

# Metropolitan Police Academy



## 1.5 History of Washington, DC

### **1.5.1 Explain the early settlement and founding of Washington, DC**

Native Americans were the first to settle the area that is known today as Washington, DC. The original inhabitants were an Algonquin people known as the Nacotchtank who lived in the area before English explorers arrived. Their main settlement was on the eastern bank of the Anacostia River. The Nacotchtank were associated with the more prominent Piscataway tribe. The arrival of European settlers was not good for the Nacotchtank Indians. Most perished due to various diseases brought by the Europeans. The remnants of the Nacotchtank tribe settled on what is now known as Theodore Roosevelt Island before being absorbed by the Piscataway.

The arrival of Europeans led to the establishment of Georgetown and Alexandria. Both towns were ideally situated for trade. Georgetown was established in 1751 as part of the province of Maryland at the northernmost navigable port of the Potomac River, right before the fall line. The area was particularly valuable in the trade of tobacco, and commerce developed along the waterfront. Wharves and flour mills were constructed to benefit from the advantageous location of being downstream from Great Falls.

Alexandria was founded in 1749 as a port town in the Commonwealth of Virginia. Like Georgetown, it traded in tobacco but also in cotton, sugar, and wine. Its tobacco warehouse was a necessary stop for Virginia tobacco exports on their way to Europe. The slave trade was important to Alexandria's economy and would become an increasingly controversial issue in the nineteenth century.

Besides Georgetown and Alexandria, the land that would eventually make up Washington, DC was primarily agricultural and rural. Farming was important and present in the district until the 1950s. Besides the Potomac River, Georgetown, and Alexandria, there was nothing that made this tract of land particularly appealing as the site of the future capital of the United States. It was not even considered when the Continental Congress debated a site for the new nation's capital.

Initially, our country's capital was located in Philadelphia, PA and the U.S. Congress was subject to the protection of the government of the state of Pennsylvania. During the Pennsylvania Mutiny of 1783, the governor of Pennsylvania refused to protect the U.S. Congress from rebelling soldiers. This forced the U.S. Congress to flee Philadelphia. It was clear that Congress needed to be in a locale that was controlled by Congress and not by a state government because a state government would have too much influence over Congress if Congress depended upon it for protection, land, resources, etc.

The decision of where to locate the capital of the United States was not an easy one. Pennsylvanians still wanted the capital to be in Philadelphia. Southern states wanted the capitol to be further south, while other northern states preferred New York or even Boston. A compromise was reached that the capital would be built on the Potomac River. George Washington was to decide exactly where on the Potomac to build this city. Unsurprisingly, he chose the site closest to his home in Mount Vernon, VA.

Maryland and Virginia donated the land that became part of Washington, DC. President George Washington was authorized by Congress to hire a team to develop the city. President Washington chose Pierre L'Enfant to draw up the city's plan. This plan did not include the port towns of Georgetown and Alexandria. The federal city, at the time also referred to as the city of Washington, or old city, was designed as a grand city by Pierre L'Enfant. The city of Washington however, only encompassed what we know today as Foggy Bottom, West End, Judiciary Square, Navy Yard, Mount Vernon Triangle, The Mall, Waterfront, DuPont Circle, Capitol Hill, Logan Circle, Penn Quarter, among other central DC neighborhoods.

### **1.5.2 Identify the Planning of Washington, DC**

The city of Washington was laid out as a grid with diagonal grand avenues. Pennsylvania Avenue, running between the U.S. Capitol used by Congress and the White House, was supposed to be the grandest of them all. The National Mall and several traffic circles also resulted from L'Enfant's plan.

Five components to the District of Columbia were established by the U.S. Congress in the District of Columbia Organic Act of 1801:

1. City of Washington
2. Washington County
3. Georgetown
4. Alexandria City
5. Alexandria County

The plan for the roadways in Washington, DC called for the city to be divided into four quadrants. The axes that separate the four quadrants emanate from the U.S. Capitol.

Washington, DC is the seat of government for a nation. Believing that the structure of the government should dictate the structure of the city, L'Enfant centered the new city on the Capitol, home of the Legislative (and at the time, the Judicial) branch of the federal government. The framers of the Constitution had the highest regard for Congress. From the Capitol (or Congress) radiate the axes of Washington. North and South Capitol Streets form the north-south (vertical) axis; East Capitol Street and the National Mall form the east-west (horizontal) axis. The axes divide the area into quadrants. The four quadrants are referred to as NW, NE, SW, and SE. A grid pattern of streets was laid out but only in the city of Washington. That is why the grid pattern and lettering system is not as defined as a rule north of Florida Avenue, which, at the time, was called Boundary Street.

In the L'Enfant designed city, horizontal streets start with the letter "A" and end in "W." There is no "J" street because, at the time, the letters "I" and "J" were written in the same font.

Vertical streets were given numerals that increase on a block-by-block basis the further one travels from the U.S. Capitol. There are no "0" blocks in Washington, DC; instead, blocks where the house numbers are less than 100 are referred to as unit blocks. For example, the initial "A" block immediately north of the east-west axis through the U.S. Capitol where house numbers are less than 100 is the unit block of A St. The block on A Street where the house numbers are between 100 and 200 is the 100 block of A St, etc.

The quadrant always follows the address in Washington, DC. For example, 100 A St. SW is one block south and one block west of the Capitol. This system is relatively easy to follow if not for the state-named avenues. These diagonal roadways are not intuitive as with the grid streets and frequently confuse people with their traffic circles.

### **1.5.3 Contrast current and nineteenth century Washington, DC**

In the early nineteenth century Washington, DC developed slowly. This was partly due to the War of 1812 in which the newly formed United States fought against the United Kingdom. The war did not go well for the United States which suffered one of the most humiliating defeats in its history, at Bladensburg, MD. This military defeat left Washington, DC open to a British invasion. The British invaded Washington, DC in August of 1814. They torched and ransacked several government buildings, including the Capitol, White House, and Treasury Building. Then-President Madison and members of government evacuated to Maryland shortly before the arrival of the British army.

After the war of 1812, Washington, DC developed at a more rapid pace. This was due to the building of the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal (C&O Canal) along the Potomac River and the arrival of railroads to the DC area. This allowed Georgetown to become an increasingly important port city. Industry developed on the Georgetown waterfront as well due to its ready access to coal brought to DC from the Allegheny Mountains via the canal. The C&O Canal allowed goods to be shipped from Georgetown all the way to Cumberland, MD. Canal construction began in 1828 and was completed in 1850. The Alexandria Canal was also built, to connect the city of Alexandria to Georgetown. It allowed Alexandria

access to the C&O Canal; however, it quickly fell into disrepair. Alexandria became a relative backwater compared to Georgetown.

Georgetown overshadowed Alexandria as a port. This made Alexandria particularly dependent on the slave trade. The abolitionist movement was gaining steam throughout the country during the nineteenth century, and there were calls by northern congressmen to ban its practice in the nation's capital. For citizens of Alexandria, this was the last straw and they petitioned the Virginia legislature to be allowed back into the Commonwealth of Virginia. The U.S. Congress allowed Virginia to take back Alexandria in 1846. Congress did not find any need for Alexandria as part of the capital city. Still, slavery was not abolished in DC until the Emancipation Proclamation in 1862. The concern over slavery culminated in the U.S. Civil War, which greatly affected Washington, DC. The MPD was founded on August 6, 1861, just after the start of the Civil War.

Washington, DC was in a difficult position during the Civil War. It was located across the river from territory occupied by the Confederacy and most of the Maryland citizenry around the city sympathized with the South. Throughout the Civil War, Washington, DC was under threat of invasion from the Confederacy's formidable Army of Northern Virginia. This threat spurred the federal government to build dozens of forts and several other military fortifications in and around the city. Many of these Civil War era forts survive today, as either parks or names of neighborhoods. Such forts include:

- Fort Stevens
- Fort Bayard
- Fort DuPont
- Fort Davis
- Fort Reno
- Fort DeRussy
- Fort Lincoln
- Fort Totten
- Fort Stanton
- Battery Kemble

The Civil War forts accomplished their purpose and the DC never came under serious threat of invasion. In 1861, amidst the Civil War, MPD was born by an Act on Congress and signed into law by President Abraham Lincoln.

After the Civil War, DC benefited from the enhanced size and power of the federal government, and it grew rapidly. It grew by 75 percent from 1860 to 1870, according to U.S. Census records. This rapid rise in population caught the city by surprise, and the infrastructure was ill-equipped to handle the influx. The city lacked sewer, sanitation, basic services, and transport infrastructure. Three local governments took a very piecemeal approach to solving the problems within DC. Congress grew so frustrated with the capital's living conditions that it discussed moving westward to St. Louis. Congress enacted the Organic Act of 1871 in order to help deal with these issues.

Congress made DC a district and The Organic Act of 1871 reorganized its governance. The cities of Washington and Georgetown were dissolved and became Washington County, the district's first government. This allowed a government that was broader in approach to city development. The government set up by Congress was a bicameral legislature and governor system. The President of the United States was given the power to appoint the district's governor and legislators. The appointment of Alexander Shepherd as governor of DC by President Grant led to many public works projects, which did much to improve the city. However, the costs involved were much greater than the budget that Congress allotted.

This form of government only lasted a few years because rampant corruption was allowed to flourish under the Grant administration. The U.S. Congress responded by reorganizing the DC government into a board of three commissioners. The U.S. President was given the power to appoint two of the commissioners while the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers appointed the third. This form of government proved successful and lasted until 1967.

In the decades following the Civil War, the District of Columbia would witness its first streetcars, sewer lines, tree plantings, parks, and sanitation system. Railroads and development extended beyond the original city of Washington into the former Washington County. Boundary Ave. was renamed Florida Ave. Congress required that the system of streets used in the original city be extended throughout the District of Columbia. Georgetown lost its own street grid and had to conform to the DC street grid sometime in the last decade of the nineteenth century. For example, High Street became what is known as Wisconsin Ave. NW today.

#### **1.5.4 Differentiate current and twentieth century Washington, DC**

At the start of the twentieth century, it became apparent that the original L'Enfant plan for the District of Columbia needed an update. U.S. Senator James McMillan of Michigan chaired a committee of renowned architects, landscape designers, and artists to expand L'Enfant's desire to surround public buildings with landscaped parks and open spaces. This became known as the McMillan Commission. Much of what makes Washington, DC beautiful today stems from the work of this commission.

There are several examples of what have made the city a more pleasant place. For example, today the National Gallery of Art is an architectural masterpiece that also houses one of the finer art collections in the country. However, prior to the McMillan Commission there was a large train station in its location with railroad tracks that traversed the Mall. The Baltimore and Potomac railroad station was demolished in order to help re-make the Mall. The Baltimore & Potomac railroad station is where President Garfield was shot by Charles Guiteau. MPD Officer Patrick Kearney caught Charles Guiteau as he tried to flee. Demolishing the Baltimore station also allowed Pennsylvania Ave. NW to intersect with Constitution Ave. NW and got rid of all the railroad tracks on the Mall. Instead, Union Station was built and it is generally regarded as one of the more beautiful train stations in the nation. Poor neighborhoods located around the Mall and the U.S. Capitol were dismantled and made into parks and neo-classical buildings.

Grand memorials and monuments were to take the place of the Victorian landscaping on the Mall. The Lincoln Memorial, reflecting pool, Jefferson Memorial, and Memorial Bridge all hail from this era. The McMillan Plan reshaped the Mall into what we know it as today. The plan's low-rise buildings, statues, monuments, etc., are now all hallmarks of the Mall. It also generated much of the parkland, through dredging and landfill that abuts the Potomac River today.

The twentieth century found DC expanding greatly into what used to be rural Washington County. Neighborhoods included AU Park, Glover Park, Foxhall, Petworth, Spring Valley, Michigan Park, Brookland, and Woodridge. Post-WWII, Washington, DC saw the extensive trolley system supplanted by buses. New schools were built throughout the city with the establishment of John Philip Sousa Middle School leading to the racial integration of all DC public schools prior to the Supreme Court's decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*.

The 1960s were a particularly tumultuous time for Washington, DC. The Vietnam War and the Civil Rights Movement brought much attention to the city. MPD was called to help with constant marches and protests on the Mall, White House, and the Capitol. The assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. in 1968 set off a powder keg of frustration among the African American community in DC. And riots and looting broke out in various neighborhoods across the city. The riots lasted four days and were centered on the neighborhoods of Cardozo, Columbia Heights, Shaw, Near Northeast as well as downtown areas and parts of the retail corridor in the historic Anacostia neighborhood. The MPD, 3rd U.S. Army Infantry Regiment and DC National Guard were tasked with restoring order. A curfew was enforced but hundreds of fires and millions of dollars in damages resulted. Thousands were arrested and several died from the riots. Order was finally restored after a few days.

There was a sense of disenfranchisement among the citizenry of DC that made the long effort for home rule authority take on extra urgency. Failing schools, rising crime, federal transportation projects ripping apart neighborhoods, and other issues brought the issue to the forefront of political discussions in the 1960s. President Lyndon Johnson finally dissolved the appointed commissioner system of government for the District of Columbia in 1967 and replaced it with an appointed mayor and city council system. This laid the groundwork for the form of governance that DC is familiar with today.

In 1973, the U.S. Congress passed the Home Rule Act, which established an autonomous DC government. President Richard Nixon signed the bill into law. The law established an elected mayor and 13 council members. The local government in DC now had control of its own lawmaking, budget, police, public works, parks, etc. Congress could still overrule local DC government acts, however, through its 30-day review process. And although Congress set up local DC courts, the U.S. Attorney's Office is the primary prosecutor of crimes occurring in DC. Judges in DC are appointed by the President and confirmed by the U.S. Senate.

Walter Washington was the first mayor elected in Washington, DC after the enactment of home rule authority. He served one term before being defeated by Marion Barry in 1978. Marion Barry would oversee a vastly changed city from the one prior to home rule. A drug epidemic and increasing crime brought DC infamy as the twentieth century drew to a close. To add insult to injury, DC lost control of its budget through a financial control board in the 1990s. This control board enacted many of the budgetary changes that allowed DC to prosper in the coming years. Also, the district saw much gentrification and new housing as well as business construction during the years following the enactment of financial control board.

The last decades of the nineteenth century proved very difficult for Washington, DC. The population of the city started to shrink, crime increased steadily, school quality diminished, and the quality of life inside the city grew worse. There were attempts to situate various freeways and interstates throughout the city, which would have torn apart the city's neighborhoods.

As the twenty-first century dawned on the District of Columbia, the Financial Control Board's chief financial officer, Anthony Williams, was elected mayor. He helped ensure that DC balanced its budgets and improved city services to residents. The improvement of city services allowed people to feel like DC was a good place to live and work.

## Summary

In this lesson, you were given an overview of the history of Washington, DC. You learned that DC has a rich history and the MPD has been intertwined with the city since the Lincoln administration. DC's history is unique within the United States due to it being both the nation's capital city and part of a growing metropolitan area.

Websites showing the geography of the District of Columbia and MPD:

- MPD Police Districts: <https://mpdc.dc.gov/page/maps-mpds-police-districts-and-psas>
- Police Districts and Police Service Areas: <https://mpdc.dc.gov/page/police-districts-and-police-service-areas>
- Police Boundary Map: <https://mpdc.dc.gov/node/1364926>