The Origin of Washington D.C.
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“Anything so delightful as Washington I have never seen elsewhere. There were a mingled simplicity and grandeur, a mingled state and quiet intimacy, a brilliency of conversation--the proud prominence of intellect over material prosperity which does not exist in any other city of the Union.”

-----M. E. W. Sherwood

Introduction

In the summer of 1800, the last giant white stone was settled on the top of the Capitol in Washington D.C., which was still called ‘the Federal City’ at that time. The completion of the Senate North Wing marked the end of the construction of this new Capital of the United States, the head of the western eagle. On November 17th in the same year, the Capitol held its first session of the United States Congress since moving from New York City to Washington D.C. (Allen, 2001, pp. 4-7) Although those times were momentous in the birth of the United States, two hundred years later, only a few people still know why the founders of this nation built this tiny square capital near the Potomac River. Moreover, only a few people understand how many struggles and difficulties the founders faced when debating the location of the nascent country’s capital. The goal of this paper is to catch up on this significant moment in U.S. history.

Although the founders of the United States engaged in heated debate regarding the location of the new country's capital, Washington, DC was definitely the best decision because of its unique geographic advantages and its ability to satisfy congressmen from different parts of the country. This paper examines the geographical origin of the Capital City, the grueling debates over its location, and the process to plan, design, and build the city. The paper concludes with an examination of how the legacy of the city’s early years lives on today.
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The Origin of the Capital City

When D.C. visitors enter a neighborhood with red-brick houses huddle along tree-shaded sidewalks, they know that they are entering a distinctive place from any approach --- Georgetown. “Georgetown is Washington’s oldest neighborhood, a once-independent town that predates the federal capital itself by more than fifty years” (Smith, 2010, p. 20-21). English traders built a tobacco trade port in 1632. This old trade port set the stage for capital’s culture and foundation. This attractive, old, and distinctive neighborhood represented an attraction to the area as a possible location for the new capital.

The Origin of Georgetown

When an oceangoing steam boat coming from Europe and crossing the Atlantic, the furthest point they can get on Potomac River is Georgetown. In 1632, English fur trader Henry Fleet “documented a Native American village of the Nacotchtank people called Tohoga on the site of present-day Georgetown and established trade there” (Delany, 1971). Because of its distinctive location, colonial leaders held high hopes for this area in the eighteenth century. “The Potomac River reached farther west than any other river on the eastern seaboard; its headwaters were only about seventeen miles from tributaries on the Ohio River.” (Smith, 2010, pp. 21-22). Therefore, Georgetown soon became a trade center for wheat and tobacco. Solid economic base and unique geographic location set the stages for this little becoming the federal capital half century later.

Georgetown existed for the most part both economically and politically independent. It had its own elected government and remained independent and apart from Maryland and Virginia until 1879. Thus Georgetown had a distinct identity even before the federal capital was
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settled. On the other hand, President George Washington and President Thomas Jefferson both had lived in Georgetown for a long time. George Washington frequented Georgetown, including Suter's Tavern where he worked out many land deals to acquire land for the new Federal City. Jefferson “lived for a long time in Georgetown while serving as vice president under President John Adams.”¹ That’s one of the reasons why George Washington and Thomas Jefferson favored to set the capital on the Potomac River: it was the city they had worked and lived.

Previous Capital

Shortly after the end of American Revolution War in 1783, the session of the Congress of the Confederation set New York as the national capital. It was the first American capital under the Constitution of the United States. Soon, the Federal Hall on Wall Street hosted the first session of both the United States Congress and Supreme Court of the United States. And the Bill of Right was also assigned in New York City. “President Washington first took office in NEW YORK CITY,” however, “when reelected in 1792, the capital had already moved to Philadelphia,”² a symbolical city represents the independence of this nation.

But things did not go well in Philadelphia. A band of unpaid soldiers besieged Congress while its members were meeting in Philadelphia, known as the Pennsylvania Mutiny of 1783. “The event emphasized the need for the national government not to rely on any state for its own security.” (Webb, 2011, p. 66) Because it was too close to potentially volatile constituents, the Congress remained in New York and determined to choose a new capital.

Debates Over Its Location

The first session of the First Federal Congress was hosted at the New York City Hall. The achievements of this session were monumental. Even though many unsettled issues that divided America throughout the revolution persisted, the First Congress created a harmonious atmosphere to determine the future of this new nation. However, when the seat of government debate was raised in September of 1789, everything changed. There was a long debate between Northern senators and Southern senators. Virginia senator Grayson informed that, “The members would have parted in tolerable temper if the disagreeable altercations on the score of the seat of government had not left very sharp impression on the minds of the Southern gentlemen.” (Bowling, 1991, p. 161). Finally, with the command of George Washington, all parts of congressmen compromised to settle the capital based on the southern city Georgetown, Maryland, which satisfied both Southern and Northern Senators.

Debate Between Northern Senators and Southern Senators

Northerners favored Philadelphia, “the first living crucible of freedom, a city that was home to a vigorous community of abolitionists,” as the seat of government. It was the best scheme that both North and South Senators could approve. Out of their expectation, the Mutiny of 1783 took place in Philadelphia, which terrified the Congress. More and more free slaves and abolitionists were moving to Philadelphia, and it was defined as an ‘unhealthy’ place and “Congressmen would have little hope of raising children there.” (Bordewich, 2008, pp. 42-43) They realized “the horrific realities of slavery,” and decided to stay in New York City temporarily and start looking for another location for Capital.
The Congress gave many optional locations, including: “Kingston, New York; Nottingham Township in New Jersey; Annapolis; Williamsburg, Virginia; Wilmington, Delaware; Reading, Pennsylvania; Germantown, Pennsylvania; Lancaster, Pennsylvania; New York City; Philadelphia; and Princeton.” (Ackerman, 1991, pp. 10-12). Alexander Hamilton wanted to stay in his hometown of New York City, but met stiff opposition from the Southern Senators. They rejected to have a capital in North because Northern states had already had a good economic foundation, a deep Northern capital would create unfairness on economic development for Southern states. But the problem for South is that the shortage in population diminished their voice in the Congress. “The South saw benefit in delaying a decision until population in the South and West increased” (Bowling, 2010, p. 128). At one side, they announced “neither the Western States nor the South would support a change of temporary residence unless that decision came in conjunction with the establishment of permanent seat of government” (Bowling, 2010, p. 128). On the other hand, the Southern Senators proposed some totally unreasonable proposal, such as ‘establish two capitals, one in South, one in North.’” (Bowling, 2010, p. 128). The goal was to simply delay the decision on setting the capital.

Other crucial figures like James Madison and Thomas Jefferson wanted the site for the capital on the Potomac River. Both of them had lived and worked in this area for a long time; moreover, it is also the place where nation’s father, George Washington, spent most of his childhood. It’s a southern location by close enough to Northern border. As a result, Georgetown seemed like the most reasonable location for permanent site of the U.S. capital which can satisfy Southern Senators. “George Washington, Thomas Jefferson and James Madison had sought for
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seven years to place the United States capitol on the Potomac recognized.” (Bowling, 2010, p. 182).

In order to achieve their dream, Thomas Jefferson and James Madison need to let the proposal pass the vote on congress. However the congress had already been dramatically split. The biggest trouble to set the Capital on the Potomac River is to get the vote from North senators who were leaded by Alexander Hamilton.

Established the Capital on the Potomac River

The Congressmen were so exhausted that they hardly knew what they were voting on anymore:

“On May 30 supporter of moving the capital temporarily from New York to Philadelphia were defeated thirteen to eleven in the Senate. Few days later, removal to Philadelphia was carried in the House by thirty-eight to twenty-two. The next week, the House voted to move to Baltimore, fifty-three to six.“

(Bordewich, 2008, pp. 42-43)

As New York’s leading politician, Alexander Hamilton effectively controlled most of the votes of the Northern members. Therefore his decision would directly influence Northern senators’ votes; in another word, Hamilton had it within his power to ensure the national capital remained in the North, or hand it to the South. However Hamilton also proposed the Debt Assumption at the same time. “Nothing mattered more to him than winning support for assumption”. “James Madison had the votes to block Hamilton’s assumption, and both he and Jefferson, and their allies, wanted the capital.” (Bordewich, 2008, pp. 47). Finally at a dinner at Jefferson’s house in New York City on June 20th, 1790, Madison agreed to passed Hamilton’s assumption.
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compromise, Hamilton agreed to vote for setting the capital near the Potomac River. Both of
them fulfilled their promise.

The Residence Act

In 1790, a historic piece of legislation determined the future the U.S. Capital and shaped
American history in unquantifiable ways: the Residence Act was passed. The Residence Act was
published in July 1790 and headed by James Madison, Thomas Jefferson, and Alexander
Hamilton. The Residence Act officially established the permanent seat of the government of the
United States selecting a site along the Potomac River. It affirmed that the capital definitively
moved from New York City to Washington D.C. After passing in the Senate on Jul 7th, and then
in the House of Representatives in July 9th, President George Washington signed this act into
law on July 16th. As a part of the Compromise of 1790, the Resident Act “marked the end of the
American Revolution, for it resolved the two most difficult and lingering issues: what to do
about the war debt (the Assumption Act) and where to establish the capital (the Resident Act).”

Building the Capital City

The construction of Washington D.C. seemed an unprecedented project two hundred
years ago. The initial shape of the federal district was a “square measuring 10 miles on each
Charles L’Enfant took up the task to design the new capital. After five months of diligent work,
L’Enfant sent the new map of D.C. to resident Washington. After the test of time, Washington
D.C. “is expected to exemplify effective urban planning. As the literature of urban history
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unfolds, there will be some larger appreciation of the city's accomplishments, and greater
attention to precisely what did emerge from the continuous and comprehensive planning efforts."(Gutheim & Lee, 2006, pp. 4-7). The construction of foresight allowed Washington D.C. to
remain effective during population bomb and maintain stable during wartime.

**A Great Designer: Pierre Charles L'Enfant**

After the location was settled down, next question shifted to deciding who will design the
capital city? This important task was fallen on a French-born American architect, the designer of
the New York City Hall, Pierre Charles L’Enfant. Back in 1789, L’Enfant had already written a
letter to President Washington asking to be commissioned to plan the city. President Washington
appointed L'Enfant in 1791 under the supervision of three Commissioners. He arrived
Georgetown March 9th, 1791. After a year and a half long investigation and design, he sent the
first map of this capital city to President Washington on August 19th, 1791. This original map is
still stored in the Congress Library today.

Facts have proved that L’Enfant’s design is practical and advanced. He perfectly
emphasized the importance of the new Nation's Legislature “His plan specified locations for the
‘Congress House’, which would be built on ‘Jenkins Hill’, and the ‘President's House’, which
would be situated on a ridge parallel to the Potomac River.” (Gutheim & Lee, 2006, pp. 12-13).
L’Enfant also foresaw the expansion of the city at a later date, therefore the urban framework of
this city he designed was super-loose and wide.” A tiny federal government shared and
undeveloped, semi rural landscape with a population that grew to only seventy-five thousand by
the time of the Civil War. While the expansive plan of L’Enfant existed on paper, it would be
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more than seventy years before its grandeur would become a reality on the ground.” (Smith, 2010, pp. 15-18)

**Legacy Lives on Today**

After two hundred of years, Washington D.C., originally being defined as a Southern town, has grown to the political center of the world. President John F. Kennedy evaluated D.C. “is a city of Southern efficiency and Northern charm.” In fact over hundreds of years development, Washington D.C. has became a typical Northern town.

“A City of Southern Efficiency and Northern Charm”

Maryland represents the borderline between the North and South. In that way, Southern senators were fulfilled by seating the Capital along the Potomac River because it’s a southern states. Seated perfectly at the crossroads between the North and South, the question remains: Is DC a Southern town today? It’s an interesting question. Although different people may have their own perspectives, most people agree that DC had transformed more into a Northern city rather than a Southern.

Geographically, Washington D.C. definitely is a Northern town. DC’s snow accumulation gradually increases since 1960 and is as much as New York in recent years. People’s most common feeling about DC in winter is ‘cold’. It hard to link Washington D.C. with cities like Miami. Because it is a crowded city with unimaginable traffic, so too most people’s impression, DC is more similar to New York City. *The Washington Post* wrote: “the

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region’s Southern accent is becoming measurably less pronounced, linguists say. The Confederate flag doesn’t fly much in these parts anymore. Korean barbecue has taken its place alongside the Southern pit-cooked variety in many neighborhoods, and the ‘sweet tea line’ that once stretched across Virginia has gotten blurry.\(^4\)

A Global Political Center

Time has changed, Washington D.C. has became totally another appearance. Seen around the nation and the globe as a city of politics and marble monuments, Washington, D.C., is one of the best-known cities in the world and represents America definitely as a powerful country and world leader. As the head of this eagle, Washington D.C. had experienced both World Wars and civil wars. The stability of this city determines the development of this nation. It is a global political center. Today, walk through the district, trees shaded the busy street. The highest authority of this nation sited everywhere in this city. Embassies from countries around the world all gathered in this little square.

President Wilson (1913-1921) once remarked of Washington, DC: “The city of Washington is in some respects self-contained, and it is easy there to forget what the rest of the United States is thinking about. I count it a fortunate circumstance that almost all the windows of the White House and its offices open upon unoccupied spaces that stretch to the banks of the Potomac ... and that as I sit there I can constantly forget Washington and remember the United States.”

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Reference


http://www.georgetowndc.com/about/georgetown/


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