

Washington and Environs — 1865

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Let's go back a hundred years. Mark Twain observed many years ago: "The eight years in America from 1860 to 1868 uprooted institutions that were centuries old, changed the politics of a people, transformed the social life of half the country, and wrought so profoundly upon the national character that the influence cannot be measured." He might have added that Washington, the Nation's Capital, was at the center of the storm that produced the change. If we are to begin to understand life in Washington in 1865, we will have to remember that transportation was slower, more difficult, and communications were slower, more personal.

The 1860's marked the end of the romantic era in American life and letters, and the art and amusements of the time reflected that fact. The family was still the focal point of society, a much revered institution. Most Americans a century ago were farmers, and life even in the city was touched by country ways and entertainments. There were all sorts of "bees"—quilting, husking, and apple bees. Music, formal and informal, was important. The decade has been called the singing sixties and wherever people gathered, whatever the occasion, there was almost sure to be singing at home, around campfires, in the streets. Dignitaries were serenaded. Popular songs included "Tenting Tonight on the Old Campground," "The Vacant Chair," "Just Before the Battle, Mother" and "Rally Round the Flag." Special songs were composed for all topics and all occasions. Reading was popular with many with the Bible, the classics, and the sentimental novels most often read. The best seller in 1865 was *Hans Brinker and the Silver Skates*. Popular magazines such as Frank Leslie's *Illustrated Weekly*, and *Harper's Weekly* were about thirty cents a copy. There were about a half dozen newspapers published in Washington in 1865. Most had offices in Newspaper Row, the east side of 14th Street between Pennsylvania Avenue and F Street Northwest. Leading journalistic humorists included Petroleum V. Nasby, and Lincoln's favorite, the tubercular Charles Farrar Browne, known to the multitudes as Artemus Ward.

The children played in parks such as Lafayette Park; they wore outrageous clothes and read such books as *The Death and Burial of Cock Robin*, *Little Red Riding Hood*, *A Visit from St. Nicholas*, and *The Frog Who Would a-Wooing Go*. With the children safely tucked away with a bedtime story, Washington grown-ups might indulge in an evening of culture and entertainment. A traveling opera company in season, a recital by renowned soprano Adeline Patti, a concert pianist, or Grover's or Ford's

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Theater. After the entertainment, many would go to Willard's Grand Hotel, or Harvey's famous restaurant on Pennsylvania Avenue, or one of the other 450-odd restaurants and taverns in the city. Pennsylvania Avenue was Washington's gay white way with cobblestones gleaming in the flickering gas light of the street lamps. There was always the chance that one might glimpse a celebrity along the Avenue. One could walk among ladies in hoop-skirted elegance, their escorts in top hats and boots.

The United States, not yet a century old, was in trouble. As the 1850's had drawn to a close, the future had seemed passably bright. The country was growing by leaps and bounds; there were 34 stars on the flag by 1860, and there were 31,000,000 people in the country. The West had not yet been tamed, but it was well on its way with great promises of riches. National interest was focused on the West and Washington was a picturesque town of 60,000 inhabitants with leisurely ways. When Congress was in session, the town was lively; when Congress was not in session, social life died. But the great issues of national sovereignty and the extension of slavery were to be settled on the battlefield, and the war that began over the West ended by riveting the attention of the Nation on the Federal City, symbol of the Union.

When the war came in 1861, few believed it would last long. The Federal Army of 16,257 men was to be supplemented by 75,000 three-month volunteers. By January 1865, half a million men had died. . . and the war was not yet over. It was clear that the North was winning; it was clear that Washington was the heart of the Union. More than anything else, the Civil War explains the nature of Washington in 1865. By that year, the city had become a fortress. Sixty-eight hastily constructed forts ringed the city and protected its approaches . . . Fort Stevens where Jubal Early tested the defenses of Washington in 1864; Fort Totten with its mighty 32-pound rifled guns . . . a battery facing the Potomac at Chain Bridge . . . Sentinels guarding Chain Bridge and the other bridges across the Potomac. Military camps had sprung up around the District . . . in Lafayette Square and on Arlington Heights at General Lee's former home.

The War Department overflowed its quarters at 17th Street and Pennsylvania Avenue, NW, into eleven buildings. The Treasury Department was busy printing greenbacks to finance the war. Washington was a great supply depot and arsenal. Guns were produced at the Government Arsenal (Fort McNair) and at the Navy Yard. For a time, bread for the troops was baked in the ovens in the basement of the Capitol building. The Washington Monument, in those days was a stub 154 feet high. Political prisoners were housed in the Old Capitol Prison which stood where the Supreme Court now stands.

By the end of the war, the city's population had more than doubled and many old residents who sympathized with the South had departed. The

newcomers were of all sorts: soldiers, contractors, lobbyists, fancy women, gamblers and confidence men. There were a hundred gambling dens in Washington in 1865 compared to 60 churches. As the war progressed, thousands of freedmen, ex-slaves, poured into the Capital. Hardly anyone seemed aware of the potential for a beautiful world capital in Pierre L'Enfant's plan of 1791.

Washington, 1865, bore little external resemblance to Washington today. Still there were recognizable landmarks. The Mall was dignified by the Smithsonian building. There was the city canal conceived as an artery of commerce and ornament to the city; the canal had by 1865 become a stinking sewer and repository for dead cats, making its sluggish way in the course of modern Constitution Avenue. The C & O Canal, Georgetown's economic lifeline to the West, was in a sorry state for the canal right of way had been severely damaged by Confederate raids.

When the war came, the construction of Architect Thomas U. Walter's magnificent cast iron double dome on the Capitol building had just begun. By 1865 the dome was completed, crowned by the statue of Freedom. Visitors could climb the winding steps between the inner and outer domes to the observation platform for a bird's eye view of the city. The White House looked much the same on the outside as it does today, but the statue of Thomas Jefferson that once graced the North front, has been moved to the Capitol building. Indians came from the Wild West to pay a call and have their pictures taken at the South portico. The grounds, south of the House, were not landscaped as they are today; but baseball was played there even as today. At the Naval Observatory you could set your watch by the black ball that dropped from the flagpole every day precisely at noon.

On March 3, 1865, the 38th Congress held a late session and then adjourned quietly amid the excitement of preparation for Inauguration Day. March 4, Inauguration Day, standing at the East front of the Capitol, under ragged skies, Lincoln expressed the attitude he believed necessary to restore the Union after the fighting was done. "With malice toward none; with charity for all. . . let us strive on to finish the work we are in; to bind up the Nation's wounds . . . to do all which may achieve a just and lasting peace." The North strived on. April 2nd, Grant hammered Lee's skeleton army. April 3rd, the news was electric: Union troops entered the burning Confederate Capital. While Richmond burned, Washington celebrated. The end came in a week, and General and Mrs. Grant left the city to visit their children. Secretary of the Navy Welles planned a quiet evening at home on Lafayette Square. Secretary of War Stanton, who always worked late, took time off to visit the recuperating Secretary of State Seward.

President and Mrs. Lincoln planned to relax at Laura Keene's performance in *Our American Cousin* at Ford's Theatre. The President's

party arrived late. At 8:30, the Lincoln's with their guests, Major Henry Rathbone and his fiancée Clara Harris entered the Presidential box. It was Act II, Scene 3 as the audience laughed at a funny line delivered by comedian Harry Hawk, John Wilkes Booth actor, lady's man, madman emerged from the darkness at the back of the Presidential Box, shot the President, stabbed Major Rathbone, leaped from the box to the stage, breaking his right leg as he landed. At a few minutes before 11:00, soldiers carried Lincoln, unconscious, dying, across the street. In the city, jubilation turned to anger and chaos. At 7:22 A.M., Saturday, April 15, 1865, Abraham Lincoln died. With him, many believed, went hopes for a peaceful reunion of the sections. The reins of government passed in orderly fashion that morning to President Andrew Johnson.

Toward the end of May, spirits revived in the city. Red, white and blue bunting replaced funeral crepe. After all, the war was over. The soldiers were going home. Before they went there would be one last great parade, the Grand Review. On May 23rd, General G. G. Meade, hero of Gettysburg, Commander of the Army of the Potomac, led his men down Pennsylvania Avenue toward the White House. At the White House stood a reviewing stand, decorated with evergreens, flags, and the names of the famous battles. Here President Johnson, Secretary of War Stanton, General Grant, and other dignitaries reviewed the troops.

Washington would never be the same. Peace brought new problems. The soldiers left. The forts were abandoned. Mayor Wallach's city government had to face problems such as cleaning up and providing facilities for an increased population. The alleys were vile places. At the outskirts of the city, there were great refuse dumps, "Sierra Nevadas of manure," the newspapers called them. Projects delayed for years would have to be begun. The old hay market would be replaced by a new Center Market, and new schools would be built. Still things weren't so bad. Much of the Nation was in ruins; hundreds of thousands were dead. But at least all could for the first time in the 1860's call themselves citizens of the United States.

A century has passed since 1865; the city has grown and changed. We can never really know what Washington was like a hundred years ago. And yet, if we look about us, we see many reminders of those great and trying times . . . Ford's Theatre . . . the Old Patent Office Building . . . the Civil War Forts . . . the Smithsonian Institution . . . the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal . . . the White House, and the great Capitol Dome, now more than a century old: symbol now perhaps more than in 1865 of the truly United States.