

OCTOBER 17 – DECEMBER 23, 2018

Eye of the Bird



Visions and Views of D.C.'s Past

The Albert H. Small Center
for National Capital Area Studies



THE GEORGE WASHINGTON
UNIVERSITY MUSEUM
THE TEXTILE MUSEUM

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“I had the urge to create paintings about Washington, D.C.’s conception and earliest years—it seems a magical thing to recreate a world long gone or never built. I wanted to paint the whole city as President George Washington and designer Peter L’Enfant envisioned it, and then paint what had actually happened here by 1825 when L’Enfant died. I am grateful to my patron, Albert H. Small, and the George Washington University Museum for the opportunity to bring my vision to fruition.” / Peter Waddell, 2018

THE WORLD SEEN FROM ABOVE has always held great interest for the public. Perhaps it is the envy of birds, but in many cultures, examples of bird’s eye views exist from ancient times right up to the current popularity of Google Earth and drones.

Eye of the Bird: Visions and Views of D.C.’s Past introduces two new bird’s eye view paintings of Washington, D.C. by Peter Waddell. *The Indispensable Plan* illustrates for the first time city planner Peter (Pierre) L’Enfant’s 1791 vision for the city. The second painting, *The Village Monumental*, reveals how D.C. had actually developed by the time of L’Enfant’s death in 1825.

Using historical prints of city views that were originally drawn by hand, *Eye of the Bird* also shows how the bird’s eye view genre and the city of Washington, D.C., both evolved in the 19th century and examines the process by which they were created.

THE INDISPENSABLE PLAN

L’Enfant planned for every conceivable need, from canals to carry people and goods through the city to the public spaces, government buildings, and military installations. He even came up with a strategy to distribute the city’s growth, by setting aside circles where each state could establish a presence.



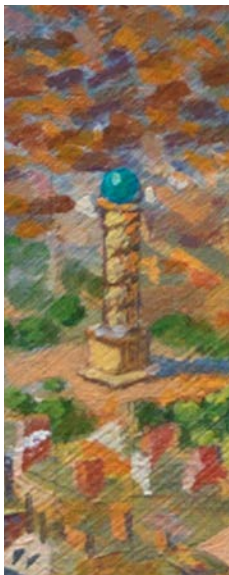
Peter Waddell
1855

The canal was the center of L'Enfant's vision for the City of Washington to transport goods and people across town. Notice the boats bringing supplies through the city.



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Peter Waddell looked at 18th-century monuments in major cities across Europe to inform his depiction of several memorials to fill the spaces L'Enfant left for them.



L'Enfant imagined the President's House as a grand palatial residence. Peter Waddell used Castle Howard in York, England, as inspiration because its floor plan is very similar to what is found on L'Enfant's plan.



L'Enfant's manuscript plan shows a detailed military installation with a breakwater on what is now called Greenleaf's Point. Waddell depicted this as a navy yard.



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THE VILLAGE MONUMENTAL

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But things didn't go according to plan. By L'Enfant's death in 1825, the city had progressed much more slowly than initially hoped. Limited funds from Congress and unrealized profits from the sales of city lots were not enough to build L'Enfant's ideal city. Rampant land speculation further hampered development.

The canal, the economic and geographic center of L'Enfant's city, was unfinished. The park connecting the White House and the Capitol was being used by farmers. L'Enfant's plans for a national university, a bevy of fountains, and avenues of elegant, stone and brick buildings seemed like a dream.

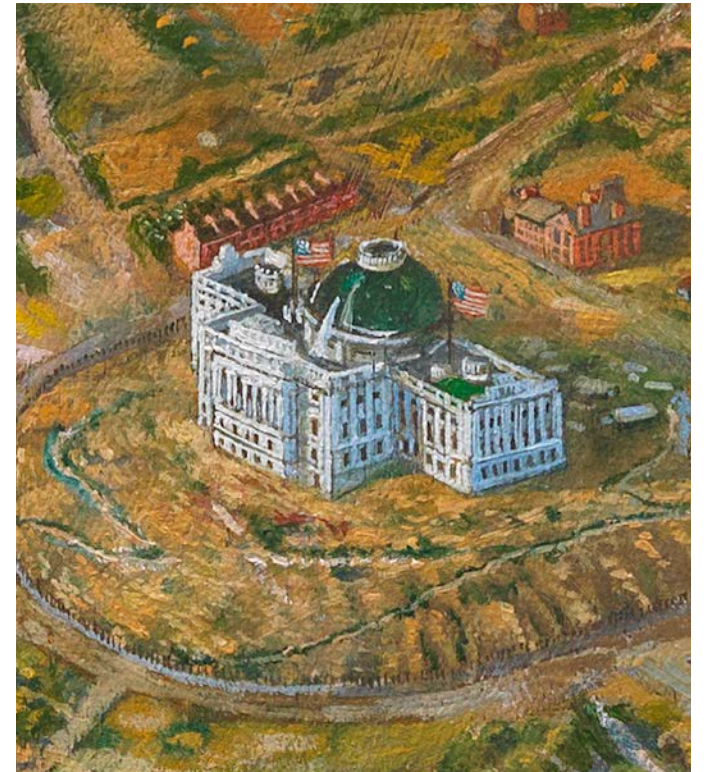
Instead, neighborhoods popped up around the city as scattered villages. The picturesque public spaces L'Enfant had theorized were nowhere to be seen.



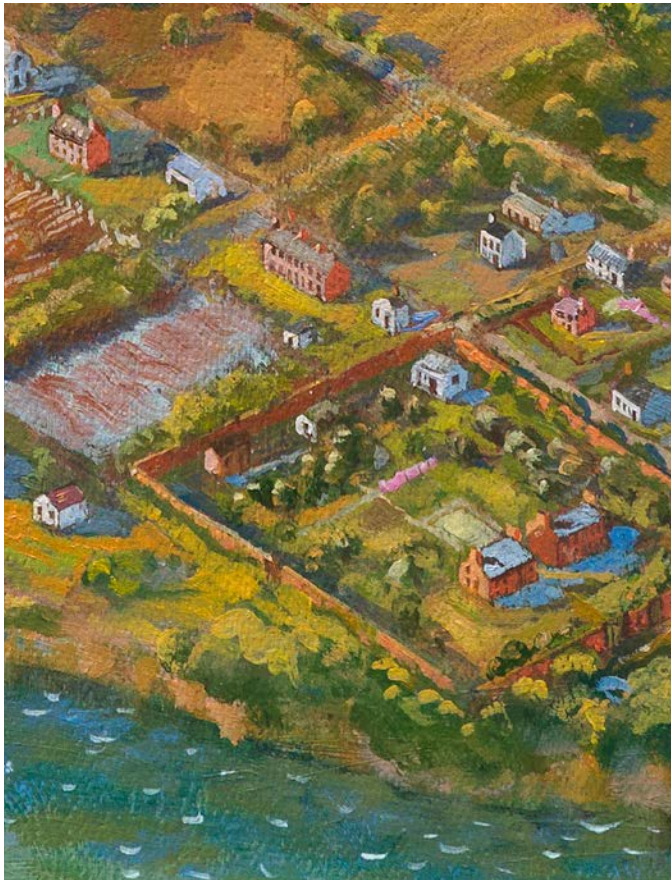
Much of Washington was still agrarian in 1825. Farmers utilized unclaimed land, including the future National Mall, for growing crops and grazing animals.



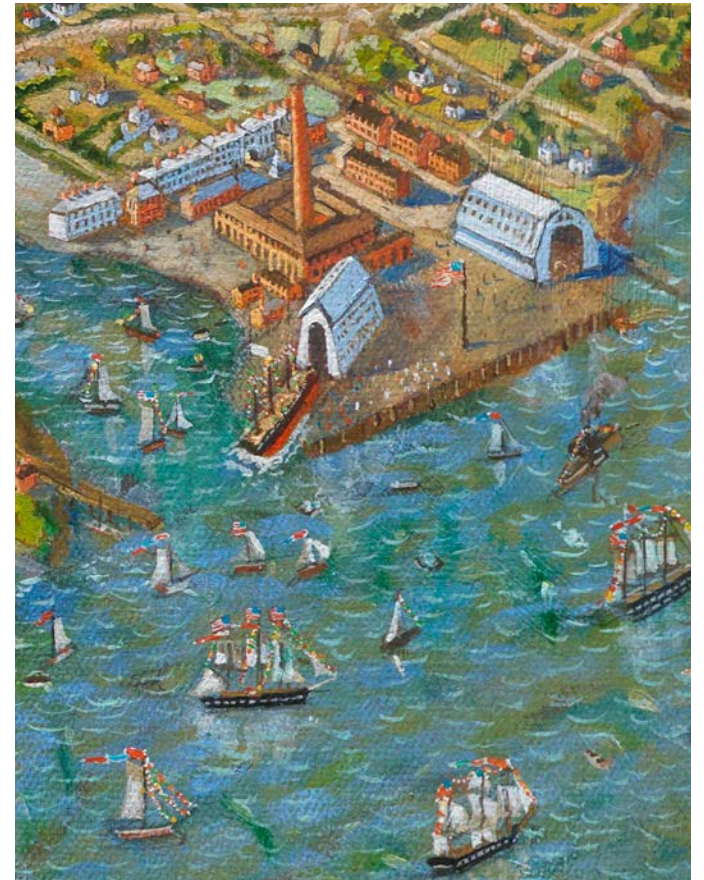
By 1825, the Capitol's reconstruction after the British burned it in the War of 1812 was almost complete. On the east lawn the final slabs of stone await their placement in the building.



The home of Commodore John Rodgers anchored the village on Greenleaf Point. Rodgers successfully saved Baltimore from the same destructive, fiery fate as Washington, D.C. in the War of 1812.



On June 16, 1825, the USS Brandywine launched to great fanfare from the Navy Yard with President John Quincy Adams on board. The ship later transported the Marquis de Lafayette home to France from his American tour.





Opposite: View of Alexandria, Va. (detail), drawn from Nature by E. Sachse & Co., published by J.T. Palmatary, 1854, AS 480

“I love that the paintings are being shown with period objects and earlier birds eye views of Washington. Artists closely guard the secrets of their craft, and I had to reverse engineer some of those images to understand how to make mine.”
Peter Waddell, 2018



An Overview of Urban Bird's Eye Views in 19th Century America

By James M. Goode

ARTISTS HAVE PRODUCED prints showing bird's eye views of cities for more than 500 years. The first published bird's eye views appeared in the late 15th-century in Germany as woodcut prints in encyclopedic atlases. The invention of the lithograph in 1796 was perfect for bird's eye views. Compared to earlier woodcuts and engravings, lithographic illustrations, drawn directly on the stone from which the print was made, were quick and inexpensive to produce in large quantities and in color. This new technology made city views available to more people.

Bird's eye views of American cities and towns became popular in the 1840s. The arrival of many experienced German lithographers in the United States just before the Civil War, such as Edward Sachse and John Bachmann, helped the industry grow.

The Civil War spurred the production of bird's eye views of battlefields and other war-related topics. Union troops stationed around the country became customers who were interested in taking or mailing home views of the fort or a nearby city they had been stationed in.

After the war, lithographic bird's eye views documented the growth of hundreds of American towns and cities spreading across the nation. Traveling artists rode the expanding network of railroads westward looking for new markets. City boosters and merchants hoped the prints would encourage settlement and stimulate the local economy.

Armory Hospital, 7th Street Armory Square, Washington, D.C., *Charles Magnus*, 1863, AS 2016.13

This hospital, with the wards marked by letters at the bottom of the print, was located on Seventh Street between the city canal and B Street, S.W. (today Constitution and Independence Avenues, respectively).



First, a traveling artist or their agent would contact the local newspaper to explain their project, and the newspaper would advertise the artist coming to town. The newspapers would continue to run stories on the artist's progress so that locals would be interested in subscribing or placing an order for a print. This early form of crowdfunding was the main way that artists financed their projects.

Next, to prepare the image, the artist would walk the streets and make pencil sketches of each building. Then, using a town map and his own observations, the artist would lay out a grid in perspective showing the streets of the town. He would carefully place each building he had sketched in its proper location, making sure to maintain a proper sense of proportion, and he would also elevate the perspective so that it appeared to have been taken from high about the city. This drawing was displayed for review by the public. The artist corrected mistakes before the lithograph was sent off to be printed.

To increase the sale of the lithograph, an artist might add enlarged drawings of prominent buildings including mansions, courthouses, railroad stations, churches, factories, and business structures. These were arranged as vignettes around three or four sides of the print and promoted the town as modern and industrialized. The owners of private buildings would pay the artist an extra fee for this promotion.



View of Alexandria, Va., drawn from *Nature* by E. Sachse & Co., published by J.T. Palmatary, 1854, AS 480

In the summer of 1853, the Alexandria Gazette and Daily Advertiser announced that J.T. Palmatary was in town to draw this bird's eye view of Alexandria, Virginia. Palmatary worked for noted lithographer and publisher Edward Sachse in Baltimore. Together the two produced numerous views of cities in the Washington region in the 1850s.

These lithographs provided information about a city's architecture, planning, transportation, and technological advancements. The introduction of horse-drawn streetcars in American cities in the 1850s, followed by the arrival of electric streetcars in the 1890s, allowed cities to stretch outwards as people began to commute in from expanding suburbs. At the same time, cities began to grow upward as taller office buildings were erected with new iron frames—the first five-story iron framed building was built in New York City in 1848.

But as the Victorian Era came to a close, the large prints were no longer novel parlor and office decorations, and cities developed so rapidly that a view was often out of date by the time it was printed and sent back to customers. The Depression of 1890 also contributed to the genre's decline. By 1925, production of lithographic city views had almost entirely disappeared with the arrival of aerial photographs taken from airplanes.

For further reading, see John Reps, *Bird's Eye Views: Historic Lithographs of North American Cities*, and *Washington on View: The Nation's Capital Since 1790*.

Opposite:
George Washington,
President of the
United States (*detail*),
Edward Savage, 1793,
AS 497

*George Washington
holds a copy of the
L'Enfant Plan of the
Federal City, which
he championed.*



Establishing the Seat of Federal Government on the Potomac River

By Kenneth R. Bowling

The federal capital could have been as far north as Newport, Rhode Island, as far south as Norfolk, Virginia, as far west as Marietta, Ohio, or at any one of more than forty proposed places in between. The reason it did not was a man named George Washington, who believed a location on the Potomac River best ensured the economic growth of Alexandria, Virginia, the value of his extensive land holdings at Mount Vernon and the thousands of acres he owned to the west of it, and most importantly for him, the survival of the Union and his reputation in history.

Residents of Georgetown, Maryland, first proposed their town and its environs for the seat of government in 1783. However, when Congress debated the location in October it chose a site on the Delaware River near Trenton, New Jersey, Southerners complained so bitterly that it threatened the survival of the Union. Consequently, Congress decided to have two seats—the one at Trenton and another at Georgetown. This compromise was repealed a year later.

A quick decision was naively expected again in 1789 as Pennsylvania and the states south of it had reached an agreement: Congress would sit temporarily in Philadelphia and then move permanently to the Potomac. Learning of this, New Englanders proposed to Pennsylvanians that the temporary seat of federal government remain at New York, where it had been since 1785, and that the permanent seat be somewhere in Pennsylvania. Southerners erupted and, as in 1783, they threatened to leave the Union.



The issue came up again as soon as Congress reconvened in 1790. At the same time, Secretary of the Treasury Alexander Hamilton was having difficulty convincing the House that the federal government should assume into the federal debt most of the revolutionary war debts of the states. By May, Congress was stalemated on both issues.

Near the end of June, Secretary of State Thomas Jefferson invited Hamilton and Representative James Madison, the leading opponent of assumption, to a dinner during which he hoped a compromise could be reached. A deal was struck: a ten-year temporary residence at Philadelphia, and a permanent residence on the Potomac; in exchange for this Madison agreed to find the necessary Southern votes to ensure that Congress agreed to assumption.

Where was George Washington in all of this? He remained distinctly quiet but very well informed throughout the seven years during which the issue of location was a political football. After Congress passed the Residence Act of 1790, a bitter Senator William Maclay of Pennsylvania credited Washington for its provisions: “He, by means of Jefferson, Madison... and others” urged the business. “Alas! That the affection, nay, almost adoration of the people should meet so unworthy a return.”

The Residence Act created the first presidential commission whose purpose was to select the site for the one hundred square mile federal district and the federal city within it. Although Washington appointed as commissioners fellow victims of Potomac Fever, a delusion-inducing obsession with the beauty and commercial potential of the Potomac River, he chose the site himself so that it included Alexandria. Washington would micromanage the construction of the city throughout and even beyond his presidency. This included choosing the city planner to design the Federal City: Peter (Pierre) Charles L’Enfant.

“No one has the final word on history, but history has much to tell us about D.C. today.”
Peter Waddell, 2018

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Who was Peter Charles L’Enfant?

By Kenneth R. Bowling

PETER (PIERRE) CHARLES L’ENFANT (1754-1825) was born in Paris to a family associated with the court of Louis XV. While trained as an artist, L’Enfant also understood architecture, engineering, landscape architecture, and event planning.

In 1775 he came to the United States to volunteer in the Continental Army. Rising to the rank of major, L’Enfant distinguished himself at the Battle of Savannah where he sustained a leg injury that plagued him for the rest of his life. He decided to remain in the United States, anglicizing his given name to Peter. Throughout his service, and in such various locations as Valley Forge, VerPlanck’s Point, and West Point, he painted portraits and military scenes. His army service and artistic talents earned him the friendship and patronage of such prominent figures as George Washington, Alexander Hamilton, and Henry Knox.

At the end of the war, L’Enfant became a founding member of the Society of the Cincinnati, the hereditary organization of Continental Army officers, designing its iconography and traveling to France to have its eagle badges produced—the only time he returned to his homeland.

In 1784 he proposed to Congress that it create an Army Corps of Engineers, one of whose functions would be to supervise the design and long-term construction of a capital for the new nation. In 1788 L’Enfant planned a parade and banquet in Manhattan celebrating the ratification of the Constitution. Its success led New York City to ask him to remodel the city hall to accommodate the First Federal Congress under

the Constitution. Designed in the Federal Style, with eagles and symbols of unity, the building became known as Federal Hall, not after the style it was designed in, but for housing the First Federal Congress.

When the First Federal Congress took up the question of the permanent location of the federal seat of government, L'Enfant wrote President Washington proposing himself as the designer of the capital “for this immense empire.” He got the job.

Yet the artist encountered difficulties in working with the city commissioners overseeing his work. When President Washington, who did his best to retain L'Enfant, told him that he would have to report to the commissioners and not to him, L'Enfant resigned. He was not fired. Washington supported L'Enfant's design for the rest of his life.

In the early 19th century, after losing a palimony suit in federal court, L'Enfant became homeless, living as a guest of the Digges family of Prince George's County from 1814 until his death in 1825. He was buried at Green Hill farm in Prince George's County, Maryland until 1909 when his body was exhumed and moved to Arlington National Cemetery after lying in state at the Capitol rotunda. His grave now looks over the Potomac to the city he designed.

Exhibition Program Highlights

All programs are free unless otherwise noted. For a complete list of programs with descriptions, or to register for a program, visit museum.gwu.edu/programs.

LECTURE

Lafayette in Washington, 1824–25

Monday, October 22, 12 PM

Mark Hudson, Executive Director, Tudor Place Historic House & Gardens

FAMILY DAY

I Can See My House From Here!

Saturday, November 10, 10 AM–3 PM

Featuring Peter Waddell, *Eye of the Bird* artist and historian
Drawing workshops: 11 AM and 1 PM

ARTS AND DRAFTS SOCIAL HOUR

Bird's Eye Views and D.C. Brews

Wednesday, November 28, 6–9 PM

Featuring Peter Waddell, *Eye of the Bird* artist and historian
\$10 members / \$15 public

LECTURE

Painting L'Enfant's Washington

Monday, December 3, 12 PM

Peter Waddell, Artist in Residence, Tudor Place

CURATOR TOUR

Washingtonians' Plan for Washington D.C.

Friday, December 7, 11 AM

Amber “Jackie” Streker, assistant curator, Albert H. Small Washingtoniana Collection
Free, but reservations are required



Visitor Information

Location

The museum is located at the corner of 21st and G streets, NW, four blocks from the Foggy Bottom-GWU Metro Station (Blue, Orange, and Silver lines). For directions and parking information, visit museum.gwu.edu/getting-here.

Hours

Monday: 11 AM–5 PM

Tuesday: Closed

Wednesday–Thursday: 11 AM–7 PM

Friday: 11 AM–5 PM

Saturday: 10 AM–5 PM

Sunday: 1–5 PM

Closed on university holidays

Admission

\$8 suggested donation for non-members. Free for museum members, children, and current GW students, faculty, and staff.

Albert H. Small Center for National Capital Area Studies

The center is open by appointment Mon, Wed–Thu 11:30 AM–4 PM. Please email washingtoniana@gwu.edu to make an appointment.

Museum Shop

Visit the shop for unique jewelry, home décor, books, and gifts from Washington, D.C., and around the world. To place an order for shipment, contact 202-833-1285 or museumshop@gwu.edu.

Membership

Support from members and donors is the driving force that allows the museum to continue its work bringing art, history, and culture alive for the GW community and the public. To join or renew a current membership, or to make a donation, visit museum.gwu.edu/support, call 202-994-5579, or stop by the front desk.

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