

Choosing the Location of Washington, D.C.

Before 1790 the United States had no permanent capital city. Early Congresses met in various cities. A political compromise established the nation's capital along the Potomac River.

How Did Geography Affect the Early Development of Washington, D.C.?

The city's site was selected by George Washington. He may have chosen it for its natural scenery or his belief that the Potomac would become a great navigable waterway. Unfortunately, debris and silt were deposited in the shallow tidal areas around the developing city. Ships could not travel the length of the river. The stagnant water created unhealthy conditions and a rotten smell.



◀ Mathematician and inventor Benjamin Banneker was hired in 1791 to help survey the land for the new national capital. In addition to his other talents, Banneker was also a farmer and a publisher of a well-known yearly almanac.



◀ French architect Pierre L'Enfant designed the plan for the city of Washington, D.C., in 1791.

▲ **Map of Washington, D.C., 1791** L'Enfant's basic plan included wide avenues and major streets radiating out from traffic circles. Modern Washington, D.C., still retains many of the elements of L'Enfant's plan.

◀ The City's Location

Straddling the Potomac River, Washington, D.C., was laid out on land handed over to the federal government from both Maryland and Virginia. The Virginia land was given back to Virginia in 1846. Thus, all of the city's current area was originally part of Maryland.