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Introduction

A "Western Palmyra"

The historian Henry Adams first visited Washington in 1850. As he ventured out from his aunt's house, "he found himself on an earth-road or village street, with wheel tracks meandering from the colonnade of the Treasury hard by, to the white marble columns and fronts of the Post Office and Patent Office, which faced each other in the distance, like white Greek temples in the abandoned gravel pits of a deserted Syrian city." Returning to the city ten years later, he discovered "the same rude colony . . . camped in the same forest, with the same unfinished Greek temples for workrooms and sloughs for roads."[1] Although recollected at some distance and marked with the author's special brand of ironic detachment, Adams's reaction mirrored that of many other visitors to the nation's capital before the Civil War. The "City of Magnificent Intentions," as Charles Dickens dubbed it, presented a startling juxtaposition of monumental splendor and miserable squalor. Public buildings in the classical style had arisen at key points in Pierre Charles L'Enfant's original plan for the capital, including the White House, the State Department and Treasury Department buildings, the Post Office, the Patent Office, and, of course, the Capitol. The Capitol had been massively extended over the previous decade, but in 1860, the dome remained to be completed, and only a few of the Corinthian columns designed to embellish the porticoes were in place. Piles of masonry, scaffolding, and workmen's huts gave

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[1] Henry Adams, *The Education of Adams* (Modern Library Edition, New York: Modern Library, 1931 [1918]), 44, 99.

Capitol Hill the appearance of a builders' yard. The Mall, intended as an important celebratory and processional space, was little better than a "cow pasture," and the mighty obelisk designed to glorify the memory of the Father of His Country had stood unfinished for several years, an oddly abbreviated shaft of masonry that seemed to symbolize the uncompleted and unfulfilled character of the capital city.[2]

The most striking characteristic of antebellum Washington, in the eyes of both foreign and domestic visitors, was the acute discrepancy between the grandiose scale of the L'Enfant plan and the untidy reality that they saw around them. Although the public buildings were impressive, what lay between them fell far short of any expectation of what a capital city should look like. According to Dickens, who visited Washington in the early 1840s, "Spacious avenues that begin in nothing, and lead nowhere; streets, mile-long, that only want houses, roads, and inhabitants; public buildings that need but a public to be complete; and ornaments of great thoroughfares, which only lack great thoroughfares to ornament – are its leading features." Imposing government buildings stood alongside undistinguished hotels and commercial premises; elegant row houses were erected in proximity to frame dwellings, wooden shanties, and a great deal of open space. Settlement was concentrated inside an arc, the base of which rested on Pennsylvania Avenue between the White House and the Capitol, with extensions to the west of the White House and south of the Mall. Even the more densely inhabited sections contained "vacant lots rank with weeds or strewn with rubbish," and behind the main thoroughfares ran alleys "dotted with groggeries and ramshackle shanties." On the outskirts of the city, patches of field and forest separated the occasional scattered dwellings, and the street plan, broken up as it was by streams and gullies, was little more than hypothetical. Much of the area of the city, observed the novelist Anthony Trollope in 1862, was "wild, trackless, unbridged, uninhabited and desolate." There the

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[2] John W. Reps, *Monumental Washington: The Planning and Development of the Capital Center* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1967), 50 and 27–53 passim; Constance M. Green, *Washington: From Village to Capital, 1800–1878* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1962), 239. For descriptions of antebellum Washington, see also Margaret Leech, *Reveille in Washington, 1861–1865* (New York: Harper, 1941), 5–16; Alan Lessoff, *The Nation and Its City: Politics, "Corruption," and Progress in Washington, D.C., 1861–1902* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994), 3–7, 20–26; Walter Erhart, "Written Capitals and Capital Topography: Berlin and Washington in Travel Literature," in Andreas W. Daum and Christof Mauch, eds., *Berlin – Washington, 1800–2000: Capital Cities, Cultural Representation, and National Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 51–78.

unwary traveler might lose himself as easily as "in the deserts of the Holy Land." From an uncultivated wilderness, "the unfinished dome of the Capitol will loom before you in the distance, and you will think that you approach the ruins of some western Palmyra."[3]

Washington appeared an exotic settlement, quite unlike other American cities. Foreign travelers looked to New York or Philadelphia, later to Chicago, for exemplars of the bustling spirit of enterprise, the unquenchable energy that drove the country forward; they did not look to the nation's capital.[4] Washington was an artificial growth that had not arisen naturally from the imperatives of commerce and industry but had been imposed on the landscape by an act of political will. It drew its identity from its status as capital. A capital city, especially a new one built from scratch like Washington, is intended to articulate the national identity and to establish a focus for an emerging national identity. It is designed as a focus for emotional allegiance, a site that, by its symbolic organization of space, its deployment of imposing architecture, its housing of national monuments and memorials, and its staging of major national events, will display the majesty of the state and reinforce the citizens' attachment to the nation. It is therefore inextricably associated with the process of nation-building. In Washington's case, the intention was to imitate the grandeur and aesthetic unity of baroque city planning, with its long vistas and its grand plazas, while emphasizing the republican ideals that animated the new nation through the adoption of an extensive plan that offered open access to its citizens and a classical architectural style that "evoked images of democratic Athens and republican Rome."[5]

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[3] Charles Dickens, *American Notes* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1985 [1842]), 106; Green, *Washington*, 239; Anthony Trollope, *North America* (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin, 1968 [1862]), 161.

[4] See Erhart, "Written Capitals and Capital Topography," 58.

[5] Milton C. Cummings, Jr., and Matthew C. Price, "The Creation of Washington, D.C.: Political Symbolism and Practical Problem Solving in the Establishment of a Capital City for the United States of America, 1787–1850," in John Taylor, Jean G. Lengellé, and Caroline Andrew, eds., *Capital Cities – Les Capitales:Perspectives Internationales – International Perspectives* (Ottawa, 1993), 241–42. On Washington as capital, see also Daum and Mauch, eds., *Berlin – Washington, 1800–2000*, especially the essays by Daum, Kenneth R. Bowling and Ulrike Gerhard, and Carl Abbott; Alan Lessoff, "Gilded Age Washington: Promotional Capital of the Nation," in Lothar Hönnighausen and Andreas Falke, eds., *Washington, D.C.: Interdisciplinary Approaches* (Tübingen: Francke Verlag, 1993), 35–49. On Washington's architecture, see Kathleen S. Wood, "Capital Architecture: Grand Visions, Monumental Reality," in ibid., 117–39. For a more general consideration of the characteristics of capital cities, see also the essays in Taylor, Lengellé, and Andrew, eds., *Capital Cities*.

However, the scale of the L'Enfant plan represented a leap of faith, a confidence that one day the nation and its capital would expand to fill the open spaces in the grand design. In the medium term, it left a gap between vision and reality that seemed to point to the inadequacy of the federal project itself. Over the antebellum decades, an unwillingness to invest heavily in the construction of a national capital seemed to betoken a lack of commitment to a strong national government. The spirit of Jacksonian democracy was inimical to the concentration of political power. As the sectional crisis deepened in the years leading up to 1860, the unfinished quality of Washington became a metaphor for the fractured condition of the nation itself.

In fact, Washington's founders had never intended that its function should be solely political; they had envisaged for the city a radiant future as a commercial entrepôt that, by exploiting its access to the Ohio Valley and the Great Lakes through the "Potomac corridor," would build a huge trade with the nation's interior. The capital, says Carl Abbott, was to be "an eminently practical gateway to the new nation." That these dreams were unfounded was due to the greater financial resources enjoyed by merchants in other cities, with the often generous support of their state governments, and the failure of Congress to provide comparable investment capital. Equally unfortunate was the reliance of Washington and the neighboring Potomac cities on a soon-to-be-outmoded technology, in the shape of the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal, which was rapidly displaced by the railroad serving the rival city of Baltimore. Further, Washington did not develop more than an incidental interest in manufacturing. It remained primarily a center of government, the population of which consisted of transients elected or appointed to federal office for a period of years, together with a core of more permanent residents whose principal occupation was to cater to their needs. Although the number of federal employees located there had doubled since 1840, reaching 2,199 in 1861, their number was still insufficient to fuel a sizable expansion of the capital.[6]

[6] Carl Abbott, *Political Terrain: Washington, D.C. from Tidewater Town to Global Metropolis* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 28, 31, and 26–38 passim; Howard Gillette Jr., *Between Justice and Beauty: Race, Planning, and the Failure of Urban Policy in Washington, D.C.* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 18–23; Green, *Washington*, 112–18, 127–31, 156–57, 191–94; David R. Goldfield, "Antebellum Washington in Context: The Pursuit of Prosperity and Identity," in Howard Gillette Jr., ed., *Southern City, National Ambition: The Growth of Early Washington, D.C.* (Washington, DC: George Washington University Press, 1995), 1–20; Walter

If Washington fared badly in the urban rivalries of nineteenth-century America, that was really no surprise. "The nation's capital occupied an anomalous position in this context," notes David R. Goldfield. "Washington belonged to everyone and to no one." Congressmen lacked the same loyalty to the city's residents that state legislators held toward their urban constituents, and they were much less likely to accede to their demands. Congress provided little support for local transportation projects, and it did not gladly make appropriations for municipal utilities or the improvement of streets. Despite repeated calls for a fairer and more generous treatment of the District, most notably in the oft-quoted Southard Report of 1835, congressmen repeatedly complained of lavish federal expenditure on local projects. "These demands on the public Treasury – the people's money – for purposes of expenditure in the cities of Washington and Georgetown, are shameful; and the manner in which our money is poured out to these people is shameless," complained Senator Richard Brodhead of Pennsylvania in 1856. Such attitudes would obstruct a resolution of the city's financial difficulties for many years to come.[7]

There has always been something problematic, if not anomalous, about the political status of the District of Columbia. Anxious to avoid leaving the officers of the federal government vulnerable to undue pressure from the citizenry of whatever part of the country the capital might be located, the authors of the Constitution allowed Congress to "exercise exclusive legislation in all cases whatsoever" in the hundred square miles that were to house the seat of government. In fact, for most of its first seventy years of existence, Washington was governed by an elected mayor and councils (the city of Georgetown and the rural sections of the District, known as Washington County, had their own separate governing

F. McArdle, "The Development of the Business Sector in Washington, D.C.," *Records of the Columbia Historical Society, 1973–74* (Washington, DC: 1976), 556–93. Statistics of federal employment are taken from U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *Historical Statistics of the United States: Colonial Times to 1857* (Washington, DC: 1960), 710. The largely transient nature of Washington's population is emphasized by Goldfield, "Antebellum Washington in Context," 19; Abbott, *Political Terrain*, 2–5; Leech, *Reveille in Washington*, 12.

7 Goldfield, "Antebellum Washington in Context"; Gillette, *Between Justice and Beauty*, 2, 16, 20–22; Green, *Washington*, 130–31, 204–7 (Brodhead quotation at 205). According to Steven J. Diner, "The government of the District by Congress has been inherently inefficient as well as unresponsive." "Statehood and the Governance of the District of Columbia: An Historical Analysis of Policy Issues," *Journal of Policy History* 4 (1992): 413.

arrangements). The conduct of municipal government in the antebellum period was not dissimilar to that in other cities of comparable size, with the important distinction that Washington, like the rest of the District, was subject to the supreme authority of Congress. That authority, however, was exercised fitfully by a national legislature whose preferred stance toward the District was one of benign neglect. Although owning roughly half the real property in the District, the U.S. government paid no taxes and contributed only intermittently to the costs of local government, with the result that the municipality was, even by antebellum standards, chronically short of money. With the best will in its world, Washington could not live up to the demanding requirements of the L'Enfant plan while providing adequate public services for its citizens. The result, as numerous foreign and domestic visitors observed, was unpaved streets, inadequate public services, and a mixture of dilapidation and monumental grandeur that ill suited the capital of a modern republic.[8]

A Southern City

In the absence of a more diversified economy and a more vigorous national presence, Washington retained its predominantly southern character. Of the District's white residents in 1850, 52 percent had been born there, and 29 percent were natives of the neighboring states of Virginia and Maryland. Its leading families retained close connections with the inhabitants of the tidewater counties of Virginia and Maryland, with whom they shared a love of fast horses, lavish entertainment, dancing, and card playing. Northerners who visited Washington or who came to take up government employment there had no doubt that they had crossed the boundary separating North from South. Washington at the beginning of the Civil War was "a third rate Southern city," recalled Mary Clemmer Ames.[9] Henry Adams was equally struck by the city's southern complexion. "The want of barriers, of pavements, of forms; the looseness, the laziness; the indolent Southern drawl; the pigs in the streets; the negro

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[8] For an historical review of the relationship between the federal government and the District of Columbia, see Diner, "Statehood and the Governance of the District of Columbia"; Donald C. Rowat, "Ways of Governing Capital Cities," in Taylor *et al*., eds., *Capital Cities*, 149–71. On antebellum Washington, see Green, *Washington*, chaps. 5–8; Gillette, *Between Justice and Beauty*, 1–36; Gillette, ed., *Southern City, National Ambition*.

[9] Mary C. Ames, *Ten Years in Washington: Life and Scenes in the National Capital, as a Woman Sees Them* (Hartford, CT: A.D. Worthington, 1875), 67–69. See also Abbott, *Political Terrain*, 38–67; Goldfield, "Antebellum Washington in Context," 11.

babies and their mothers with bandanas; the freedom, openness, swagger, of nature and man" seemed as exotic as "the thick odor of the catalpa trees" that filled the air. Still more, "Slavery struck him in the face; it was a nightmare; a horror; a crime; the sum of all wickedness!"[10]

The pervasive presence of African Americans – driving carts and carriages, shoveling coal, serving at tables, selling fruits and vegetables, lounging and conversing on the streets – was the clearest evidence to northern visitors that they had entered the South. Eighteen percent of the city's population in 1860 was African American, but, as one visitor observed, the official enumeration appeared "inconsistent with the swarms of Negroes in the streets of Washington." Washington was a slaveholding community: 1,774 of its inhabitants were enslaved in 1860. Yet it contained fewer slaves than it had in 1820, and the proportion of slaves in the population had declined from 19.4 percent in 1800 to 2.9 percent in 1860.[11] Sixty percent of Washington's slaveholders possessed no more than one slave, and few held more than five, which suggests that most owners could find little use for their bondsmen and women other than as domestic servants. Although partly induced by the peculiarities of the capital's economy, this decline in the enslaved population was, in fact, shared with most Upper South cities in the generation leading up to the Civil War.[12] The partial ban on the slave trade in the District of Columbia introduced in 1850 had terminated Washington's status as a major slave mart, but local residents were still permitted to buy and sell slaves for their own use, local newspapers continued to carry advertisements for their human property, slave auctions were still held, and the occasional slave coffle could still be seen making its way through the streets of the capital. At the same time, the strengthened fugitive slave law gave added incentive to the local business of slave catching. The municipal

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[10] Adams, *Education of Henry Adams*, 44.
[11] Constance, M. Green, *The Secret City: A History of Race Relations in the Nation's Capital* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1967), 63; Letitia W. Brown, "Residence Patterns of Negroes in the District of Columbia, 1800–1869," *Records of the Columbia Historical Society*, 47 (1971): 78.
[12] For alternative explanations for the decline of slavery in the cities, see Claudia D. Goldin, *Urban Slavery in the American South, 1820–1860: A Quantitative History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976); Richard C. Wade, *Slavery in the Cities: The South, 1820–1860* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964); Barbara Jeanne Fields, *Slavery and Freedom on the Middle Ground: Maryland during the Nineteenth Century* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1985), 40–62; Harold D. Woodman, "Comment," in Stanley Engerman and Eugene Genovese, eds., *Race and Slavery in the Western Hemisphere: Quantitative Studies* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1975), 451–54.

police spent much of its time acting as a slave patrol, and many of the cases heard by local magistrates concerned the legal status of persons claimed as human chattels. Although greatly reduced in scope, slavery remained in force in the federal District, and slaveholders retained their power within the community, buttressed by the support of influential congressmen and government officials from the slave states.[13]

Washington's free black population had grown rapidly since the city's foundation, as a result partly of the cumulative effect of local manumissions and partly of the city's attractiveness to freed slaves from the neighboring states. The city offered a wider range of employment opportunities than surrounding rural areas, along with the social attractions of a developed black community. In 1860, the city contained 9,209 free African Americans, 84 percent of the total black population.[14] As elsewhere in the South, free blacks were debarred from numerous economic activities, but there were important niches that they could exploit, occupations that local whites found menial or dishonorable because they entailed an element of personal service but offered a relatively secure livelihood, including barbering, catering, butchering, and the operation of laundries and livery stables. Free blacks also labored as stevedores, coal handlers, carters, draymen, hod carriers, bootblacks, waiters, bartenders, and cooks. Others made a living from market gardening and market trading. Although

[13] On slavery in the District, see Green, *Secret City*, 13–54; Stanley Harrold, *Subversives: Antislavery Community in Washington, D.C., 1828–1865* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2003); Mary Beth Corrigan, "The Ties That Bind: The Pursuit of Community and Freedom among Slaves and Free Blacks in the District of Columbia, 1800–1860," in Gillette, ed., *Southern City*, 69–90; Walter C. Clephane, "The Local Aspect of Slavery in the District of Columbia," *Records of the Columbia Historical Society* 3 (1900): 224–56; William T. Laprade, "The Domestic Slave Trade in the District of Columbia, *Journal of Negro History* 11 (January 1926): 17–34.

[14] On free blacks in the District of Columbia, see especially Corrigan, "Ties That Bind"; Mary Beth Corrigan, "'It's a Family Affair': Buying Freedom in the District of Columbia, 1850–1860," in Larry Hudson Jr., ed., *Working toward Freedom: Slave Society and Domestic Economy in the American South* (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 1994), 163–91; Corrigan, "Ties That Bind"; Green, *Secret City*, 13–54; Letitia W. Brown, *Free Negroes in the District of Columbia, 1790–1846* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972); Allan John Johnston, "Surviving Freedom: The Black Community in Washington, D.C., 1860–1880" (Ph.D. diss., Duke University, 1980), 114–45 (NB published by Garland in 1993 under the same title); Henry S. Robinson, "Some Aspects of the Free Negro Population of Washington, D.C., 1800–1862," *Maryland Historical Magazine* 64 (Spring 1969): 57–63. For a comparative perspective, see Ira Berlin, *Slaves without Masters: The Free Negro in the Antebellum South* (New York: Pantheon, 1974); James Oliver Horton, *Free People of Color: Inside the African American Community* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1993).

the great majority of African Americans were employed in some form of unskilled labor or domestic service, several had found more lucrative occupations. One hundred and fifty African American businessmen were listed in *Boyd's Directory* for 1860. In consequence, a sizeable black middle class had developed. The tax lists for 1860 record 1,175 of the District's 11,131 blacks as owning some property and 235 as owning property worth in excess of $1,000. Already by 1860, Washington had acquired something of a reputation as a favorable location for free blacks to live and work.[15]

A vigorous African American community established itself in the nation's capital over the course of the antebellum era. By 1862, it supported eleven black churches with 3,850 members, some boasting well-appointed buildings and excellent choirs. More than any other institutions, church organizations bound African Americans together and formed networks of solidarity and communication around which a black community could be built. The churches sponsored charitable work, arranged lectures, organized burial societies and fraternal associations, and ran Sunday schools. Some also provided accommodation, teachers, and financial support for day schools for African American children. In view of the poverty of most of the city's black residents and the refusal of the municipal government to make any provision for black schools, great sacrifices had to be made to provide any educational facilities at all. Nevertheless, one or two primary schools were maintained throughout the antebellum period and, for a while during the 1850s, a secondary school for girls operated by the white philanthropist Myrtilla Miner. As a result, literacy levels, although depressingly low in comparison with local whites, were higher than among the black communities of most other southern cities. In 1860, approximately 42 percent of the free black population was literate, and several hundred African American children attended school. The arduous struggle to establish and maintain churches

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[15] On occupations and property holdings, see Dorothy Provine, "The Economic Position of Free Blacks in the District of Columbia, 1800–1860," *Journal of Negro History* 58 (1973): 61–72; Green, *Secret City*, 27–28; Melvin R. Williams, "A Blueprint for Change: The Black Community in Washington, D.C., 1860–1870," *Records of the Columbia Historical Society*, 48 (1972): 361–65; Melvin R. Williams, "A Statistical Study of Blacks in Washington, D.C. in 1860," *Records of the Columbia Historical Society*, 50 (1980): 174–75; Berlin, *Slaves without Masters*, 217–49. On residential patterns, see James Borchert, *Alley Life in Washington: Family, Community, Religion and Folklore in the City, 1850–1970* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1980), 1–28; Brown, "Residence Patterns of Negroes in the District of Columbia," 75–77.

and schools served more than anything else to knit the black community together.[16]

Washington's free blacks were subject to a strict black code inherited from Maryland. Although they had not acquired some of the more punitive provisions later added to the black codes of neighboring states, the District's laws, supplemented by repressive city ordinances, were troublesome enough. Free blacks were supposed to carry free papers with them at all times. Any African American suspected of being a fugitive might be arrested and sold to pay for the costs of his incarceration, including the fees that went into the pockets of the policemen and magistrates involved in the case. Black testimony was excluded from the courts in any case involving white persons. African Americans were subjected to a 10 P.M. curfew, and they were not permitted to assemble in public in numbers exceeding five. Lashes could be inflicted for a host of minor offences, such as setting off firecrackers, bathing in the Washington City Canal (although the detrimental consequences of exposure to its waters should have been deterrent enough), or flying a kite within the city limits. Although many of these provisions were irregularly enforced, their presence on the statute books was both a source of continuous irritation and danger and a constant reminder of the second-class status of those to whom they applied.[17]

Washington, then, was a southern city, but very much a city of the Border South. The institution of slavery was in retreat, and in its place was emerging a system of free black labor that, although it reflected a continuing insistence on the imperatives of racial hierarchy, offered a more flexible set of economic and social possibilities. Slavery was numerically in decline, but its adherents clung fiercely to the institution, rejecting any attempts to eliminate it or to modify its terms, and they received strong support from southern representatives in the federal government, who were anxious that the defenses of slavery should not be breached in the nation's capital. However, the city's very status left it peculiarly open to outside influences. Although located in the South, it could never be wholly a southern city. The business of the government necessarily attracted northerners, many of whom did not approve of the South's

[16] Williams, "Blueprint for Change," 366–70; Corrigan, "Ties That Bind," 75–78, 80–82; Green, *Secret City*, 23–25, 50–52; John W. Cromwell, "The First Negro Churches in the District of Columbia," *Journal of Negro History* 7 (1922): 64–106.

[17] Green, *Secret City*, 18–19, 25, 37, 47–48; Leech, *Reveille in Washington*, 236; Berlin, *Slaves without Masters*, 316–40.