

[Santelli on Costanzo, 'George Washington's Washington: Visions for the National Capital in the Early American Republic'](#)

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Adam Costanzo. *George Washington's Washington: Visions for the National Capital in the Early American Republic*. Early American Places Series. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2018. 264 pp.

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Adam Costanzo's *George Washington's Washington*, a volume in the Early American Places series of the University of Georgia Press, examines the federal capital as an urban space and analyzes the political, economic, and ideological meanings behind its development. Costanzo details that George Washington's vision of a grand capital city differed with that of many Americans, especially those who favored a weak central government. "In the fiercely partisan environment of the early republic period," Costanzo argues, "the federal city became a symbolic pawn in the contest between rival political groups" (p. 4). Costanzo's analysis of the development of Washington brings together public works, construction and style of federal buildings, and local society and politics. In adopting this approach to the development of Washington, DC, "the design of the federal city, its physical, economic, and social development, and, in particular, the buildings erected there, all reflect the impact of federal policies regarding the District" (p. 4).

Costanzo points out that over the past few decades, scholars have connected the social history of Washington, especially the influence of elite women, with the operation of the federal government. He observes that his work inverts this recent framework by seeking to determine the influence of government on the development of the city rather than the city's influence on government. In addition, Costanzo builds on previous contributions regarding federal architectural design, style, and city planning. In combining these inquiries, he seeks to unite the history of the political and socioeconomic structures of Washington, DC, with urban and architectural history. *George Washington's Washington* accomplishes this multilayered approach through a range of primary sources, including census records, newspapers, private letters, congressional records, and commissioner proceedings.

George Washington's Washington is divided into four parts. In part 1 Costanzo describes the visions held by Washington architect Pierre Charles L'Enfant, Thomas Jefferson, and local boosters. Washington's vision of a federal metropolis was reflected in L'Enfant's city designs, revealing a city that represented a burgeoning American empire built on commerce and western expansion. Congress, however, lacked the funds to finance the construction of such a city, so Washington and the city commissioners turned to land speculation. A combination of problems emerged, including the

slow sale of land; conflict between local landholders and the commissioners made the development of the new federal city slow. The population of the federal city did increase and was demographically similar to that of Georgetown, but with the population dispersed over a wider area, the federal city had more of an appearance of a sparsely occupied village than a federal metropolis. Confronted with initial problems with the sale of land and conflict between the city commissioners and L'Enfant, the federal city seemed "comically, even grotesquely, underdeveloped" in 1800 (p. 60).

The development of the capital city was further stunted when Jefferson and the Democratic-Republicans took power. Part 2 focuses on this shift. Where Washington envisioned a federal metropolis and promoted a grand design for a capital city, Jefferson and the Democratic-Republicans sought to promote an agrarian republic with a modest capital city. Jefferson's perspective on the federal city was informed by the notion that government needed to be protected from the "corrupting influences of the manufacturers, wage laborers, wealthy aristocrats, and ragged beggars who infested the large capital cities of Europe" (p. 63). Jefferson only supported spending on the capital city for federal buildings. For example, he promoted the classically inspired plans for the first Capitol building designed by William Thornton, but he neither supported constructing an ostentatious president's mansion nor the improvement of city streets unless they connected federal buildings. It was not until 1810 with the support of Dolley Madison that some of the rooms in the president's mansion, such as the oval drawing room, were completed with the assistance of federal monies. Congress made few efforts at improving the city from 1801 to 1812, leaving the task for improvement to local residents.

The burning of Washington by the British in August 1814 opens part 3. That the city survived the War of 1812 "symbolized the permanence of the United States and its break with Great Britain" (p. 109). This permanence energized local residents to make improvements in the city, including the construction of a city hall and creation of orphanages and schools for poor and underprivileged children. Congress appropriated funds for the purpose of rebuilding federal buildings, especially the Capitol.

This transition toward congressional acceptance of responsibility for the development and maintenance of the capital city began in the 1820s. The 1828 groundbreaking ceremony of the Chesapeake and Ohio (C&O) Canal opens part 4 and links the new project with Washington's original Potomac Company. Where the Potomac Company had failed to create a connection between the capital city and the West, the new C&O Canal Company represented both local and federal interest in devoting funds toward the city's improvement. This transition accelerated under the Jacksonians, despite Andrew Jackson's own promises to reassert Jefferson's agrarian republicanism. Jackson himself came to see the federal capital as a nationalist symbol that could articulate a sense of union and federal control. With Jacksonian support in Congress, a number of important federal buildings were constructed in the 1830s and reflected their "intention to raise the stature of the nation's capital" (p. 181).

Many Jacksonians came to see a strong national capital as a useful tool in asserting their vision of expanding slavery into the West. Costanzo argues that the Jacksonians and emerging sectionalism came to redefine politics within the capital city. The cotton boom in the South aided textile manufacturers in the North, provided a market for crops grown in the West, and "offered an outlet for slave owners in the Upper South to sell slaves they no longer wanted as their economy shifted

away from tobacco production” (p. 156). These economic interconnections, Costanzo argues, “spurred a sense of nationalism among the American population as the regions became more dependent on one another.” Sectional tensions, however, emerged as a result of these economic interconnections, developing sense of national identity, and the increasing influence of the abolitionist movement in the North. Both proslavery and antislavery Americans increasingly came to view the federal capital as a proxy for the nation. “By highlighting the symbolic value of the national capital,” Costanzo argues, “both opponents and proponents of Southern slavery raised the stature and significance of the federal city” (p. 160).

This story is about the realization of Washington’s vision, which Costanzo argues was finally embraced by the 1830s and ’40s. His approach to the story of the federal capital brings into focus not only a physical illustration of the city through its buildings and public works projects but also a social and political view of the city that reveals the changing attitudes and emerging nationalism of the period. Although the epilogue makes references to the development of Washington up to the Civil War, Costanzo’s architectural and urban space approach would be useful in further examining the emergence of sectionalism and how these debates manifested themselves in the development of the federal city in the years leading up to the Civil War. Debates over the reconstructed capital, for example, in the 1850s boiled down to political vision as articulated in architecture. The statue of Lady Liberty on top of the Capitol building, for example, became a battleground of debate regarding statuary symbolism and slavery. Scholars will find *George Washington’s Washington* to be a useful contribution to the study of the people and politics of Washington, DC, in the early American republic. Although Costanzo’s story concludes with the Jacksonian era, his contribution provides a useful framework for future research and inquiry.

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