

STATE GUIDE

WASHINGTON, DC

by LAUREN GAMBER

BETWEEN 1776 AND 1800, Congress met in temporary locations in New York City and Philadelphia. When it came time to pick a permanent US capital, however, the Northern and Southern states couldn't agree. So who ultimately chose the location for our nation's capital, Washington, DC?

George Washington, of course. In 1791, Maryland and Virginia donated 100 square miles straddling the Potomac. Nov. 21, 1800, almost a year after Washington's death, Congress met in the new capital for the first time. Today, the Washington, DC, metro area extends far beyond the original territory, and the local economy revolves around the federal government and tourism. Home to major record repositories such as the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) <archives.gov>, the Library of Congress (LOC) <loc.gov> and the National Society Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR) Library <www.dar.org/library>, DC is a genealogist's dream—and one of the nation's roots research capitals.

DIAMOND IN THE ROUGH

To create the District of Columbia (then called the Territory of Columbia), Maryland ceded to the federal government parts of Montgomery County (including Georgetown) and Prince George's County, and Virginia gave up part of Fairfax County plus the town of Alexandria. The territory was then divided into two counties: Washington County east of the Potomac, and Alexandria County west of the Potomac. The city of Washington was incorporated in 1802.

In 1846, Alexandria County went back to Virginia. The city of Alexandria resumed its independence (i.e., was not tied to a county) in 1870, and the rest of Alexandria County became Arlington County in 1920. On a modern map, the District of Columbia resembles a diamond with a bite taken out of it. The "bite" is Arlington County and part of Alexandria.

Records of early DC settlers might be in Maryland or Virginia. Virginia kept custody for Alexandria's records, and until the late 1800s, Georgetown's deeds and wills were registered in Montgomery County, Md. In 1871, the city of Washington annexed Georgetown, and Washington and the District of Columbia became coterminous. Today, residents generally say "Washington" when referring to the metropolitan area, and call the city "DC" or "the District."

FAST FACTS

- ★ **Established:** 1790
- ★ **First federal census:** 1800
- ★ **Birth and death records begin:** 1874
- ★ **Marriage records begin:** 1811
- ★ **Contact for vital records:**

Birth records:

Department of Health, Vital Records Division 899 N. Capitol St. NE, First Floor, Washington, DC 20002, (202) 442-5955, <doh.dc.gov>

Marriage records:

Superior Court of DC, Marriage Bureau Section, Moultrie Courthouse, 500 Indiana Ave. NW, Washington, DC 20001, (202) 879-4840, <www.dccourts.gov/services/marriage-matters>

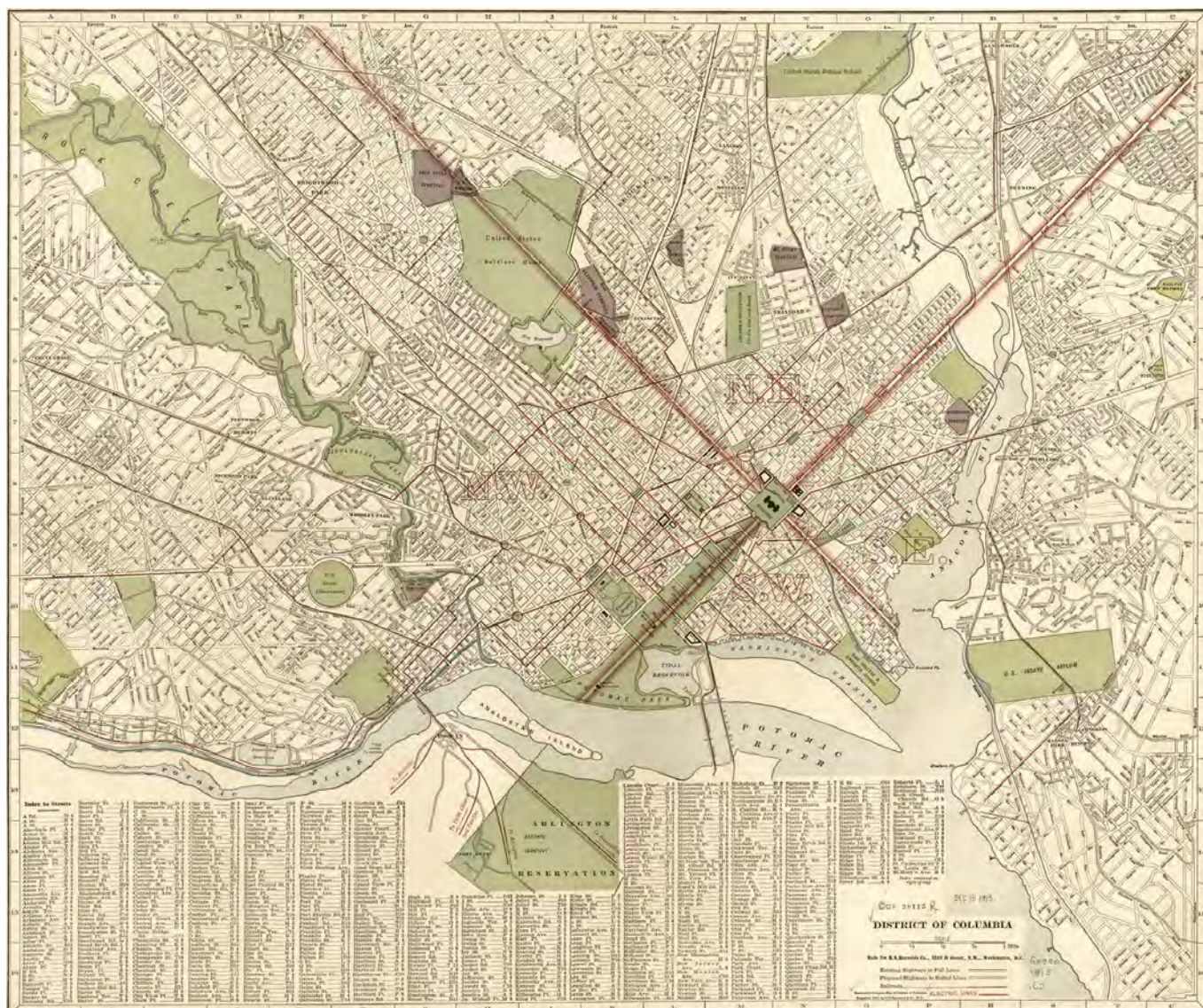
DISTRICT CHAMPIONSHIP

In 1663, English settlers received the first land grants in what's now the District of Columbia (at the time, Charles County, Md.). In 1751, Scottish immigrants founded Georgetown, which flourished as a tobacco port, thanks in large part to the black slaves who labored there.

Georgetown was the District's port of entry, but most passenger ships landed in Baltimore or Philadelphia. Arrivals were mostly people from throughout the country who moved to Washington to work for the government.

In the 1860s, DC's population more than doubled. Runaway and abandoned slaves flooded the capital after slavery was abolished there; after the

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timeline

1800

Washington, DC, becomes the official US capital

1814

British troops burn most of Washington's public buildings and records

1846

The Smithsonian Institution is founded

1864

Arlington National Cemetery is established

1867

Congress establishes Howard University

1899

Jazz legend Duke Ellington is born in DC

Civil War, African-Americans made up a third of the city's population.

Use these records to track your Washington, DC, kin:

★ **CENSUS:** Access micro-filmed federal censuses for the area starting in 1800 (1810 and most of 1890 have been lost) at large libraries, NARA and its regional facilities, and the Family History Library <www.familysearch.org>. Find records online at subscription sites Ancestry.com <ancestry.com> and Archives.com <www.archives.com>. HeritageQuest Online <heritagequestonline.com> (free via subscribing libraries) and the free FamilySearch.org also offer census records and/or indexes.

Remember that in 1790, anyone living east of the Potomac in what's now DC, would've been a Maryland resident. Check the schedules for Prince George's and Montgomery counties. The 1790 Virginia census, which covered the area west of the Potomac, is missing.

★ **VITAL RECORDS:** Districtwide registration of births and deaths began in 1874; marriage records date to 1811. To order copies of birth and death certificates, contact the Vital Records Division of the Department of Health <doh.dc.gov>. You'll need to contact the Marriage Bureau Section of the Superior Court of DC <www.dccourts.gov/services/marriage-matters> for marriage records. Note that birth records become public 125 years after the birth occurred; and death records, 75 years after the death. Only immediate



family members can obtain these records in the interim.

Some vital records are indexed on FamilySearch, while other collections have just images. Here you'll find birth (1874 to 1897) and death (1855 to 1965) returns, plus marriage records from 1811 to 1850. The FHL also has marriage and death notices that appeared in the area's first major newspaper, the *Daily National Intelligencer*, between 1806 and 1858.

★ **COURT RECORDS:** The majority of the District's court records reside at the Washington National Records Center in Suitland, Md. <www.archives.gov/dc-metro/suitland>; the FHL has some microfilm copies.

★ **LAND RECORDS:** Contact the Washington DC recorder of deeds <otr.cfo.dc.gov/service/otr-recorder-deeds> for land records. The FHL has microfilm copies covering 1792 to 1886 and a grantor/grantee index for 1792 to 1919. The

1954

Washington DC integrates its schools

1961

DC residents gain the right to vote for president

1963

Martin Luther King Jr. delivers his "I Have a Dream" speech near the Lincoln Memorial

1970

DC gains an elected nonvoting delegate to the House of Representatives

1992

The House of Representatives approves statehood for Washington DC; the Senate does not

TOOLKIT

Websites

Cyndi's List: District of Columbia <cyndislist.com/us/dc>

DCGenWeb Project <www.theusgenweb.org/dcgenweb>

The Freedmen's Bureau Online <www.freedmensbureau.com>

Tombstone Transcription Project: District of Columbia <www.usgw-tombstones.org/dccolumbia/district.html>

Publications

The Guide to Black Washington, revised edition, by Sandra Fitzpatrick and Maria R. Goodwin (Hippocrene Books)

The Jewish Community of Washington, D.C. by Martin Garfinkle (Arcadia)

Official Register of the United States, Containing a List of Officers and Employees in the Civil, Military, and Naval Service, 37 volumes (Government Printing Office)

Washington, Past and Present, three volumes by John Clagett Proctor (Lewis Historical Publishing Co.)

Archives & Organizations

Arlington Historical Society Box 100402, Arlington, VA 22210, (703) 892-4204, <www.arlingtonhistoricalsociety.org>

District of Columbia Archives Office of Public Records, 1300 Naylor Court NW, Washington, DC 20001, (202) 671-1105, <os.dc.gov/node/41092>

District of Columbia Public Library Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial Library, 901 G St. NW, Washington, DC 20001, (202) 727-0321, <www.dclibrary.org>

Historical Society of Washington, DC 801 K St. NW, Washington, DC 20001, (202) 516-1363, <www.dchistory.org>

Library of Congress 101 Independence Ave. SE, Washington, DC 20540, (202) 707-5000, <www.loc.gov>

NARA Washington National Records Center 4205 Suitland Road, Suitland, MD 20746, (301) 778-1510, <www.archives.gov/suitland>

Washington DC Probate Court 515 Fifth St. NW, Third Floor, Washington, DC 20001, (202) 879-9460, <www.dccourts.gov/superior-court/probate-division>

Recorder of Deeds 1101 4th St. SW, Fifth Floor, Washington DC 20024, (202) 727-5374, <otr.cfo.dc.gov>

FHL also has copies of deeds for Alexandria County (1783 to 1865; indexed 1793 to 1870), as well as Prince George's County (1696 to 1851; indexed 1696 to 1884) and Montgomery County (1777 to 1854; indexed 1777 to 1863). Remember, Georgetown wills and deeds were registered in Montgomery County until the late 1800s.

For historical maps, look to NARA, LOC, the District of Columbia Public Library (DCPL) <dclibrary.org> and the Historical Society of Washington, DC <www.dchistory.org>.

CAPITAL STOPS

Washington, DC, is a must-visit for any roots researcher, especially someone with ties to the capital city. Here's a look at some of the major repositories (see the Toolkit for more website addresses and contact details):

★ **DAR LIBRARY:** Founded in 1896, the library <www.dar.org/library> has an enormous collection of biographies; genealogies; cemetery, Bible and church records; city directories; manuscripts; and membership applications with supporting files. Start your research online with its Genealogical Research System.

★ **DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA ARCHIVES:** Part of the Office of Public Records, the archives holds birth, marriage and death records; wills and probates; indentures of apprenticeship; and other records.

★ **DCPL:** The Washingtoniana Division has city directories dating from 1822, newspapers, cemetery records and photos. The Black Studies Division has a wide range of historical materials, as well.

★ **HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF WASHINGTON, DC:** The society has 100,000 photographs from the 1860s to the present; more than 400 maps; histories of neighborhoods, families and businesses; and more.

★ **LOC:** The Local History and Genealogy Reading Room has more than 50,000 genealogies, 100,000 local histories and a huge collection of city directories. Before you go, find online guides to the genealogy collections <loc.gov/rr/genealogy/bib_guid/bibguide.html>.

★ **NARA:** Records of interest here for African-American research include slave emancipations and manumissions (the FHL has some of these on microfilm). NARA also has censuses, passenger lists, naturalizations filed in federal courts from 1802 to 1906, Civil War service and pension records, WWI draft registration cards and more.

Of course, Washington, DC offers more than libraries and archives. You can get a sense of what your ancestors' lives were like by touring the area's historic neighborhoods. Go online to <www.nps.gov/history/nr/travel/wash> and <www.culturaltourismdc.org> for self-guided travel itineraries. There's no better way to follow in your ancestors' footsteps. ●