

WASHINGTON D.C. 1861



Presented by

D.C. CIVIL WAR CENTENNIAL COMMISSION



1861

ON THE EVE OF CIVIL WAR

Washington in 1861 bore little resemblance to Washington today. Despite its growth from 14,000 in 1800 to approximately 75,000 in 1861, the town remained a drowsy village on the Potomac except when Congress was in session. By 1865 the Washington area numbered 120,000 people and it had begun its remarkable growth.

Ambitiously laid out over an area extending from the Potomac and Anacostia Rivers as far as Rock Creek to the west and Boundary Street (Florida Avenue) to the north, the town had not fulfilled the plan of its designer, Pierre l'Enfant. The boasted Government Buildings were the Capitol, General Post Office, Treasury, Executive Mansion and the Smithsonian Institution.

First in importance was the classic Capitol, with its paintings and statuary. It housed the Library of Congress. The original dome had been removed, huge scaffolding met the eye from every point and all about the East Front lay great blocks of stone. Work continued during the War until completion.

The Patent Office and General Post Office were located at 7th and F Streets, N.W. Neither Building was fully completed in 1860. The Treasury was located at 15th and F Streets. It, too, was under construction. On the site of the north end of the Treasury was the small red brick State Department. The War and Navy Departments were old-fashioned brick buildings located where now stands the old State, War and Navy Building.

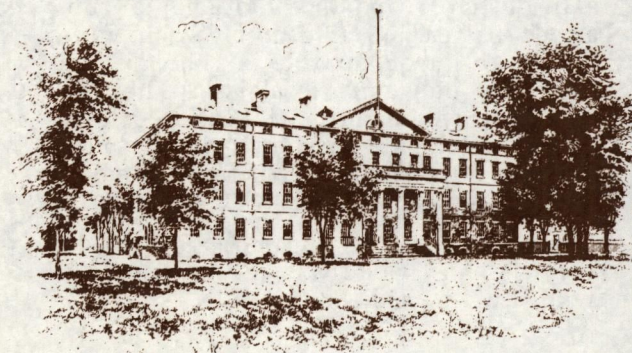


Pennsylvania Avenue, Washington, from a sketch made in 1861

The White House was between the State Department and the War and Navy Department Buildings. Behind the Executive Mansion were the Potomac flats, a breeding ground for malaria. South of the Mansion was an unsavory marsh which had formerly served as an outlet for sewage. The old City Canal (now Constitution Avenue) originated here and extended eastward to the Anacostia River. Also, south of the Executive Mansion stood the Washington Monument then only about one-third completed. In the Mall — not yet fully developed — stood the Smithsonian Institution, then, as now, well worth visiting. Balloon ascensions, under Thaddeus S. C. Lowe, occurred here, to be followed by other ascensions for military observations later in the War. The City Hall still stands at 451 Indiana Avenue, N.W.

Pennsylvania Avenue, the main thoroughfare, extended from the Capitol to the Treasury, then bent for two blocks and

continued on past the White House. On the North side of the Avenue were the larger hotels, restaurants and shops. The South side was lined with dingy buildings; only the old Center Market was of importance. 1862 saw the first streetcar line completed from the Capitol to 15th and G Streets, N.W. Few of the streets were paved. Consequently in rainy weather the City was swampy and in dry weather it was beset with dust clouds.



The War Department, 1861



The Navy Yard, Washington, in 1861

Washington had no strength as a military post. It was accessible to the enemy on all sides. However, although virtually cut off from the North for a few days in 1861, Washington soon became an armed camp and the principal military center for the Northern war effort. Troops were billeted in and on the outskirts of the City and across the River in nearby Virginia. Here was assembled, equipped and trained the Army of the Potomac which was to serve so heroically throughout the War. The City became a receiving depot for recruits; large storage centers for army supplies sprang up; corrals for thousands of horses and mules were constructed. Large slaughter houses were erected near the Monument.

Three bridges crossed the Potomac River, old Long Bridge (present Railroad Bridge), Aqueduct Bridge (foundations alongside Key Bridge) and Chain Bridge.

A ring of Forts surrounded the City which by April, 1861, consisted of 68 Forts and Batteries and an additional 93 unarmed batteries. Of course, Washington played an important role in the care and treatment of wounded soldiers. The City Hospital System included Post Hospitals, public buildings, churches, private dwellings and miscellaneous structures numbering fifty-six buildings in all.

From 1800 to 1861 and thereafter Washington's chief value was its service as a symbol of the Union.

HISTORIC EVENTS

- March 4, 1861 . Inauguration of President Lincoln (Re-enactment)
- April 14 Minnesota offers Union Troops (Commemoration)
- April 19 Sixth Massachusetts Regiment arrived
- April 25 Seventh New York Regiment arrived
- May 24 Federals take possession of Alexandria and the Virginia Heights. (Rededication of Confederate Monument)
- July 22, 23 . . . Battle of Bull Run (Re-enactment)
- October 21 . . . Battle of Balls Bluff, Va.
- November 8 . . Mason and Slidell seized on British Steamer Trent.
- November 21 . . "Battle Hymn of Republic" composed by Julia Ward Howe. (Commemoration)

*The D. C. Civil War
Centennial Commission
extends a cordial
invitation to all to visit
Washington during the
Centennial Years.*