

## FIXING THE PERMANENT SEAT OF GOVERNMENT ON THE POTOMAC RIVER

By ROY C. ALLEN

### Binding the Bargain

"A *Virginia delusion*" Virginians and Marylanders in the executive and the legislative branches<sup>1</sup>—Washington, Jefferson, Madison, Lee, and White from Virginia, and Carroll and Gale from the Potomac area of Maryland headed homeward at the end of the second session of Congress aware that mere enactment of the Residence Act was by no means a guarantee that the permanent seat of government would ever come to the Potomac. They could scarcely have felt otherwise. The newspapers were filled with derisive comments about the way in which the Southerners had been trapped by the Pennsylvania delegation. Long before the bargain had been sealed one correspondent warned the Southerners: "Get Congress to Philadelphia, and farewell forever to the Potomac."<sup>2</sup>

Another called the bargain a "Virginia delusion" and made the prediction:

The probability that Congress will ever remove from Philadelphia, after it shall have been so long the seat of government . . . has been treated in that ludicrous point of view in which it must appear to every unprejudiced mind.<sup>3</sup>

*Potomac assets* The ridiculers and the practical politicians alike erred in two respects. The mistake of lesser importance was their assumption that the Potomac valley was a wilderness. Instead it was a pleasant land of farms, meadows, woodlands, and orchards watered by a noble river; inhabited by families that had cultivated the soil there for three or four generations. It boasted commercial towns—Alexandria and Georgetown—whose vessels were quite as closely in touch with Bordeaux and Liverpool as were those of New York and Philadelphia.

\*Chapters 6 and 7 from Roy C. Allen's Seminar Report on FIXING THE PERMANENT SEAT OF GOVERNMENT OF THE POTOMAC RIVER have been excerpted as of special interest to Arlingtonians. A copy of the entire manuscript showing how President Washington arrived at a decision on the specific location for the Federal District, and why he chose the Georgetown-Alexandria locality out of the broad area of selection delineated by the Congress is filed in the Arlington Historical Society library. Mr. Allen says "it was interesting for me to examine these two questions, for although the Congress originally specified an area of some 1,500 square miles within which a Federal district not exceeding 100 square miles might be sited, President Washington still requested an expansion of the permitted area by some 40 square miles."

<sup>1</sup>Joseph Gales, Sr., *Annals*, p. 932.

<sup>2</sup>*New York Journal*, June 3, 1790.

<sup>3</sup>*New York Journal*, Aug. 3, 1790.

On the heights of the Potomac a mile downstream from the lower Falls on the Maryland side stood the town of Georgetown. Laid out in 1751, incorporated in 1789, the little river port had flourished for many years as a shipping center for Maryland and Virginia tobacco. Five miles further down the Potomac, on the Virginia side, the town of Alexandria was still more firmly established and sophisticated. Beautiful houses built before the Revolution for the Scottish tobacco factors and the wheat merchants had made Alexandria in the judgment of that observant Frenchman, the Duc de la Rochefoucauld-Liancourt, "beyond all comparison the handsomest town in Virginia."<sup>4</sup> By building a network of roads into the lower Shenandoah Valley in the 1760's and 1770's, Alexandrians had captured the lion's share of the export trade in Virginia wheat and flour. The residents of Alexandria and Georgetown alike saw in the possible location of the federal capital on the Potomac the dawning of a bright new future.

The second and more important mistake of the Potomac detractors was their underestimate of the political resourcefulness of the Virginia leaders of that day. No one was more acutely sensitive to the possibility that the bargain might become unsealed than those who made it. Washington, Jefferson, and Madison—though the record shows that the President had nothing but an eloquently silent part in the legislative transactions—were all thorough realists, experienced in politics and long united in the wish of fixing the national capital on the Potomac.

*An administration strategy* The declaration of a permanent capital in the statutes was, as the Southern bloc well realized, only an opportunity, and they had ten years in which to translate it into reality. Even so, from the moment they left New York there was a sense of urgency in everything they did touching the seat of government. Washington had kept an attentive eye upon all of the details, but at this stage the guiding hand in the strategy of planning what one day would become the political capital of the world was that of Jefferson, with Madison assisting. The program that Jefferson drew up even before leaving New York, perhaps at the request of the President and in consultation with Madison, was actually a precis of the provisions of the Act and of ideas for the President to bear in mind on his way to Mount Vernon.<sup>5</sup> Jefferson knew that the gentlemen of Georgetown and Alexandria, as well as the principal landowners in the neighborhood, would be prompted by self-interest to indulge in local competitions for the seat of government comparable to those that had taken place in Congress. This called for the closest secrecy about the exact location intended for the capital and it is clear that for several months none could say with certainty where this would be. In

<sup>4</sup>Gay Montague Moore, *Seaport in Virginia*. (Richmond: 1949; Garnett and Massie), p.

<sup>5</sup>Jefferson's Draft of Agenda for the Seat of Government (Aug. 29, 1790).

a second document produced in Jefferson's planning, the desired and ultimate location was fixed in Jefferson's mind, as no doubt it was also in the President's.

*Washington surveys the Potomac* The Act fixing the permanent seat of government did not stipulate that a capital city be laid out. It did not even direct that a district of ten miles square be claimed for the Federal Government. Like the Constitution, it merely set this as the maximum limit. The government under the Residence Act could have functioned quite as easily within the limits of Georgetown as Jefferson and Washington feared it might continue to do permanently in Philadelphia. It is now certain, however, that as he rode southward, Jefferson had arrived at the basic assumption concerning the capital: the opportunity would never occur again if this one were to be lost; it would be dangerous as well as illusory to rely upon Congress or the legislatures of Virginia and Maryland for means to improve the opportunity; there would be a new city laid out and planned so as to be worthy of the rising empire; the district for the seat of government would be of the maximum size permitted by the Virginia and Maryland resolutions and allowed by the law; and to attain the great object it would be necessary to press forward immediately and vigorously, and to appeal to the self-interest of the landowners in the vicinity. In the effort to seize the opportunity that might never come again, Jefferson's basic strategy was to keep the decisions in the hands of the executive and away from those of the legislative bodies as much as possible. This was not only permitted by the law but was aided by the vague phraseology as to the amount of land to be acquired for government purposes, and Jefferson took full advantage of these openings.

His opening discussions with Daniel Carroll, Benjamin Stoddert, and William Deakins, Jr. took place at Georgetown on September 13, 1790. Washington himself had stopped at Georgetown two days earlier, ostensibly to hold a conference on affairs of the Potomac Company and no doubt to plan the tour of inspections to be made later. But the actual opening of negotiations he left to Jefferson, whose report of the conversations was drafted on the 14th when he was at Alexandria. Jefferson was in haste to reach Monticello and doubtless intended the document as an aide-memoire to be handed to Washington as he stopped at Mount Vernon on the 15th. In it he declared that the landowners would doubtless come forward soon with proposals.<sup>6</sup> Two weeks later the *Georgetown Times and Patowmack Packet* announced that local inhabitants would offer to the President 400 acres of land for the seat of government; the signed proposals were ready to be given to Washington when he arrived in Georgetown in mid-October.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>6</sup>Jefferson's Report to Washington on Meeting Held at Georgetown (Sept. 14, 1790).

<sup>7</sup>*Georgetown Times and Potowmack Packet*, Sept. 29, 1790.

On Saturday, October 16th, the President spent a day in company with the leading citizens of the town, viewing the adjacent countryside as Jefferson had done a month earlier; Washington then departed early Sunday morning for the Great Falls and Conogocheague, over seventy miles upriver. The *Maryland Journal and Baltimore Advertiser*, in an attempt to penetrate the secret, reported that this trip of inspection around Georgetown was made “in order to fix upon a proper situation for the GRAND COLUMBIAN FEDERAL CITY” and then added: “We are informed that since the arrival of the President in our parts, bets respecting the Seat of Government run high in favor of George-Town; by the return of the President [from Conogocheague], we hope to have it in our power to lay a circumstantial account of this important matter before the Public.”<sup>8</sup> Washington’s interest in the progress of the Potomac Company’s works was genuine and profound, but he could not have been unaware of the value of such a journey as a feint to cloak his purpose. He was authorized by the Residence Act to locate the capital anywhere on the Potomac in an eighty-mile stretch between the Eastern Branch and the Conogocheague and his journey served to stimulate rumors that the choice might actually fall upon a spot far above tidewater.<sup>9</sup>

On the day after Washington set out for the Conogocheague the Georgetown landowners engaged a surveyor to map the various tracts owned by each proprietor “within the lines laid down”—lines apparently indicated by the President.<sup>10</sup> Speculation continued as to the exact location. By mid-November it was rumored that Washington had ordered three sites in different parts of the Potomac to be surveyed, but the *Georgetown Times and Patowmack Packet* admitted that nothing certain was known.<sup>11</sup> At the end of the month Samuel Davidson, a Georgetown merchant, wrote a friend that “not a doubt remained but that the Grand Federal City will soon rear its august head in the vicinity of this town,” that the location would be between Rock Creek and the Eastern branch, and that the heights of Peter Slashe’s plantation would be the site of the “Stadt House.”<sup>12</sup>

<sup>8</sup>*The Maryland Journal and Baltimore Advertiser*, Oct. 26, 1790.

<sup>9</sup>William Force, “History of the Selection of the Permanent Seat of Government for the United States”, in *Special Report of the Commissioner of Education on the Condition and Improvement of Public Schools in the District of Columbia*. (Washington: 1871, GPO). (Ex. Doc. No. 315, 41st Cong. 2d Sess.), p. 187.

<sup>10</sup>William Deakins, Jr., to Washington, Nov. 1, 1790 (*Washington Papers*).

<sup>11</sup>*Georgetown Times and Patowmack Packet*, Nov. 16, 1790.

<sup>12</sup>Samuel Davidson to unidentified friend, Nov. 28, 1790 (Cited in “A Site for the Federal City: The Original Proprietors and their Negotiations with Washington”, *Columbia Historical Society, Records*, 1957-59, p. 130.)

## The President Picks a Site for the Federal District

*Foggy bottom* In an era when travel was slow and hazardous at best a capital accessible to coastal and ocean-going vessels was imperative. The 20th Century residents of the Washington Metropolitan area, nevertheless, have wondered now and again why a trained surveyor, who knew the countryside well, should choose a spot where tidal swamplands yearly bred fevers and oppressive damp heat would blanket the city every summer. The answer, apart from the undeniable importance of a location in a good port area, was the combined features of centrality to the nation as a whole, and a promising and practical *water* communications route well into the interior toward the Ohio Country—an area which Washington was firmly convinced would be vitally important to the future of the new republic and which was still in danger of being detached by the British, the French, or even by the adventurous, restless, resentful men of the Appalachians.

*Inspection surveys* During the period October 1790 to January 1791, the President inspected many Potomac sites<sup>13</sup>—from Oxon Hill, Md., and Alexandria, Va., to the vicinity of Cumberland, Md. near the mouth of the Conogocheague River, some eighty miles north of Georgetown. Although he was convinced that ultimately the navigation of the Potomac by ocean-going vessels to points above Great Falls would be easy and feasible, after the locks were completed and the river cleared, he believed that such sure and easy navigation would not be achieved within the period of about ten years that the government would have to prepare its permanent seat. Accordingly, based on his findings and, especially, upon his inspection surveys from October 14 to 25, 1790, he decided that the capital city should be located in the area where navigation and good port facilities then existed or could be easily developed within the following ten year period.<sup>14</sup> To assure that these facilities would be available, and generally under the control of the Federal Government, he decided that he should include within the Federal district the facilities of the Alexandria port as well as those of the Georgetown port—both to be supplemented by the excellent anchorages in the off-season available in the Eastern Branch.<sup>15</sup>

*Surveying the square* Washington determined that if the district were to be surveyed as a square, to include the Eastern Branch and Georgetown, the line to the southwest would cut through the old colonial city of Alexandria. He felt that he should exclude or include all of Alexandria. The attitudes and views of the citizens of Georgetown favoring inclusion of their town in the district are recorded,<sup>16</sup> but no records have been found of any consultations

<sup>13</sup>Washington to Tobias Lear, Oct. 27, 1790.

<sup>14</sup>Washington to Robert Morris, Feb. 1, 1785.

<sup>15</sup>Washington To Jefferson, Jan. 2, 1791.

<sup>16</sup>Washington to Jefferson, Mar. 31, 1791.

that Washington may have held with the leading citizens of Alexandria to determine their views on this matter. It is probable, however, that such consultations did take place.

On January 2, 1791, Washington wrote Jefferson, enclosing his notes.<sup>17</sup> setting forth the district boundary problem as it related to Alexandria. There is no record that Secretary Jefferson replied to this letter, but the close personal attention given this matter by the President is shown by another letter to Jefferson on January 4, 1791,<sup>18</sup> in which he "begs to see" Secretary Jefferson before proceeding further with the drafting of a Proclamation announcing the federal district boundaries.

Within a few weeks he made his decision; under the date of January 22, 1791, he issued commissions to the individuals he had selected as commissioners for the federal district.<sup>19</sup>

Two days later, on January 24th, he issued a proclamation<sup>20</sup> declaring and making known how "one part" of the ten miles square could be found:

. . . By running four lines of experiment in the following manner that is to say: running from the court-house of Alexandria, in Virginia, due southwest half a mile, and thence a due southeast course till it shall strike Hunting Creek, to fix the beginning of the said four lines of experiment.

Then beginning the first of the said four lines of experiment at the point on Hunting Creek where the said southeast course shall have struck the same, and running the said first line due northwest 10 miles; thence the second line into Maryland due northeast 10 miles; thence the third line due southeast 10 miles, and thence the fourth line due southwest 10 miles to the beginning on Hunting Creek.

Since all of the tract thus specified did not lie within the limits set by the Residence Act (above the mouth of the Eastern or Anacostia branch), the President further directed in the Proclamation that:

. . . the sd four lines of experiment being so run, I do hereby declared and make known that all that part within the sd four lines of experiment which shall be within the state of Maryland and above the Eastern branch, and all that part within the commonwealth of Virginia and above a line to be run from the point of land forming the upper cape of the mouth of the Eastern branch due South West, and no more, is now fixed upon and directed to be surveyed, defined, limited and located for a part of the sd district accepted by the sd act of Congress for the permanent seat of the government of the U.S. (Hereby expressly reserving the direction of the survey and location of the remaining part of the said district to be made hereafter contiguous to such part or

<sup>17</sup>Washington to Jefferson, Jan. 2, 1791, *ibid.*

<sup>18</sup>Washington to Jefferson, Jan 4, 1791.

<sup>19</sup>Commission for Commissioners for the Permanent Seat of Government, Jan 22, 1791. (Letter Book, *Washington Papers*).

<sup>20</sup>Proclamation, Jan. 24, 1791. (*District of Columbia Letters and Papers* in the Library of Congress.)

parts of the present location as is, or shall be agreeable to law). And I do accordingly direct the sd Commissioners, appointed agreeable to the tenor of the sd act to proceed forthwith to run the sd lines of experiment, and the same being run, to survey, and by proper metes and bounds to define and limit the part within the same which is herein before directed for immediate location and acceptance, and thereof to make due report to me under their hands and seals.

*Notification to Congress* By a letter of the same date, President Washington informed the Congress of his Proclamation, and provided a copy of it to Congress, stating:

. . . I have, by Proclamation, bearing date this day, a copy of which is herewith transmitted, directed Commissioners, appointed in pursuance of the Act, to survey and limit a part of the territory of ten miles square on both sides of the river Potomack, so as to comprehend George Town, in Maryland, and to extend to the Eastern Branch. I have not by this first Act given to the said territory the whole extent of which it is susceptible in the direction of the River; because I thought it important that Congress should have an opportunity of considering whether by an amendatory law, they would authorize the location of the residue at the lower end of the present, so as to comprehend the Eastern branch itself, and some of the Country on its lower side in the State of Maryland, and the town of Alexandria in Virginia. If, however, they are of the opinion that the federal territory should be bounded by the water edge of the Eastern-branch, the location of the residue will be made at the upper end of what is now directed. I have thought best to await a survey of the territory before it is decided on what particular spot on the North Eastern side of the River the public buildings shall be erected. <sup>21</sup>

*The district under the first proclamation* The segment of the present District of Columbia encompassed within the scope of the first proclamation, and the probable extent of the "residue" at the upper end of the District, are illustrated in Figure 2. The present familiar geography of the Metropolitan Washington area would have been considerably modified had the southeastern district boundary line remained along the northwestern bank of the Eastern branch on the Maryland side of the Potomac, and delimited by a southwest line from the upper cape of the Eastern branch into Virginia. All of the District of Columbia area to the east of the Anacostia River (Anacostia Park, Fort Dupont Park and Bolling Field) would have remained in Maryland. On the Virginia side, that part of Arlington County southeast of the delimiting line (National Airport, Potomac Yards) part of Alexandria, would not have been annexed to the District. Further, the addition of the residue to the north or upper part of the delimited area, assuming the retention of the ten-miles square configuration, would have resulted in the inclusion of the Pimmit Hills-McLean-Little Falls section of Fairfax County on the Virginia side, and the inclusion of the Glen-Echo-Bethesda-Kensington section of Montgomery County on the Maryland side.

<sup>21</sup>Washington to the Senate and House of Representatives, Jan. 24, 1791.

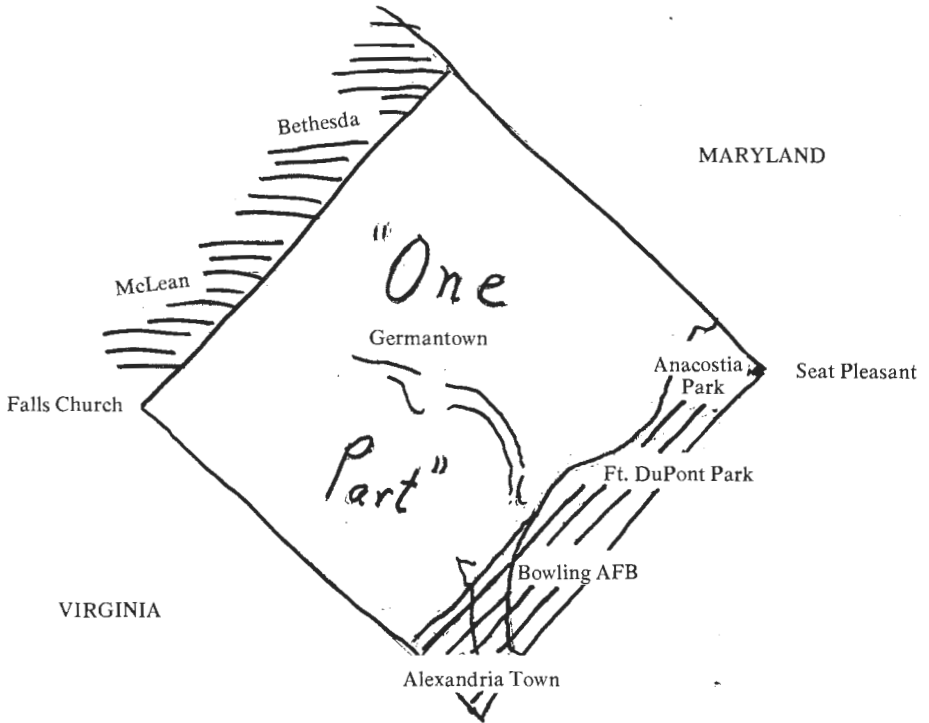
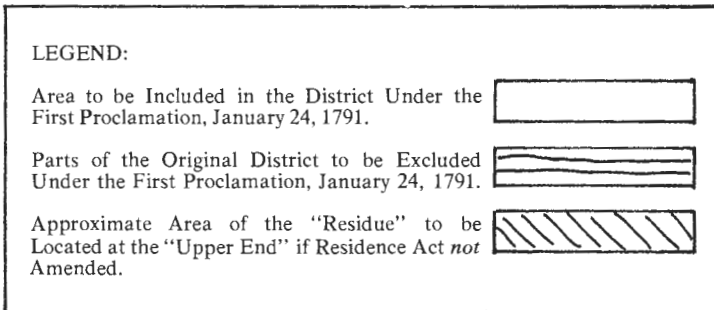


Figure 2

Areas Accepted and Excluded Under  
Terms of the First Proclamation.





It is interesting, too, to note a more significant modification of the present District of Columbia area had Alexandria city not been included in the original federal district. Alexandria was the center of the agitation for retrocession of the Virginia segment of the district back to Virginia in the period of the Mexican War.<sup>22</sup> It is doubtful that the country part of the Virginia segment (now Arlington County) could have mustered the support in the Virginia General Assembly and in the Congress to have been successful in the retrocession struggle.

*Congress amends the resident act* Based on the President's request, a bill to amend the Residence Act to permit the inclusion of Anacostia and Alexandria areas in the district was introduced into the Senate on February 17, 1791,<sup>23</sup> and received a first reading that day.<sup>24</sup> Second and third readings were given on February 18<sup>25</sup> and February 26<sup>26</sup> without contest and the bill was approved by the Senate. The Senate bill was received in the House of Representatives on February 26,<sup>27</sup> and was passed on March 1.<sup>28</sup> The President approved the bill on March 3, 1791.<sup>29</sup>

The text of the amending act reads:

*Be it enacted by the Senate and the House of Representatives of the United States of America in Congress assembled,* That so much of the act, entitled "An act for establishing the temporary and permanent seat of the government of the United States," as requires that the whole of the district of territory, not exceeding ten miles square, to be located on the river Potomac, for the permanent seat of the government of the United States, shall be located above the mouth of the Eastern Branch be and is hereby repealed and that it shall be lawful for the President to make any part of the territory below the said limit, and above the mouth of Hunting Creek, part of the said district, so as to include a convenient part of the Eastern Branch, and of the lands lying on the lower side thereof and also the town of Alexandria, and the territory so to be included, shall form part of the district not exceeding ten miles square, for the permanent seat of the government of the United States, in like manner and to all intents and purposes, as if the same had been within the purview of the above recited act: *Provided,* That nothing herein contained, shall authorize the erection of public buildings otherwise than on the Maryland side of the river Potomac, as required by the aforesaid act.<sup>30</sup>

*Significance of restriction* Although there was no contest of his request in the Congress, Washington's action of taking the matter to Congress for an

<sup>22</sup>Dorothy Ellis Lee, *A History of Arlington County, Virginia*. (Richmond: 1946), p. 6.

<sup>23</sup>Joseph Gales, Sr., *Annals*, p. 1801.

<sup>24</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 1803.

<sup>25</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 1812.

<sup>26</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 1813.

<sup>27</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 2024.

<sup>28</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 2025.

<sup>29</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 2405-2406.

<sup>30</sup>United States, 1 *Stat.* 214.

adjustment of the limits on the location of the district was a general violation of the basic strategy of the Administration; a strategy of proceeding with all possible speed to implement the Act using the discretionary powers granted in the basic act, and of avoiding recourse or dependence upon the Congress or upon the legislatures of the states of Virginia and Maryland. His action, therefore, makes it clear that President Washington felt very strongly about the exact parts of Virginia and Maryland that he wanted to be included in the District. The amendment served to remove any doubt as to the opposition still existing in the Congress, because the amendment in addition to giving the President the discretion to shift the district boundary southward on the Potomac, also reiterated the restriction as to the location of the Federal buildings, this time specifying their location on the Maryland side, and expanding and making the restriction more explicit.

*The second proclamation* No time was lost in establishing definite lines for the boundaries of the district. On March 30, 1791, the President issued a proclamation declaring:

that the whole of the said territory shall be located and included within the four lines following, that is to say:

Beginning at Jone's Point, being the upper cape of Hunting Creek, in Virginia, and at an angle in the outset of 45 degrees west of the north, and running in a direct line 10 miles for the first line, then beginning again at the same Jone's Point and running another direct line at a right angle with the first across the Potomac 10 miles for the second line; then from the termination of the said first and second lines running two other direct lines of 10 miles each, the one crossing the Eastern Branch aforesaid and the other the Potomac, and meeting each other in a point.

. . . and the territory so to be located and defined, and limited shall be the whole territory accepted by the said acts of Congress as the district for the Permanent seat of the Government of the United States.<sup>31</sup>

*Setting the cornerstone* The cornerstone for the district was set at Jones's Point, by George Washington with due Masonic ceremony, on the bank of the Potomac below Alexandria, on April 15, 1791.<sup>32</sup> Many of the original stones, set at intervals of one mile along the boundaries are still in place though badly showing the effects of time.<sup>33</sup>

*Agreement with the district landowners* While awaiting the amending action by the Congress, Washington and Jefferson had been deeply engaged with respect to firmly and legally establishing the district on a sound basis. In January 1791, Washington initiated confidential correspondence with two Georgetown friends, Deakins and Stoddert, requesting them to buy

<sup>31</sup>Proclamation, Mar. 30, 1791. (Letter Book, *Washington Papers*).

<sup>32</sup>Arlington County, Virginia, *A History of the Boundaries of Arlington County, Virginia*. (Arlington: 1967), p. 12.

<sup>33</sup>Richard S. Wheeler (et al), *The Boundary Stones*. (Arlington: 1963).

Georgetown land on their private account for later government use,<sup>34</sup> In February, the President appointed Major Andrew Ellicott to survey the bounds of the tract,<sup>35</sup> and in March he engaged Major L'Enfant to lay out the Federal city portion of the district.<sup>36</sup> Later in March, President Washington met the local landowners in the Georgetown area at Suter's Tavern in Georgetown, and persuaded them to sell at 25 English pounds (\$66.66) an acre any land the Nation might need as sites or grounds for public buildings, and to permit the remainder of the proposed city area to be divided into lots and sold, the proceeds from every other lot to go to the Government with no charge to be made for the land needed for streets and highways.<sup>37</sup>

#### NOTES

Manuscripts used in this paper include the documents and works of George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, and Alexander Hamilton in the Library of Congress. Letters cited by date alone are to be found in the published works of the writers of them but in every cited case each reference has been examined in the original or microfilm form.

With reference to the legislative history of bills, resolutions, or acts of Congress primary reliance was given to Joseph Gales, Sr., *Annals of the Congress of the United States: The Debates and Proceedings in the Congress of the United States* (Gales and Seaton, 1834) cited herein as *Annals*.

<sup>34</sup>Washington Willilam Deakins junior, and Benjamin Stoddert, Jan. 24, 1791; Feb. 17, 1791, and Feb. 28, 1791.

<sup>35</sup>Washington to Jefferson, Feb. 1, 1791.

<sup>36</sup>Washington to Willliam Deakins junior, and Benjamin Stoddert, Mar. 2, 1791.

<sup>37</sup>Washington to Jefferson, Mar. 31, 1791.