurring in the new Washington City. Roughly the same size in 1800, the population of Washington City was 60 percent larger than that of Georgetown in 1820, and by 1830 it had more than doubled.<sup>56</sup>

## Population

	1790	1800	1810	1820	1830
Georgetown	2,135	2,993	4,900	7,360	8,441
Washington City	n/a	3,210	8,208	13,247	18,827

Sources: Mary Beth Corrigan, *U.S. Census data*.

As much as this kind of rapid growth translated to a booming business for Georgetown merchants, it also resulted in ill effects on residents: dumping of trash, an increase in “unappetizing” trades and businesses, and overall bad behavior in an ever more crowded environment. The Georgetown Corporation passed a series of ordinances in 1795 which, among other things, imposed hefty fines for the dumping of carrion, excessive oyster shells, broken glass, and other “filth,” as well as for allowing swine to run free.<sup>57</sup>

Georgetown’s population growth and the demand for real estate led to significant expansions of the town’s boundaries. Hundreds of new lots were added to the north and west, upon which were built some very impressive houses and mansions. In 1793, Montgomery County assessed most parcels between \$250 to \$600 in an era when a laborer made around \$5 per month.<sup>58</sup> Smaller lots in less desirable areas commanded far lower prices. Wealthy residents such as Uriah Forrest, William H. Dorsey, and Benjamin Stoddert owned many of the largest and best situated lots.<sup>59</sup> Many Georgetown-linked individuals and family clans saw their fortunes rise, but some also suffered in the establishment of the nation’s capital.

## BENJAMIN STODDERT (cont.)

But Stoddert and his associates had placed their bets on the area west of the president’s house, which encompassed Georgetown and their “Pretty Prospects”: “Lay out your gains in lots, cheap but good large homes, on one of the Avenues leading from Geo Town to the Prests. House you can not better serve yourself—the District—the Public.” Stoddert predicted that there would be profits, even if some Georgetowners expressed skepticism: “Displeased as are the People of Geo Town there are not many there whose situation will be so enviable two years hence, as theirs will be. I mean those who have property. Land 5 miles from Phila. inferior to my 300 ar. up the road, is worth L50 to L100 an acre.”<sup>133</sup>

Unfortunately for Stoddert and his associates, their speculative efforts did not bear sufficient fruit. Stoddert and Forrest had to forfeit personal property in an effort to pay back taxes. In 1800, they endorsed each other’s note for money they owed the District’s commissioners, which the commissioners refused to accept. In a last-ditch attempt to escape bankruptcy, Stoddert tried to persuade friends to buy shares in a new speculative investment he dubbed the “Washington Tontine,” which contained all his real estate holdings, but this also failed. To make matters worse, there were challenges to Stoddert’s title to some city lots even as these continued to pile on more tax arrears. By 1812, Benjamin Stoddert was described as one of the largest tax delinquents in Washington. When he died in 1813, his debts exceeded \$50,000.<sup>134</sup>

# The Effects of Cession on African Americans

Although slavery had been a major factor in deciding whether the capital should be in the North or South, no one talked about how this affected African Americans living in the selected site, most of whom were enslaved.

The new District of Columbia was about one-third Black in 1800. According to historian Letitia Woods Brown, 14,903 individuals lived in the ten-mile square District. Of those, 4,027 were African Americans. There were 1,726 living in Georgetown, 1,244 in Alexandria, and 746 in the federal city. Most were enslaved, but Alexandria had 367 free Blacks, Georgetown had 277, and 139 lived in other parts of the District. The ten years since passage of the Residence Act had seen an influx of laborers to build the capital, many of whom were free or enslaved African Americans. For instance, Brown writes: “[T]he work force which built the Capitol itself was made up for the most part of a group of 90 slaves hired for that purpose.”<sup>60</sup>

None of this construction was done in Georgetown, but enslaved Blacks from there were undoubtedly hired out to work on the government buildings. They of course did not profit from their work, but skilled, free Blacks in Georgetown could have availed themselves of this opportunity for employment.

Georgetown had its own miniature “Black code,” i.e., a set of restrictive local laws applicable mainly to African Americans, although also to servants. For example, no one could hire or “harbor or entertain” someone else’s enslaved person (or servant) without the enslaver’s written consent. Similarly, enslaved persons (and servants) were not allowed to purchase or acquire liquor unless they had a written order from their enslaver. This meant that Whites could not send their servants out to get alcohol for the house unless they carried a written order. Punishment for violations for Whites was a fine, but for the enslaved it could be thirty lashes.<sup>61</sup> A similar law made it unlawful for indentured servants or the enslaved to congregate in groups of seven or more. Constables were directed to arrest the group and administer as many as thirty-nine lashes. Anyone interfering with the constables was subject to a fine of five pounds.<sup>62</sup> That such concerns were primarily racist is evidenced by a 1797 Maryland law, the preamble to which said Georgetowners had “sustained many inconveniences from the want of proper powers of the corporation to pass laws to restrain the mischiefs from vagrants, loose and disorderly persons, *free negroes*, and persons having no visible means of support [emphasis added].”<sup>63</sup>

Still, for a few decades, some of the enslaved in Georgetown enjoyed more freedom than most African Americans would until after the Civil War. This was because the wealthy, White Georgetowners had enslaved Blacks living and working in their houses. Historian Ira Berlin described these “urban slaves” in the capital region before the Civil War:

- : Urban slaves, unlike their plantation counterparts, lived literally
- : on top of or beside their owners and other white people in
- : attics, backrooms, and closets. ... As domestics, laborers, and
- : especially skilled tradesmen and tradeswomen, they moved
- : freely through the towns, often as hirelings, rented from one
- : master to another. Sometimes they rented themselves, collecting
- : their own wages and living independently of owner or hirer.<sup>64</sup>

Yarrow Mamout was a prime example of an “urban slave.” Brought to Maryland from Africa on a slave ship in 1752, he was enslaved by various members of the Beall family of Maryland. He ended up in Georgetown before being freed in 1796 and becoming one of the most respected and wealthy men in the Black community. His portrait was painted by the prominent artist, Charles Willson Peale, and by local artist, James Alexander Simpson.<sup>65</sup>



Yarrow Mamout by James Alexander Simpson in 1822. This portrait hangs in the Peabody Room of Georgetown Public Library. (Photo by James H. Johnston)

By 1818, free Black craftsmen and businessmen in Georgetown had banded together in what they called the Mutual Relief Association. According to an announcement it placed in the newspaper, the association's purpose was "the relief of the free people of color in this town." The announcement noted that the association had been "of great assistance in relieving the poor people of color, which the inclement season, and other causes have in some instances reduced to much distress."<sup>66</sup> Joseph Moore was president of the association for a time.<sup>67</sup> As a teenager, he had worked at a nursery where the owner taught his Black employees to read and write, and Moore had gone on to become "a respectable grocer."<sup>68</sup> Other members of the association were Andrew Barker, a plasterer, and William V. Grant, a bricklayer.<sup>69</sup>

Georgetown had two schools for Black girls. Mary Becraft, a young, Catholic African American, ran one of them in the 1820s. A history written after the Civil War records:

[T]here are those living who remember the troop of girls, dressed uniformly, which was wont to follow in procession their pious and refined teacher to devotions on the Sabbath at Holy Trinity Church. The school comprised girls from the best colored families of Georgetown, Washington, Alexandria, and surrounding country. The sisters of the Georgetown convent were the admirers of Miss Becraft, gave her instruction, and extended to her the most heartfelt aid and approbation in all her noble work, as they were in those days wont to do in behalf of the aspiring colored girls, who sought for education, withholding themselves from such work only when a depraved and degenerate public sentiment upon the subject of educating the colored people had compelled them to a more rigid line of demarcation between the races.<sup>70</sup>

This "depraved and degenerate public sentiment," which we call "racism" today, began to poison what had been a more tolerant attitude towards African Americans in an earlier Georgetown. Georgetown's Southern leanings were infamous by the time of the Civil War. Writing of the divisions in the town, author Mary A. Mitchell referred to a Union hospital on 30th Street:

A burr under the saddle for the neighbors, it flew the Stars and Stripes all day and was constantly patrolled by blue-clad Yankee Joes. Across the street at 1300 30th Street lived Mrs. Grafton Tyler, a Bowie from Prince Georges County, who was so irritated by the spectacle that she kept her shutters closed most of the time. In fact her reaction to these symbols of Yankee control resembled that of most of the older southern generation who represented the town's most diehard Secesh. Abstaining from any positive action, they lived through the four years as if in a state of siege. Some secluded themselves on estates in rural Maryland, others stuck it out in town, openly sending supplies to relatives living on plantations within federal lines stripped bare by plundering soldiers.<sup>71</sup>

Of course, the Southern sentiment in Montgomery County was worse. Mitchell writes that after visiting Georgetown in 1863, Walt Whitman called it three-fifths Southern.<sup>72</sup> However, Abraham Lincoln garnered only fifty votes (2 percent of the total) in Montgomery County in the 1860 presidential election.<sup>73</sup>

African Americans in Georgetown first began to benefit from being a part of the District of Columbia, home to a Congress full of Northerners, once the South seceded. One result was the Emancipation Act of 1862, which created a procedure whereby enslaved persons in the District of Columbia were freed and their owners, if they applied, were compensated.<sup>74</sup> It was two more years before the State of Maryland adopted a new constitution which abolished slavery without requiring compensation and even longer before the federal government did.

However, post-bellum Georgetown still didn't seem to realize that the Civil War had been fought over slavery and racial equality. In 1865, when legislation was pending in Congress to change Georgetown's charter to make African Americans eligible to vote, the town council asked for a straw vote of Georgetowners on the bill. Of course, the voters then were all White males. The council's resolution asking for the vote was unabashedly racist. It called the bill in Congress a "grievous oppression" of a "helpless [Georgetown] community" and "evil." The good citizens of Georgetown voted 712 to 1 against African Americans voting. Congress ignored them. The law it passed denied the vote to anyone who had supported the Rebellion but otherwise made the vote available to every male person "without any distinction on account of color or race."<sup>75</sup>



The end of elected governments in the District of Columbia, the Organic Act of 1871, is attributed by some to stem from similar racist sentiments throughout the capital. Former slaves in the South began fleeing to Northern cities, including Washington, throughout the Civil War, with the great migration coming upon the war's conclusion. When African Americans began winning elections in the District, White residents were willing to give up self-governance and let the president pick a governor for the District, rather than allow Black representation in government.<sup>76</sup>

For most of its history, Georgetown had been about one-third African American, counting both enslaved and free Blacks. This began changing in the early 20th century when it began to again attract the wealthy. Passage of the Old Georgetown Act in 1950 accelerated the change to the point where today Georgetown is seen as a White enclave. The law was promoted as a way of preserving the 18th and 19th century houses and the general feel of a small town in earlier times.

The sponsor of the legislation was New York State Congressman James Wadsworth, a Republican. His home was in the 3300 block of N Street, west of Wisconsin Avenue. Ironically, his wife was the daughter of John Hay, the personal secretary of the "Great Emancipator" Abraham Lincoln. The Wadsworths' home was full of Lincoln memorabilia inherited from Hay. Supporting Wadsworth was his close Georgetown neighbor, David Finley. He was the first director of the National Gallery of Art.

The title of the Act was a misnomer. It was triggered by plans for construction of a gas station in Georgetown, but well-to-do Georgetowners saw in it the opportunity to rid the town of tenements, many of which had been put up after the Civil War and rented to the influx of freed Blacks. But Wadsworth and Finley focused on preserving an aesthetic ideal rather than the actual history of Georgetown. Wadsworth patterned the law on acts passed in New Orleans, Louisiana, Charleston, South Carolina, and Alexandria and Richmond, Virginia. Finley was known more for preservation of art than for historic preservation. Yet despite his claimed interest in preserving old Georgetown, he once had purchased several dilapidated tenements on Dent Place, razed them, and replaced them with cheap row houses which he rented out.



"Georgetown from Trinity College," oil painting by James Alexander Simpson, 1831 (Booth Family Center for Special Collections, Georgetown University)

## Henry Threlkeld and Georgetown College

Henry Threlkeld, another Englishman, emigrated to the colonies in 1716 and arrived with sufficient means to purchase an estate of 1,000 acres known as Berleith. His only child, John, married Mary Hopkins, the widow of a Georgetown landowner. Her dower-right inheritance included one-third of her late husband's property. John Threlkeld bought the remaining family property from Mary's brother-in-law and co-heir, thereby amassing land that extended from just above the Potomac River in the south to what is now Nebraska Avenue in the north. This uneven, generally poor land was not well-suited for agriculture and Threlkeld used it instead for pasturage, orchards, and sheep raising.<sup>135</sup>

In April 1787, he donated a plot of land to The Reverend John Carroll to enable him to found Holy Trinity Church in Georgetown, the first Catholic Church in what would become the District of Columbia. Threlkeld sold the property to the Jesuits for the nominal fee of 5 shillings, which could be regarded as a gift when comparable lots went for up to 50 pounds. Threlkeld was not Catholic, but this gesture can be understood as an act of goodwill to a religious order that had faced many restrictions in the pre-revolutionary era. And, as a very wealthy man, he could afford to give it away.<sup>136</sup>

In April 1788, construction began at a larger neighboring plot on Georgetown College's first building, later called "Old South," leading Carroll to write: "We shall begin the building of our Academy this summer. On this Academy are built all my hopes of permanency and success of our holy religion in the United States." On January 23, 1789, Jesuits John Carroll, Robert Molyneux, and John Ashton completed the purchase from Threlkeld and William Deakins Jr. for "seventy-five pounds current money" of the acre and a half on which construction had already started. This land became the core of Georgetown College's campus.<sup>137</sup>

The Jesuits and Georgetown College continued to rely heavily on their Maryland roots and did not appear to benefit materially from the establishment of the capital city next door. The college's financial fortunes rose and fell based on the levels of private donations, those usually a result of overall economic factors. These included fluctuating enrollment, student tuition, hiring out of enslaved labor, and the performance of the five farms the order ran in Maryland that depended on enslaved labor, such as White Marsh in Prince George's County and St. Inigoes in St. Mary's County.

Georgetown College received a boost in 1815 when Congress granted it a federal charter allowing it to confer degrees and assume the status of a university. But financial pressures remained, largely due to mismanagement of resources, especially the farms. By 1838, funds became so scarce that the administration took the decision to sell 272 enslaved people, primarily from those farms, to cover costs. It was late in the 19th century before Georgetown University was in a position to expand and eventually achieve the status of one of the nation's top private institutions of higher education.<sup>138</sup>



Mt. Zion Church in Georgetown. Rev. A. J. Foy was pastor in 1950 and testified against the Old Georgetown Act, saying it would drive African Americans out of Georgetown. The Methodist congregation originally was composed of both races, but over time it became predominantly African American. (Photo by James H. Johnston)



Mt. Zion and Female Union Band Cemetery, Georgetown. In the 1960s, developers began clearing the tombstones until citizens obtained a court order to stop work. Since then, the D.C. Government and volunteers have cleaned up and restored the cemetery in part, but the old damage is still apparent. (Photo by James H. Johnston)

federal Fine Arts Commission had to approve all exterior construction in “old Georgetown.”<sup>80</sup> Any new building and any change to an existing building needed approval, and approval required hiring architects and lawyers. The poor, predominantly African Americans, had no recourse except to let their houses deteriorate or to move. Naturally, over time, Georgetown gentrified and lost its character as an integrated town.

Montgomery County, meanwhile, also had been changing, from rural to suburban. Under the E. Brooke Lee regime in 1918, the county began to promote growth. The Washington Suburban Sanitary Commission was created to extend water and sewer lines to subdivisions, much like Marbury and other Columbia Bank of Georgetown directors sought appointments as justices of the peace to extend roads to their borrowers’ developments. The Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission complemented this effort for zoning purposes to ensure that livable communities attracted middle-class Americans to the capital region for the many new federal jobs in the Franklin Roosevelt and Harry Truman administrations.<sup>81</sup>

The only witness to testify against Wadsworth’s bill was Rev. J.D. Foy of the Mount Zion Methodist Church of Georgetown, which had a predominantly Black congregation. Rev. Foy said that 70 percent of Georgetown’s Black population had already been driven out by “this trend toward reclaiming, or remodeling, the community to conform to certain standards.” He feared the bill “further strengthens the hands of those who have power and wealth against the weak.” He compared the proposed Old Georgetown Act to a “restricted covenant,” having the effect of barring Black ownership.<sup>77</sup> Although he didn’t use the precise words, he obviously felt Wadsworth’s bill was racist in effect and probably in intent.<sup>78</sup> Rev. Foy’s arguments were rejected, and the bill became law a few months later.

At the same hearing, Congressman Wadsworth was asked if the bill would perpetuate “historical interests.” He answered that it would, but it would not be as “elaborate as what was done at Williamsburg,” which had been meticulously restored to look like it did in colonial times.<sup>79</sup> Similarly, most witnesses at the June 22, 1950 hearing on the bill—the only hearing held—felt its purposes were twofold: historic preservation and aesthetic.

The historic preservation purpose of the Act is codified in Section 2. It stipulates that any proposed construction in Georgetown shall be referred to the U.S. Commission of Fine Arts “in order to promote the general welfare and to preserve and protect the places and areas of historic interest.... [emphasis added].” However, in practice, the Old Georgetown Act has served only to preserve a style of architecture, a “look,” rather than history.

Rev. Foy was prophetic. Architecturally, Georgetown fell under federal control. The Old Georgetown Board composed of architects and overseen by the



By the early 1960s, reformers drawn from the ranks of the new residents attracted to the county's quality housing took up both the cause of Civil Rights and a change in county government. One of the first inklings was an attempt to get the county council to pass an anti-discrimination ordinance, starting in 1959. It took two years before the council held a hearing on the matter, but when it did, more than 250 people showed up.<sup>82</sup> In 1966, the county government structure Lee had created was overthrown in the elections by the reformers.<sup>83</sup> The result is, whereas today African Americans constitute only 4 percent of Georgetown's population, they represent 18 percent of Montgomery County's, and when other races and ethnicities are taken into account, those who identify as "White" now make up less than half the county's population.<sup>84</sup>

## Boss Shepherd and Home Rule in Georgetown

Although in the debates leading up to selection of a capital, the location was always referred to as "Georgetown," and although many prominent men there lobbied for and profited from the decision, its citizens came to resent subjugation to a resident, national Congress as opposed to the more relaxed, and more distant, Maryland legislature in Annapolis.

The first significant occasion of Congress asserting authority over Georgetown was in 1805. Under the town's original charter from the Maryland legislature, it had been governed by a self-perpetuating, seven-member commission.<sup>85</sup> In 1789, the legislature changed this to a corporation with a mayor chosen by aldermen, who in turn were elected. Any freeman twenty-one years or older who had lived in Georgetown for a year and who owned "visible property within the State [of Maryland] above the value of thirty pounds" was eligible to vote.<sup>86</sup> In the 1805 law, Congress made some slight changes to the structure and a major change regarding who was eligible to vote: "free white male citizens of Georgetown, of full age, and having resided within the town aforesaid, twelve months previously, and having paid tax to the Corporation."<sup>87</sup> Congress was dictating to Georgetown who could vote in local elections.

Georgetown's self-governance was put on a short leash. It needed congressional approval in 1802 to levy a tax for paving streets and alleys, and for sinking wells and building pumps. When it wanted to build a causeway to connect Mason's Island (now Theodore Roosevelt Island) to Arlington, Virginia, the town needed congressional approval both to build the causeway and to tax Georgetowners to pay for it.<sup>88</sup> In 1809, Congress saw fit to define the precise boundaries of Georgetown and ordered it to erect permanent boundary markers.<sup>89</sup>

Nevertheless, Georgetown's government remained surprisingly stable. In the seventy-one years between the federal government's taking sovereignty in 1800 and Georgetown's dissolution and absorption into Washington, D.C. in 1871, it was led by only ten mayors. Federal oversight must have been trying, though. When Mayor John Cox moved to a new house on Fayette Street near Georgetown College, he had to get an act of Congress in 1826 to extend the town's borders 300 feet to the west because his new house was outside the existing city limits.<sup>90</sup>

The Organic Act of 1871 merged all three of the then-remaining jurisdictions in the District of Columbia, i.e., Georgetown, Washington City, and Washington County, into a single territory under a governor appointed by the president. The driving force behind this legislation that ended Georgetown's 120 years of self-government was Alexander "Boss" Shepherd.<sup>91</sup>

## Georgetown Founders

### HENRY FOXALL

Henry Foxall, born in England in 1760, made his first mark in Dublin as the head of a large iron works facility. He emigrated to Philadelphia and persuaded the prominent Robert Morris, a signer of the Constitution, to join him in establishing an iron works in that city. The new federal city also proved to be a very lucrative venture for him. In 1799, Thomas Jefferson, convinced that the new capital needed its own ordnance supplier, and impressed with Foxall's entrepreneurial and management qualities, persuaded him to move to the area. Foxall established a successful foundry on the western edge of Georgetown. He also built a house in town close to the Potomac River and another, summer house on higher ground to the north, which he called "Spring Hill." He was a pioneer in manufacturing arms and ordnance and helped the nascent U.S. military upgrade its obsolete weaponry. Foxall was the first arms producer to cast bored cannons, vastly superior to the old kind. These new cannons were used in the failed attempt to defend the city during the British invasion in August 1814. The British had set their sights on destroying Foxall's foundry, the only one remaining south of Philadelphia. But a freak summer tornado on the second day of the attack prevented the British troops from proceeding farther west than the White House. They hastily retreated back to their ships and Georgetown and Foxall's foundry were spared.<sup>139</sup>





Portrait of Alexander Robey "Boss" Shepherd, 1870. (Smithsonian Institution Archives)

Few people in the District's government were as colorful and controversial as Shepherd. A politician well-suited to the scruples of the gilded age, he used any means necessary—legal, illegal, or merely questionable—to improve the city and further its independence. He also lobbied for suffrage on behalf of the formerly enslaved, who poured into the area in large numbers during his time in power.

By the time Shepherd appeared in 1871, the city was in poor shape in every respect. The revenues envisioned by the sale of lots back in 1790 had never materialized and few reliable sources of funding had arisen in the meantime. The Civil War, in particular, took a huge toll on the District's already stretched finances and inadequate infrastructure. Congress by and large still held the mindset that it was not responsible for the upkeep much less the development of the city. Many members lived in boarding houses when Congress was in session and escaped to their home districts whenever possible.

Administrators of the three semiautonomous components of the District—Washington City, Washington County, and Georgetown—squabbled among themselves and competed for congressional funds for even the most basic needs, such as filling potholes.<sup>92</sup> The situation was so dire that there was serious consideration of moving the nation's capital to St. Louis, which geographically could have been regarded as the new center of a United States that by then had spread across the continent.<sup>93</sup>

Shepherd and his allies were successful in winning support from the public and Congress to create a unified territorial government as laid out in the Organic Act of 1871. The single, eleven-member legislative body included two representatives for Georgetown and the County of Washington, respectively, presided over by a governor. All were appointed in 1871 by the president. Neither Shepherd, the popular favorite, nor Jason Magruder of Georgetown got the nod to be the first governor. President Ulysses S. Grant, fearing factionalism, instead appointed financier Henry Cooke, who also served as nominal president of the Board of Public Works.<sup>94</sup>

Shepherd did eventually become D.C.'s second (and last) governor, but his actions as the appointed vice chairman of the Board of Public Works gained him the most fame and notoriety. He operated largely on his own and rarely consulted the other members of the Board before he took sweeping action. The "Boss" was able to pull this off largely because the actual governor, Cooke, was more focused on finances and less on the physical territory he had been appointed to manage. "Why is Governor Cooke like a sheep?" went a popular joke at the time. "Because he is led around by A. Shepherd."<sup>95</sup>

In just three short years, from 1871-1874, Shepherd completely transformed the city in a literal whirlwind of infrastructure and beautification projects. He closed the stinking Washington Canal, which was the last remnant of Tiber Creek; laid down 157 miles of paving; and installed 123 miles of sewers, 39 miles of gas mains, and 30 miles of water mains. In addition, he planted tens of thousands of trees, established the city's first horse-drawn streetcar transportation system, and illuminated the previously gloomy city with gas-powered streetlights.<sup>96</sup>

All this improvement came at a steep price. Shepherd incurred the wrath of many individuals and businesses as property taxes were raised repeatedly to help finance the improvements blitz. Many, including prominent politicians or wealthy individuals, were also outraged at the results of street grading crews hastily trying to level the city's uneven terrain. In some cases, grading teams left properties teetering on virtual cliffs or swallowed up by a mountain of fill dirt reaching the second floor. The consequences can be seen even today.<sup>97</sup>



Consequences of street regrading under Boss Shepherd. The street at 3035 Dumbarton Street has been lowered, requiring a retaining wall and steps. (Photo by James H. Johnston)



When fill dirt raised the street at 2619-2621 O Street, thus burying the original entrances, bridges were needed from the raised street to new front doors on the second story of the old houses. (Photo by James H. Johnston)

“Boss” Shepherd’s ambitious infrastructure projects ultimately exceeded their budget by more than double the original estimate, effectively bankrupting the city. The overruns stemmed from mismanagement, no-bid contracts, and preferential treatment for neighborhoods where Shepherd or his closest allies had financial interests. An angry Congress fired Shepherd, dissolved the District of Columbia’s Territorial Government, and appointed a three-man commission that served through 1973, when limited home rule was granted. Charges of corruption were levied, but ultimately Alexander “Boss” Shepherd was never found guilty of a crime.<sup>98</sup> Yet, despite his many flaws, had someone with the courage—or hubris—of Alexander Shepherd not appeared on the scene, D.C. might have languished even longer as a sleepy backwater.

## Georgetown’s Decline and Resurrection

Although Georgetown was never reincorporated as a city after the Organic Act of 1871, it was frequently referred to as such by Congress, perhaps out of habit or perhaps to grant it equal footing with Washington City.<sup>99</sup> Contemporaneous sources show little popular resistance to and even some approval of the town’s loss of identity. Georgetown was renamed West Washington, but local newspapers continued to use both names; over time, the original name regained popular use. The town’s streets were given, with some exceptions, the same pattern of alternating numbers and letters as in the rest of the District, though some street names, like Prospect, Dumbarton, and Olive, survived, and some new ones (e.g., Volta, Dent) were added over time. Georgetown in the modern era is regarded as D.C.’s oldest neighborhood but, other than being subjected to more stringent historic preservation laws than any other part of the city, it enjoys no special status.<sup>100</sup>

Georgetown’s descent was closely linked with the decline of trade from the port. As the tobacco trade declined in the early 19th century, production and sale of flour became the leading commercial activity in Georgetown. Between 1815 and 1835 dry goods, groceries, and hardware items accounted for about four-fifths of all imports at the Georgetown customhouse. Though the port received a short-lived boost when the C&O Canal commenced operations in 1831, the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad connections between the capital and Baltimore completed in 1835 encouraged retailers to buy directly from wholesale firms in Baltimore and New York.<sup>101</sup> The decline of the port’s usefulness accelerated in the post-Civil War era, as sediment began to fill up the harbor and channels of the Potomac, making navigation difficult and eventually impossible for larger ships. Various canal systems had been developed over the decades, but none ever lived up to its promise of enabling significant trade to the west. As oceangoing ships were built larger to transport more cargo, deep water ports, particularly Baltimore, grew in regional importance. Ultimately, however, it was the advent of steam locomotion that rendered Georgetown’s port obsolete.<sup>102</sup>

Had the capital not been sited next door, Georgetown would never have prospered the way it did and might even have collapsed. The Chesapeake and Ohio Canal, for instance, would surely never have been built. In any event, the waterfront at Georgetown gradually turned into a site for heavy industry, such as flour and paper mills, a rendering plant, a bottling facility, warehouse storage, and other industrial uses. After the C&O Canal ceased operations in 1924, railroad tracks were laid along Water Street to bring in western coal to power private properties, businesses, electricity-generating plants, and the streetcar system. Workers constructing the Key Bridge in the early 1940s lived in cramped houses erected mainly in the lower Georgetown and adjacent Foggy Bottom areas.<sup>103</sup> By the Depression era, however, many industrial activities were no longer economically feasible. Sections of Georgetown assumed slum-like conditions, with dilapidated, overcrowded housing lacking plumbing and electricity.

As Georgetown declined, better-off residents moved elsewhere in the District or out of the city entirely. Newer neighborhoods, such as nearby Glover Park and Cleveland Park, were desirable symbols of progress and a superior style of life.<sup>104</sup> This began to change during and especially after World War II, when an influx of federal workers clamored for scarce housing. Georgetown's favorable location close to the federal corridor, and cheap real estate prices, enticed some people to consider moving to the neighborhood.<sup>105</sup> It soon caught the attention of cabinet officers like Allen Dulles, and politicians like Senator John F. Kennedy, whose glamor further added to Georgetown's growing cachet. But many new owners preferred tearing down old houses rather than renovating them, leading to passage of the Old Georgetown Act, ostensibly intended to prevent the further degradation and destruction of historic properties and preserve the character of the town.

The legislation, along with other historic preservation and beautification actions, helped keep the federal architectural style for the neighborhood.<sup>106</sup> However, the legislation defined "old Georgetown" well beyond its historical borders, and it has not overcome the effect of the automobile on a street grid designed for pedestrians and horses. It also had the effect, discussed earlier, of driving out many residents who had called the neighborhood home for generations, especially African Americans.<sup>107</sup> As a result, Georgetown today, while it may have architectural appeal, does not quite resemble the way it looked originally or indeed for most of its history.

## "America's Last Colony"? The Question of Retrocession

Doubts and complaints were expressed about cession from the start.<sup>108</sup> The principal complaint was disenfranchisement. In the decade after passage of the Residence Act of 1791, District residents had continued to participate in politics as citizens of their former states. Uriah Forrest of Georgetown, for example, won election in 1792 on behalf of Maryland to the U.S. House of Representatives.<sup>109</sup> The situation changed after passage of the Organic Act of 1801. This led President James Monroe in 1818 to revive an earlier plan that would solve this problem by giving the District territorial status. The idea was batted about in Congress and in the popular press for a number of years but ultimately led nowhere.<sup>110</sup> Over time, other, more material issues added to the general discontent of many District residents of the territory ceded by Virginia as well as Maryland. The scope and reasons for their unhappiness were not the same across the board. Those living in Washington City generally benefited more from their proximity to the federal government and the economic opportunities that flowed from it, such as federal building construction, housing, dining, and entertainment. But many residents of the port towns of Georgetown and Alexandria did not enjoy the same degree of attention. Alexandria in particular was disadvantaged due to its physical distance.

The most relentless effort to retrocede came from Virginia. Although both Marylanders and Virginians living in the ceded areas lost their status and voting rights as citizens of a state, Virginians bore additional burdens. The first was administrative: Alexandria had been the historic seat and court of Fairfax County. Cession meant that these offices had to be moved somewhere else in the state. The second likely was more galling: The Residence Act of 1791 prevented construction of federal buildings on the Virginia side. Practically, this meant that Alexandria city and county were deprived of the commercial benefits that devolved to the Maryland portion.<sup>111</sup> In 1824, a grassroots movement to retrocede got underway but it took over two decades to convince the public that retrocession was in its best interest. Eventually, Congress and Virginians agreed. The Retrocession Act of 1846 passed Congress easily and was accepted by the Virginia Assembly early the following year. In the immediate postbellum era, given the extent of devastation wrought by the Civil War, several attempts were made to reunite Alexandria with the District of Columbia, but they obviously failed.



Georgetown residents also entertained the idea of retroceding. The reasons were similar to those of Alexandria: lack of congressional representation and overall federal neglect. No doubt the lively debate occurring on the Virginia side of the Potomac also had a spillover effect, though enthusiasm for retrocession in Georgetown appeared to be muted compared to that in Alexandria for a number of reasons. First, many citizens feared being subject to state taxation, which they were spared as District residents.<sup>112</sup> Second, while Georgetown's economy was largely autonomous, it did benefit from close proximity to the federal government. Third and finally, the prospect of devolving back to Maryland did not appear as attractive to many inhabitants as pursuing the option of joining Washington City and County in a unified, semiautonomous territorial government. When Congress passed the second Organic Act in 1871, Georgetown as a semiautonomous political entity ceased to exist. However, the law gave the District of Columbia the right to elect a delegate to the House of Representatives who is authorized to introduce legislation, participate in debate and even sit on committees, but is not allowed to vote.

The underlying issue motivating retrocession—no congressional representation and, since 1913, federal taxation—persists in the modern era, but more recent initiatives have focused more on achieving greater autonomy or even statehood. In 1933, in a Supreme Court case not dealing with voting rights, *O'Donoghue v. United States*, the Court wrote: "It is important to bear constantly in mind that the District was made up of portions of two original states of the Union, and was not taken out of the Union by the cession. Prior thereto its inhabitants were entitled to all rights, guarantees, and immunities of the Constitution. ... We think it is not reasonable to assume that the cession stripped them of those rights."<sup>113</sup> It took several more decades and continued protest for Congress to give D.C. residents a greater say in how they were governed. In 1960, Congress passed the 23rd Amendment granting D.C. residents the right to vote for the president and vice president. It was ratified the following year. The amendment allocated the District three electoral votes, but it gave the power of appointing those electors to Congress.

Popular energy around the civil and women's rights movements of the 1960s and early 1970s helped revitalize the call for more representation and self-government. The result was the Home Rule Act of 1973, which included a charter granting the District the right to elect a mayor and city council, but also giving Congress authority over the budget and the right to review and block legislation passed by the council.<sup>114</sup> In June 2020, the House of Representatives passed a historic bill granting D.C. statehood but it was not taken up by the Senate and died.<sup>115</sup>

In more recent polls, District voters overwhelmingly prefer D.C. statehood over retrocession. The sentiment in Maryland is similar: a 2019 poll of Maryland residents supported statehood. In particular, residents of Montgomery and Prince George's Counties backed statehood overwhelmingly. When asked about retrocession, a majority of Marylanders also opposed it. Maryland lawmakers, who would have to consent to retrocession according to Maryland state law, are similarly opposed. Their antipathy to retrocession is longstanding: A survey of Maryland state legislators from the 1990s found that over 90 percent of the state's governing body rejected the notion of retrocession even if Congress mandated it as a condition of D.C. statehood.<sup>116</sup>

## Georgetown Founders

### THOMAS CORCORAN

Thomas Corcoran emigrated to Baltimore from Ireland in 1769 to work at his uncle's leather shop. By 1788, he was intent on setting up his own business in Richmond. But he was so impressed with the bustling commerce at the Georgetown port that he decided to settle there instead. He continued in the shoemaking and leather trade, quickly prospering by becoming the principal shoe supplier to Georgetown College.<sup>140</sup> He also dabbled in trading tobacco and other commodities, and invested in real estate. But it was in banking and politics that Corcoran realized his greatest success.

There was almost no corner of Georgetown civilian or official life that Corcoran did not touch. As one of the town's most influential citizens, he led a delegation welcoming George Washington when the president arrived in 1791 to participate in the contentious negotiation on the sale of lots in the new federal city. In 1795, Corcoran became Georgetown's first elected mayor and served a total of five terms. He also served as Director of the Bank of Columbia. In 1801, Thomas Jefferson appointed him to be a member of the District's levy court, a position he held until his death in 1830. In 1815, President Madison appointed him Postmaster General of Georgetown, a lucrative position he held to the end of his life. When Congress contemplated moving the nation's capital after the burning of Washington during the War of 1812, Corcoran offered the federal government use of Georgetown College as an interim location while the White House and Capitol were rebuilt—an offer made without the college's consent and one that ultimately was refused.<sup>141</sup>

His son, William Wilson Corcoran, did not immediately follow in his father's footsteps. He first went into the dry goods business with his brothers but eventually got involved in his father's real estate dealings. He also worked for a time at the Bank of Columbia and later served as an officer at the Second Bank of the United States in Washington City. In 1837, he founded a brokerage business and parlayed that success to establish the Corcoran and Riggs private banking firm, later Riggs National Bank, with partner George Washington Riggs. By the time of his death in 1888, W.W. Corcoran had far exceeded his father's legacy as a financier, wealthy philanthropist, and patron of the arts.<sup>142</sup>

# Maryland's Loss—and Gain

Maryland's gift of land to the federal government may be regarded as patriotic, but it came with the practical expectation that the state would reap financial and political benefits. Was the net result favorable to the Free State? Financially, Maryland gave up a small amount of territory that today generates the equivalent of about one-fifth of its entire income tax revenue, and whose residents on average earn more than their neighbors across the border. While Montgomery County ranks as one of the wealthiest jurisdictions in the nation, its median income still lags behind that of Georgetown.<sup>117</sup>

	Median Income 2023 US\$	Population 2023 (000)	Income Tax Revenue US\$
Georgetown *	\$142,783	24	N/A
Montgomery County	\$128,733	1,100	N/A
District of Columbia	\$106,287	679	4,180,000
Maryland	\$101,652	62,000	15,286,000

\* zip code 20007 used as proxy

Source: Maryland Comptroller and D.C. Chief Financial Officer tax data for 2023.

But Maryland also has gained greatly thanks to the spillover effect of being adjacent to the nation's capital. This was of course the original reason Maryland agreed to cession. One could even argue that “when it rains [federal contracts] it pours” in the so-called DMV (District, Maryland, Virginia) region, which accounts for almost a quarter of total federal contract spending. Only California, Texas, and Virginia account for more.<sup>118</sup> Maryland is home to over sixty federal facilities, including such large agencies as USDA, DHS, Commerce, and NASA.<sup>119</sup> Among Maryland residents are approximately 145,000 federal employees who on average earn \$137,624 per year, as well as over 3 million civilian workers employed by federal contractors who collectively account for more than 10 percent of the federal government's total U.S. civilian workforce. These figures pertain to early 2025.<sup>120</sup>

Being part of an extended “company town” has protected Maryland from the brunt of negative economic developments affecting the rest of the nation. On the flip side, however, the state generally feels the impact of congressional political brinkmanship—such as budget-related sequestrations or government shutdowns—to a greater degree than elsewhere in the U.S.<sup>121</sup> Cuts implemented as well as proposed by the current administration to the federal workforce and federal agencies already are having a disproportionately large negative impact on Maryland, and especially Montgomery County, compared with other states. The latest budget projections of the Montgomery County Council indicate that the county's revenue may drop by \$854 million over the next six years due to federal policies and their impacts on immigration, the federal workforce, and tariffs.<sup>122</sup> Politically, the impact is harder to gauge. Maryland's representatives in Congress do not seem to enjoy an elevated status in enacting or influencing legislation or attract relatively more political donations as a result of being the District of Columbia's neighbor.

With more than two centuries of hindsight, Montgomery County's cession of land to the federal government for a capital was of little consequence. It accounted for roughly a third of the sixty-nine square miles that Maryland ceded, or a little more than 14,000 acres, including those under the Potomac River. Little, if any, of this land has actually been used by the federal government. The monumental city, e.g., the Capitol, the Mall, the monuments, the museums, and the White House that tourists think of as Washington, sits on land that came from Prince George's County. Today, the federal government owns 9,360.6 acres in the District of Columbia, or about 22 percent of what Maryland ceded. Again, most of these acres are taken up by the monumental Washington and Rock Creek Park. Except for the Naval Observatory, the residence of the vice president, and the Department of Homeland Security installation near Tenleytown, it is hard to think of any federal properties that sit on the old Montgomery County land.

Indeed, the 14,143 acres Montgomery County ceded to the federal government in 1800 pale in comparison to the 178,526.9 acres of land that the federal government owns in Maryland today.<sup>123</sup> This modest gift helped make Montgomery County the wealthy and prominent jurisdiction it is today. Had Congress and George Washington approached land acquisition the way the federal government does today, they could have reached the same result by simply making the monumental part of the capital federal property, like a national park, and leaving the rest in Maryland. That is more or less how major cities like London and Paris operate today.

# Conclusion

The legend that the capital was built on a worthless swamp is unfounded. The site chosen was well watered, and it was far and away one of the most scenic sites available. As George Washington knew, getting rid of the marshy areas was well within 18th century engineering's capabilities. But pity the preexisting old Georgetown, whose fortunes rose and fell in the political winds from being adjacent to the new capital.

Montgomery County itself played no role in the decision to cede its portion of the District of Columbia to the federal government, but most people in 1790 thought that having the nation's capital in their midst would be a boon. This didn't happen for the county immediately. But in the 226 years since cession, the county has gone from a sleepy, rural community devoted to farming to one of the wealthiest, most highly educated counties in the United States, largely because it was next to the capital of the United States.

While Congress debated where to put the capital for seven years before settling on the Potomac River site, there was never any doubt in George Washington's mind where it should be, and in the end his opinion was the one that counted. While the need for the capital to be midway between North and South and amenable to both pro-slavery and anti-slavery politicians was a factor, the impact of the decision on African Americans was never considered. Meanwhile, because Maryland and Virginia readily ceded their land and threw in money to boot, the impact on those two states at the time was minimal, though Virginia took its land back less than fifty years later. Maryland did not do likewise, but its loss today in tax dollars from Georgetown and the entire northwest side of Washington, D.C. might make it wish it too had reneged.

Still controversial after some 238 years is the matter of giving Congress control of the District of Columbia. A principal purpose of this requirement, written into the Constitution, was to allow the federal government to protect Congress. Yet despite this, the British burned the Capitol in 1814, and rioters ransacked the building and drove out legislators and the vice president with threats of physical violence on January 6, 2021. The Founders gave no thought to the fact that Georgetown would lose its independence and residents of the District of Columbia would not have representation in Congress. Even D.C.'s limited home rule is dependent on congressional legislation that could be modified or revoked at any time.

The United States of America was an experiment in constitutional democracy, the first in the history of the world. Its capital, Washington, D.C., was likewise an experiment in who decides where the capital should be and how it should be governed. Today's city is the result of a long learning curve in this regard, with both mistakes and flashes of brilliance. What is indisputable is that Maryland made a very generous gift to the new nation, a fact that remains largely unrecognized today, and that Montgomery County also has been a major beneficiary of the gift. The result is Washington, D.C., a beautiful, vibrant city full of monuments as well as a lesson in and tribute to democracy.

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

**Kate Whitmore** is a former economist with experience at the World Bank in D.C. and Dresdner Bank in Germany, where she researched and wrote about international trade and investment matters. She later started a wine import business and currently lives part of the year in Salzburg, Austria. A Georgetown native, Kate has developed a deep love for local history. This is her first published writing on the subject.

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# Endnotes

- 1 2024 census data records 1,082,273 persons living in the county with 43.1% of these between the ages of 19 and 65, giving a total of 53.9%, or 583,334 working age residents. United States Census, Quick Facts, Montgomery County, Maryland. It is home to 77,550 federal employees, meaning that about 13.3% of those employed in the county work for the federal government. Montgomery County Economic Development Corporation, Navigate the Federal Budget Cuts with Key Resources, <https://thinkmoco.com/doing-business-here/resources-for-federal-agencies/>.
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- 78 When asked by Congressman Wadsworth whether the laws in Alexandria, Richmond, or Charleston had had a unique and adverse effect on African Americans, Foy replied diplomatically: "The community complexion, the very air which is breathed there, would support any movement with total disregard to any minority group or the feeling you may have toward them," Id. 68.

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- 137 John Daley, *Georgetown University: Origin and Early Years* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 1957), 57.
- 138 Report of The Working Group on Slavery, Memory, and Reconciliation to the President of Georgetown University, Georgetown University, Washington, D.C., Summer 2016, 14-15, <https://georgetown.app.box.com/s/nzo1tx4elaerg13akjwxuve3pv9sb03a>.
- 139 Grace Dunlop Ecker, *A Portrait of Old George Town*, 71-76.
- 140 Grace Dunlop Ecker, *A Portrait of Old George Town*, 19.
- 141 Warner, *At Peace with All Their Neighbors: Catholics and Catholicism in the National Capital, 1787-1860*, 185.
- 142 William Wilson Corcoran, "A grandfather's legacy; containing a sketch of his life and obituary notices of some members of his family, together with letters from his friends (Washington, D.C.: H. Polkinhorn, 1879) <https://archive.org/details/agrandfathersle01corcgoog/page/n13/mode/2up>.

#### Additional Photo Credits:

Page 4: Bridge at Little Falls of the Potomac River, above Georgetown, 1797 Maryland Center for History and Culture, Resource 4720

Page 9: Front cover of "Pennsylvania, Delaware, Maryland, and Virginia almanac, for the year of our Lord 1795" by Benjamin Banneker [note: though the pamphlet uses the Bannaker spelling throughout, use of Banneker is more common] (Courtesy of the Maryland Center for History and Culture, Resource 2241)

Page 9: Original Boundary Stone No. 6 on Southern Avenue in Prince George's County. Aquia sandstone. The District side is marked "Jurisdiction of the United States." Surveyor Andrew Ellicott also wanted the stones to show the "variance" from north, meaning the difference in degrees between true north and the magnetic north that a compass would show. The two sides not shown read "Maryland" and "1792." (Photo by James H. Johnston)

Page 12: Miniature portrait painting of William Marbury, by James Peale, 1798 (courtesy of the Maryland Center for History and Culture, 1970.4.1)

Page 13: Portrait of Benjamin Stoddert by E.F. Andrews: Courtesy of the Navy Art Collection, Washington, D.C. U.S. Naval History and Heritage Command Photograph

