

## National Capital: Washington, D.C.

The selection of the site for Washington, D.C. was a political compromise, and the father of the compromise was George Washington. In 1790, leaders of the young nation, the United States of America, felt they should create a special city – a truly magnificent city – to accommodate their capital. New Englanders liked the idea, if the city was to be situated in New England. Southerners demanded that the capital be located in the south.

Newly-elected President George Washington solved the impasse by convincing Americans that the city should belong to all. Build it halfway between New England and Georgia, and everyone would have equal access to the city. Under terms of the agreement, Washington, who had a great love for the Potomac River and its lush, rolling banks, was to designate the precise city site. Not surprisingly, he selected a fork in the Potomac River within 18 miles of his Mount Vernon home. One side was at the head of the tidewaters of the river. The city was to cover a scenic coming together of the East Potomac and West Potomac and to occupy land explored by Captain John Smith in 1608.

There were only a few cabins in the newly designated Federal City, as President Washington modestly called it. Just across the river lay the thriving port of Alexandria, Virginia, and just a few miles up the west fork lay the little town of Georgetown, Maryland. The city was to be no larger than 10 square miles, and to provide the necessary land, the state of Maryland donated 69.25 square miles and the state of Virginia 30.75 square miles. The land from Virginia was ceded back to Virginia in 1846. In 1791, Major Pierre Charles L'Enfant, a former member of General Washington's continental army staff, was given the job of designing the city.

Residents and visitors to early Washington, D.C. found the city to be either muddy or dusty, depending upon the season. The city was the object of savage jokes. There were few houses and still fewer buildings. Not many people visited Washington prior to the Civil War. In fact, ambassadors who lived in Washington drew hardship pay. But in May of 1865, more than 100,000 people flocked to the capital city to witness the Grand Review of the victorious Union Army. For two days and nights the crowds watched 150,000 Union soldiers parade up Pennsylvania

Avenue. Both visitors and soldiers stayed over the week to see the sights. The visitors went home and told their friends that Washington wasn't such a bad place after all.

In the decades that followed, Washington underwent periods of expansion. During World Wars I and II, new federal agencies, new buildings, and many thousands of new civil servants appeared almost overnight. Today the Federal City is a thriving metropolis of 674,000 persons with another 3 million suburbanites living in Maryland and Virginia.