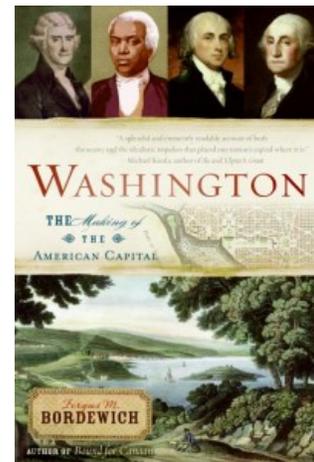


## Washington — How America Made its Capital City

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Fergus M. Bordewich has written what is best described as a biography of Washington, D.C. In *Washington: The Making of the American Capital* (Amistad Books/HarperCollins), Bordewich traces the history of America's Capital City, telling that story with a compelling narrative and fascinating (and surprising) details.

The story of Washington the city is inseparable from the story of the Founders and their heirs — and the story of the new nation. The very existence of the city is a monumental achievement, and the establishment of a new capital for the nation did not make sense to all. New York and Philadelphia (and Philadelphia even more than New York) offered amenities and cultural institutions that Washington would not have for over a century and beyond. The new District of Columbia was largely a swamp, but the Founders has a bold vision. George Washington was himself determined to see the new capital express the grandeur of the new nation's vision and commitment to democracy. When constructed, the Capitol was the largest building in the young nation, and the White House was the largest residence. Both basically stood in bare fields.



There is more to this story — much more, in fact. Bordewich's account takes the reader only up to the early nineteenth century. Nevertheless, by that time Washington the city was a fact, and the outlines of modern Washington were already visible. *Washington: The Making of the American Capital* is a great story that is well told.

An excerpt:

*Today some 550,000 Washingtonians live at the core of a linear megalopolis with millions of inhabitants, extending deep into Maryland and Virginia. The tacit assumption that the capital would always be a white man's city —no one even remotely imagined otherwise in the 1790s—has also been overthrown by time: today 57 percent of the city's inhabitants, most of the leading members of its municipal government, and a significant portion of its business establishment are African American. The skeleton of L'Enfant's grand plan survives, adapted to the exigencies of modern life. His boulevards continue to shape (and confuse) the flow of traffic, nudging the eye toward the majestic symmetries that lie half-buried, like an elegant palimpsest, beneath the modern cityscape. The White House remains where L'Enfant put it, although a more fearful age has hemmed it in with fences, barriers, and rings of invisible security to a degree that would have profoundly dismayed Americans of the 1790s, who expected even their highest officials to be easy of access, and available to them at almost any time. The Capitol, too, remains what the Founders intended, much larger and grander than it was two centuries ago, of course, but still framed by the proportions sketched by William Thornton on the steamy island of Tortola, and more than ever a magnet to the eye, proof to all of the astonishing persistence of American democracy.*

