

# HISTORY OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA

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When the United States Constitution was adopted on September 15, 1787, Article 1, Section 8, Clause 17, included language authorizing the establishment of a federal district. This district was not to exceed 10 miles square, under the exclusive legislative authority of Congress. On July 16, 1790, Congress authorized President George Washington to choose a permanent site for the capital city and, on December 1, 1800, the capital was moved from Philadelphia to an area along the Potomac River. The census of 1800 showed that the new capital had a population of 14,103.

The District of Columbia Bicentennial Commission was established to develop plans for the celebration of various anniversary dates in District of Columbia history. The commission is comprised of 39 members with a specified number of commissioners appointed by the mayor, the chairman of the D.C. Council, council members, the District delegate to the House of Representatives, the courts, and the District of Columbia Bar. Among the events celebrated are the 200th anniversary of the Residency Act, which established that there shall be a permanent seat of government on the Potomac River (July 16, 1790); the 200th anniversary of President George Washington's proclamation of the site for the federal district (January 24, 1791); and the 200th anniversary of the arrival of Pierre L'Enfant, Benjamin Banneker and Andrew Ellicott. The commission may designate other bicentennial events for celebration.

There have been several forms of appointed and elected governments in the District of Columbia: an appointed, three-member commission (1790-1802); elected councils and an appointed mayor (1802-1820); elected councils and an elected mayor (1820-1871); an appointed governor, a two-house legislature (one appointed and the other elected), and an elected, non-voting delegate to the Congress (1871-1874); and another appointed, three-member commission (1874-1967). Following the defeat by Congress of a home rule effort in 1967, then-President

Lyndon B. Johnson reorganized the District government and created the positions of an appointed mayor/commissioner and an appointed nine-member council.

District residents won the right to vote in a presidential election on March 29, 1961, to elect a board of education in 1968 and, in 1970, to elect a non-voting delegate to the House of Representatives. In 1973, Congress approved a bill that provided District residents with an elected form of government with limited home rule authority; as a result, District residents voted for a mayor and a council for the first time in more than 100 years. District residents accepted the home rule charter by referendum vote in 1974. Congress delegated to the District government the authority, functions and powers of a state, with a very important exception: Congress retains control over the District's revenue and expenditures by annually reviewing the entire District government budget. In addition, Congress has repeatedly prohibited the District from imposing a non-resident income tax.

In 1980, District voters approved a statehood initiative by a majority of 60 percent; delegates to a statehood constitutional convention were elected in 1981 and, in 1983, a bill for the admission of the state of New Columbia was introduced in Congress. The "Constitution for the State of New Columbia" is still under congressional consideration and is reintroduced into each new congressional session. Under the specifications of the statehood initiatives, most of the land area of the District of Columbia would become the state of New Columbia; the District of Columbia would continue to exist, albeit reduced in size to an area consisting of the White House, the Capitol, the Supreme Court, the Mall and federal monuments and government buildings adjacent to the Mall.

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## **CHRONOLOGY OF SOME EVENTS IN THE HISTORY OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA**

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**May 15, 1751:** The Maryland Assembly appoints commissioners to lay a town on the Potomac River, above the mouth of Rock Creek, on 60 acres of land to be purchased from George Gordon and George Beall. This settlement becomes Georgetown.

**February 27, 1752:** The survey and plat of Georgetown into 80 lots is completed.

**September 17, 1787:** The Constitution is signed by the members of the Constitutional Convention.

**June 21, 1788:** The 1788 U.S. Constitution, as adopted by the Constitutional Convention on September 15, 1787, is ratified by the states. Article 1, Section 8, Clause 17, gives Congress authority "to exercise exclusive legislation in all cases whatsoever, over such District (not exceeding ten miles square) as may by cession of particular States, and the acceptance of Congress, become the seat of the government of the United States...."

**July 16, 1790:** The Residency Act of 1790 gives the president power to choose a site for the capital city on the east bank of the Potomac River between the mouth of the Eastern Branch and the Connogocheague Creek (now Conococheague) near Hagerstown, nearly 70 miles upstream.

**January 22, 1791:** George Washington appoints Thomas Johnson and Daniel Carroll of Rock Creek, representing Maryland and Dr. David Stuart, to represent Virginia, as "Commissioners for surveying the District of (sic) Territory accepted by the said Act for the permanent seat of the Government of the United States...."

**January 24, 1791:** President George Washington selects a site that includes portions of Maryland and Virginia.

**December 1, 1800:** The federal capital is transferred from Philadelphia to the site on the Potomac River now called the City of Washington, in the territory of Columbia. At the time of the 1800 census, the population of the new capital included 10,066 whites, 793 free Negroes and 3,244 slaves.

**February 27, 1801:** Congress divides the [District] into the counties of Washington and Alexandria.

**May 3, 1802:** Congress grants the City of Washington its first municipal charter. Voters, defined as white males who pay taxes and have lived in the city for at least a year, receive the right to elect a 12-member council. The mayor is appointed by the president.

**May 4, 1812:** Congress amends the charter of the City of Washington to provide for an eight-member board of aldermen and a 12-member common council. The aldermen and the common council elect the mayor.

**March 15, 1820:** Under the Act of 1820, Congress amends the Charter of the City of Washington for the direct election of the mayor by resident voters.

**July 9, 1846:** Congress passes a law returning the city of Alexandria and Alexandria County to the state of Virginia.

**May 17, 1848:** Congress adopts a new charter for the City of Washington and expands the number of elected offices to include a board of assessors, a surveyor, a collector and a registrar.

**April 16, 1862:** Congress abolishes slavery in the federal district (the City of Washington, Washington County, and Georgetown). This action predates both the Emancipation Proclamation and the adoption of the 13th Amendment to the Constitution.

**January 8, 1867:** Congress grants black males the right to vote in local elections.

**June 1, 1871:** The elected mayor and council of Washington City and Georgetown, and the County Levy Court are abolished by Congress and replaced by a governor and council appointed by the president. An elected House of Delegates and a non-voting delegate to Congress are created. In this act, the jurisdiction and territorial government came to be called the District of Columbia, thus combining the governments of Georgetown, the City of Washington and the County of Washington. A seal and motto, "Justitia Omnibus" (Justice for All), are adopted for the District of Columbia.

**June 20, 1874:** The territorial government of the District of Columbia, including the non-voting delegate to Congress, is abolished. Three temporary commissioners and a subordinate military engineer are appointed by the president.

**June 11, 1878:** In The Organic Act of 1878, Congress approves the establishment of the District of Columbia government as a municipal corporation governed by three presidentially appointed commissioners — two civilian commissioners and a commissioner from the military corps of engineers. This form of government lasted until August 1967.

**July 4, 1906:** The District Building, on 14th Street and Pennsylvania Avenue, becomes the official City Hall.

**July 1, 1952:** The Reorganization Plan of 1952 transfers to the three commissioners the functions of more than 50 boards.

**March 29, 1961:** The 23rd Amendment to the Constitution gives District residents the right to vote for president.

**February 20, 1967:** The Washington Metropolitan Area Transit

Authority is created through a compact between the District of Columbia, Maryland and Virginia.

**April 22, 1968:** District residents receive the right to elect a Board of Education.

**December 24, 1973:** Congress approves the District of Columbia Self-Government and Governmental Reorganization Act, P.L. 93-198, which establishes an elected mayor and a 13-member council.

**May 7, 1974:** Voters of the District of Columbia approve by referendum the District Charter and the establishment of advisory neighborhood commissions. General elections are held for mayor and council on November 5, 1974.

**January 2, 1975:** The newly elected Mayor Walter Washington and first elected council take office.

**February 3, 1976:** The first election for advisory neighborhood commissioners is held.

**March 29, 1978:** The first segment of the Metrorail Red Line opens.

**August 22, 1978:** Congress approves the District of Columbia Voting Rights Amendment, which would give District residents voting representation in the House and the Senate. The proposed constitutional amendment was not ratified by the necessary number of states (38) within the allotted seven years.

**January 2, 1979:** The Mayor Marion Barry takes office.

**November 4, 1980:** District electors approve the District of Columbia Statehood Constitutional Convention of 1979, which became D.C. Law 3-171 and which called for convening a state constitutional convention.

**November 2, 1982:** After the constitutional convention, a Constitution for the State of New Columbia is ratified by District voters.

**October 1, 1984:** The District enters the municipal bond market.

**October 29, 1986:** Congress approves an amendment to the District of Columbia Stadium Act of 1957, which authorizes the transfer of Robert F. Kennedy Stadium from the federal government to the District of Columbia government.

**February 20, 1987:** The Metropolitan Washington Airports Authority is created to acquire Washington National and Washington - Dulles International airports from the federal government, pursuant to P.L. 99-151, The Metropolitan Washington Airports Act of 1986. The authority begins operating the airports on June 7, 1987.

**October 1, 1987:** Saint Elizabeth's Hospital is transferred to the District of Columbia government pursuant to P.L. 98-621, The St. Elizabeth's Hospital and the D.C. Mental Health Services Act of 1984.

**January 2, 1992:** Mayor Sharon Pratt Dixon, the first woman mayor, takes office.

**January 2, 1995:** Marion Barry takes office for an unprecedented fourth term as Mayor of the District of Columbia.

**April 17, 1995:** President Clinton signed the law creating a presidentially appointed District of Columbia Financial Control Board and a mayor-appointed Chief Financial Officer.

**July 13, 1995:** The newly appointed financial control board holds its first public meeting. It is composed of Dr. Andrew Brimmer, chair; and members: Joyce A. Ladner, Constance B. Newman, Stephen D. Harlan and Edward A. Singletary. John Hill is the Executive Director and Daniel Rezneck is the General Counsel.

**February 14, 1996:** Mayor Barry announces a transformation plan to reduce the size of government and increase its efficiency.

**Source: Office of Public Records**