



AMERICAN TREASURES OF THE LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

Imagination



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Original Plan of Washington, D.C.



Pierre Charles L'Enfant (1754-1825)
[Plan of the city intended for the permanent
seat of the government . . .](#)
Manuscript map on paper, 1791
[Geography & Map Division](#)

Pierre-Charles L'Enfant's 1791 plan for the city of Washington is one of the great landmarks in city planning. It was, L'Enfant claimed, "a plan whol[l]y new," designed from its inception to serve as the framework for the capital city of the new nation beginning in the year 1800. Its scheme of broad radiating avenues connecting significant focal points, its open spaces, and its grid pattern of streets oriented north, south, east, and west is still the plan against which all modern land use proposals for the Nation's Capital are considered.

L'Enfant (1754-1825) was born in France and educated as an architect and engineer. Caught up in the spirit of the American Revolutionary War, he came to America at the age of twenty-two and served with honor as an officer in the Corps of Engineers of the Continental Army. On September 11, 1789, he wrote to President George Washington in order "to solicit [sic] the favor of being Employed in the Business" of designing the new city. At this early date, L'Enfant already perceived "that the plan should be drawn on such a scale as to leave room for that aggrandizement & embellishment which the increase of the wealth of the Nation will permit it to pursue at any period how ever remote."

"An Act for establishing the temporary and permanent seat of the Government of the United States," was signed into law on July 16, 1790. After giving cursory consideration to other locations, George Washington selected a site for

the seat of government with which he was very familiar--the banks of the Potomac River at the confluence of its Eastern Branch, just above his home at Mount Vernon. Selected by Washington to prepare a ground plan for the new city, L'Enfant arrived in Georgetown on March 9, 1791, and submitted his report and plan to the president about August 26, 1791. It is believed that this plan is the one that is preserved in the Library of Congress.

After showing L'Enfant's manuscript to Congress, the president retained custody of the original drawing until December 1796, when he transferred it to the City Commissioners of Washington, D.C. One hundred and twenty-two years later, on November 11, 1918, the map was presented to the Library of Congress for safekeeping.

In 1991, to commemorate the two hundredth anniversary of the plan, the Library of Congress, in cooperation with the National Geographic Society, the National Park Service, and the United States Geological Survey, published an exact-size, full-color facsimile and a computer-assisted reproduction of the original manuscript plan. These reproductions are the Library's first facsimiles to be based on photography and electronic enhancement technology. During this process, it was possible to record faint editorial annotations made by Thomas Jefferson, which are now virtually illegible on the original map.

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