

I. BEFORE THE FEDERAL CITY AND CAPITOL HILL

1. THE FIRST RESIDENTS: THE NACOTCHTANK

The earliest known inhabitants of Capitol Hill were the Algonquian-speaking Nacotchtank. The name of the tribe, also the name of the principal village, is believed to mean “trading village.” The Indians were active in this area because of its proximity to the Eastern Branch, a key source of food, transportation, and communication. With increased land and water trade networks connecting groups of American Indians by 500 B.C., the Nacotchtank became associated with the Piscataway, whose chief presided over all the area tribes to the north of the Potomac River, and the Doeg, who were located on the Virginia bank of the Potomac River. Centuries later, in June 1608, Captain John Smith reported visiting a Nacotchtank village on the eastern bank of the river opposite the future site of Capitol Hill. Ultimately, as the colonists arrived, the Nacotchtank relocated, and are believed to have merged later with the Piscataway.



FIGURE 3: Captain John Smith, *Map of Virginia*, Engraved by William Hole, 1624. (Courtesy of National Park Service)

2. LORDS BALTIMORE AND THE LAND GRANTS, 1632-1790

By 1632, the land that was to become Capitol Hill, and the larger Washington, D.C., was located within a royal charter granted by King Charles I to George Calvert, Lord Baltimore, and his heirs and successors. As the proprietors, the Lords Baltimore had the power to divide and dispose of the land.

The earliest land grants on Capitol Hill were Duddington Manor, Duddington Pasture, and New Troy, patented in 1664 by George Thompson. These grants totaled a 1,800-acre tract that was acquired from Thompson by Thomas Notley in 1670. In 1671, Notley united the three grants into one holding, known as *Cerne Abbey Manor*. The tract included a large portion of the future city of the U.S. Capitol, said to roughly include the northeast and southeast sections “from the boundary to the Anacostia River or the Eastern Branch, to the Potomac Southwest, to the Bureau of Engraving and Printing [14th Street, S.W. between C and D Streets, S.W.] and thence Northwest to about Seventh and K Streets.”¹ To the east was *The Houpyard*, a 500-acre tract granted to Walter Houp in 1687.² The tract was enlarged by *Houp* in 1688 with an additional 154 acres designated as *Houp’s Addition*. The combined acreage sat diagonally across the future site of Capitol Hill from about H Street, N.E. to the Eastern Branch, between 3rd and 10th Streets, N.E. to 3rd Street and Kentucky Avenue, S.E. The land covering most of what would become Capitol Hill East was part of *The Nock*, a 500-acre parcel granted in 1686 to Walter Thompson.³ Also laid in a northwest/southeast diagonal, the land abutted *The Houpyard* from H Street to today’s Barney Circle. The eastern border ran from 14th Street, N.E. southeastwardly to the site of Congressional Cemetery. The land beyond *The Nock* east to the Eastern Branch, including the future subdivision of Rosedale and Isherwood, was a 414-acre tract known as *Chance*, which was patented in 1734 by Thomas Evans.⁴

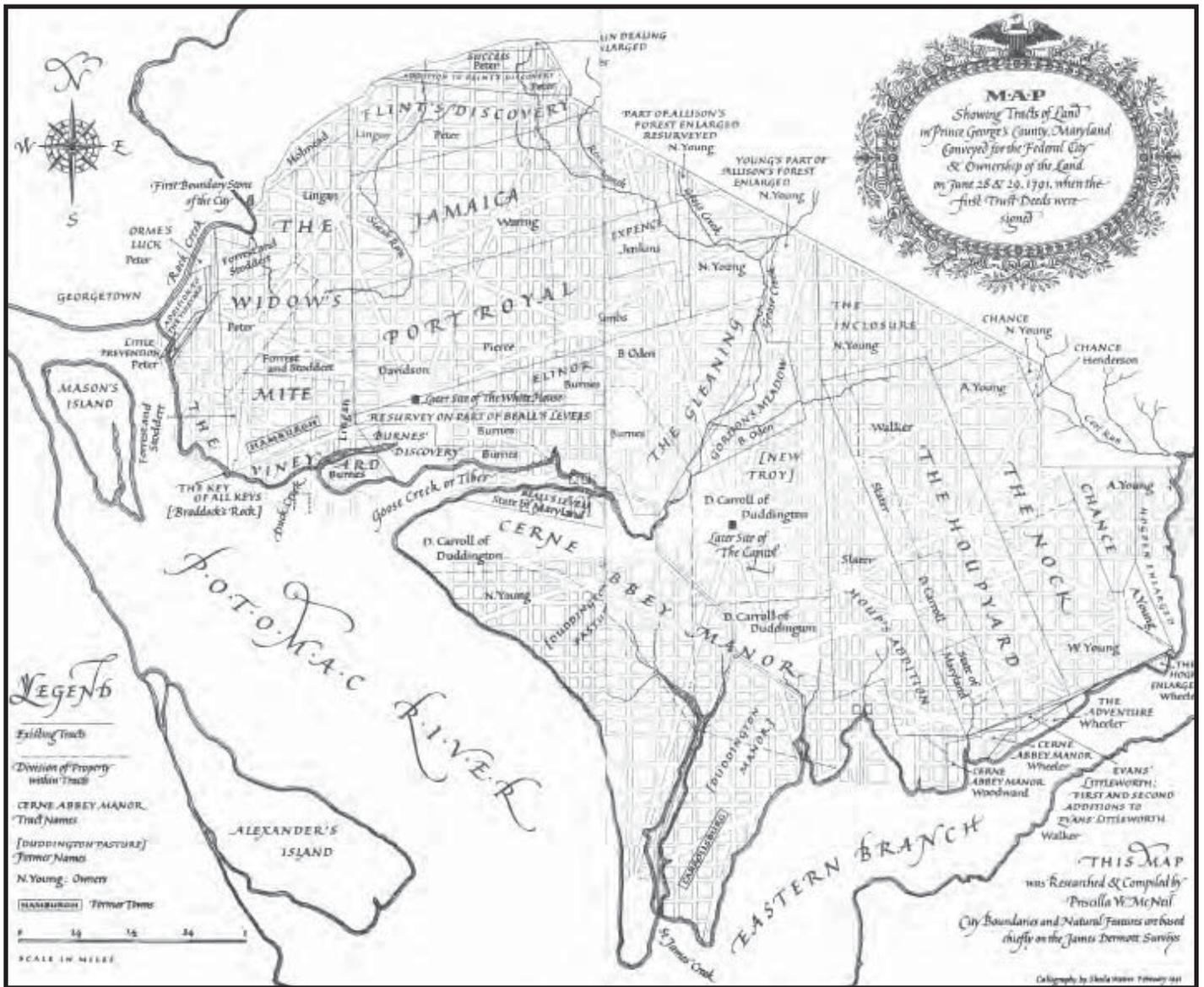


FIGURE 4: Priscilla W. McNeil, *Map Showing Tracts of Land in Prince George's County, Maryland Conveyed for the Federal City & Ownership of the Land on June 28, & 29, 1791, when the first Trust Deeds were signed*, February 1991. (Courtesy of Washington History: Magazine of The Historical Society of Washington, D.C.)

These lands were patented “in anticipation of the need for fertile tobacco-growing acreage as nearby farmlands became depleted,” and generally not inhabited until after the turn of the eighteenth century.⁵ By the time it was chosen as the site of the new federal city, the area “was a patchwork of agricultural development and decay. The landscape showed the effects of forced changes in the fauna from a half century of farming tobacco, corn and other crops. The results were not very pretty, but time had already begun to heal parts of the exhausted land. By 1800, web-like patterns of clearings had grown haphazardly over the old fields and woods, connecting a few clusters of buildings...”⁶ Pierre (Peter) Charles L’Enfant, chosen by President Washington to design the federal city, when first shown the land he would lay out as the nation’s capitol, stated “although the land is apparently level, yet, by gentle and gradual swellings, a variety of elegant prospects are produced.”⁷

II. CAPITOL HILL 1790-1870

1. CEDED TO THE PUBLIC ON CONDITION: THE ORIGINAL PROPRIETORS OF CAPITOL HILL

The 10-mile square chosen for the District of Columbia extended beyond the confluence of the Potomac and Anacostia Rivers and included the colonial towns of Georgetown, Maryland, and Alexandria, Virginia, as well as nearby plantations and farmland.⁸ Within that 10-mile square, a smaller area was established as the federal city (City of Washington) and platted according to L'Enfant's plans.⁹ It was owned by 19 landowners, who signed an agreement in 1791 to cede "to the Public on condition" portions of their land for the creation of a permanent government seat. Comprising about 6,000 acres, the land was to be laid out with streets, alleys, public reservations, and squares, to be divided into buildable lots. The original proprietors would "retain half of the lots on their former land, plus their own buildings, other improvements, and graveyards wherever possible. They would be compensated by the government only for land appropriated for public use exclusive of that needed for streets and alleys."¹⁰ The land was described as forest, fields, and low-lying land.¹¹

The area that became Capitol Hill was owned by Daniel Carroll of Duddington, William Prout, Abraham Young, William Young, and George Walker.¹² The house of Charles Carroll of Carrollsburg, the father of Daniel Carroll, was located on the bank of the Eastern Branch, just south of the U.S. Capitol.¹³ William Prout's house was situated in the vicinity of 8th and M Streets, S.E., north of Reservation 14 where the Navy Yard was later placed.¹⁴ The home of William Young was located within the confines of what is now Congressional Cemetery. His brother, Abraham Young, had a house located at the approximate intersection of 15th and D Streets, N.E. The land of George Walker was improved by a dwelling set near Maryland Avenue and 6th Street, N.E.¹⁵ Many of these early landowners were also slaveholders and their antebellum properties included "log pens extending behind [the mansion houses] that ranged in size from ten by fourteen to sixteen by twenty feet."¹⁶



FIGURE 5: George Isham Parkyn, *Washington*, 1795. (Courtesy of Prints and Photographs, Library of Congress)

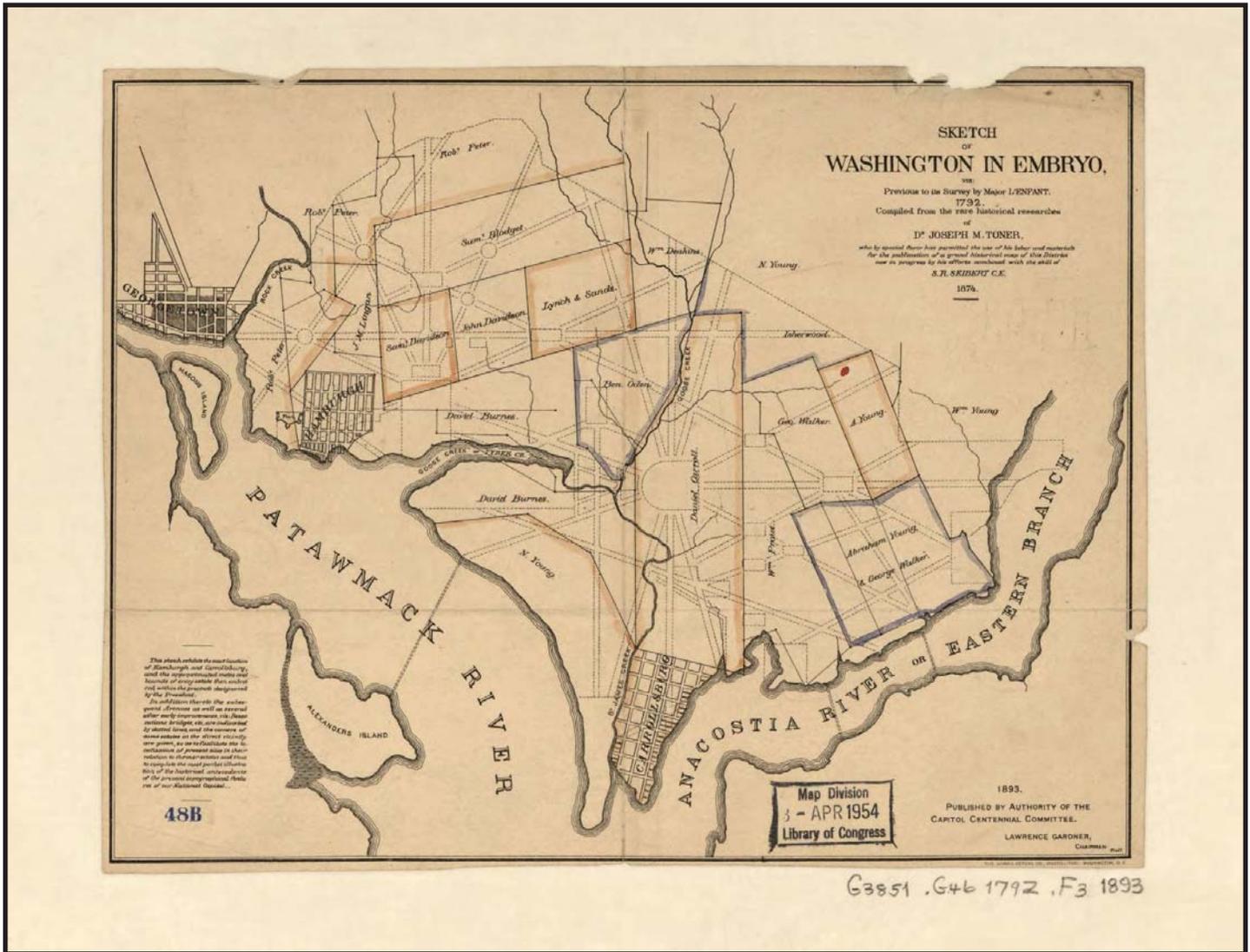


FIGURE 6: E.F.M. Faetz & F.W. Pratt, *Sketch of Washington in Embryo, viz, Previous to its Survey by Major L'Enfant, 1874.* (Courtesy of Geography and Maps, Library of Congress)

These men were persuaded to grant their land with the promise that the placement of the federal city in this region would increase the value of the surrounding land they retained; this growth, however, would prove much slower than promised, and the venture would prove disastrous for many of the Capitol Hill proprietors.

The far northeasternmost corner of what is now Capitol Hill East, east of 15th Street and north of C Street, N.E., was not included within the federal city boundary under the purview of Pierre L'Enfant. Rather, this land was part of Washington County. Prior to its inclusion within the District of Columbia, the Maryland tract was owned by Abraham Young.¹⁷ Benjamin Stoddert, a prominent Georgetown merchant, had contracted to purchase the property from Young, and, like many of those original proprietors owning property near the Capitol building, expected to benefit from its subsequent development. This tract in particular, which would be known as Rosedale and Isherwood in the late nineteenth century, was valuable because of the exceptionally abundant spring feeding the creek that ran through it into the Eastern Branch.¹⁸ Stoddert's request that this parcel be exempted from the federal city plan was granted by President George Washington.¹⁹

2. A FARSIGHTED PLAN: THE L'ENFANT PERIOD

The present-day Capitol Hill neighborhood, stretching from Jenkins Hill to Anacostia Flats, excluding the Cool Run tract (located, in part, in today's Rosedale-Isherwood neighborhoods), was an integral part of Pierre Charles L'Enfant's design for the City of Washington in 1791. The Baroque plan "delineated a capital city of magnificence, worthy of international distinction, and to be sure, from Capitol Hill one could make out the lineaments, the wide avenues and spacious public areas, of the ceremonial core."²⁰

The White House, denoted as the "President's House," and the U.S. Capitol, identified as "Congress House" or "Federal House," were the centerpieces of the plan, each occupying large squares with associated public office buildings and landscaped gardens. The President's House was to be located "...more in the wood, and off the creek..."²¹ To the east, the Capitol building was to be placed on Jenkins Hill, which L'Enfant characterized as "a pedestal waiting for the superstructure."²² The prominently rising hill was roughly circular, with a relatively level plateau on top that extended to a high point at 1st Street. The landscape to the east then formed a "saddle-shaped, very softly rounded ridge."²³ The Capitol would serve as a focal point for the residential neighborhood known as Capitol Hill that would ultimately develop on its east side, and extend to the Eastern Branch.

At the approximate center of what would become the Capitol Hill neighborhood in its entirety was a large reservation, now known as Lincoln Park, specifically called out by L'Enfant in his plan as "Reference B." His notes on the map indicated it was to be the site of "an historic Column—also intended for a Mile or itinerary Column, from whose station (a mile from the Federal house) all distances of places throughout the Continent to be calculated."²⁴ Lincoln Park was equal in height to the Capitol's Jenkins Hill and Observatory Hill, found further to the west where the first U.S. Naval Observatory was located in the northwest

neighborhood of Foggy Bottom. The park, the largest residential park in the city, was sited at the confluence of Massachusetts and North Carolina Avenues, Kentucky and Tennessee Avenues, and East Capitol Street. It was bounded on the west and east by 11th and 13th Streets. Beyond Lincoln Park to the east, the natural terrain sloped gradually until it dropped steeply into the Eastern Branch. L'Enfant planned buildable lots of various sizes for private development to span the squares surrounding the park.

The L'Enfant Plan also designated 15 "Squares colored yellow... [and] proposed to be divided among the several States of the Union...." The planner had placed these squares in such a way that they were "the most advantageously and reciprocally seen from each other, and as equally distributed over the whole City district, and connected by spacious Avenues round the grand Federal Improvements, and as contiguous to them, and at the same time as equally distant from each other, as circumstances would admit. The settlements round those Squares must soon become connected."²⁵ By inviting the states to make "their imprint on the federal city, L'Enfant hoped to spur settlement around the squares...."²⁶ Several of the 15 squares, which were never granted to individual states as L'Enfant envisioned, were located on Capitol Hill. Square No. 5 at C Street, N.E. where Maryland and Massachusetts Avenues intersected is now Stanton Park, and Square No. 14 at C Street, S.E. where Pennsylvania and North Carolina Avenues crossed is now Seward Park.²⁷ Squares 15 and 16, bounded by 5th and 7th Streets between L and K Streets, S.E., were set aside for a market. Square No. 17 (also designated by the letter E) at the confluence of Virginia, South Carolina, and New Jersey Avenues was called "town house squares," and was to be accentuated with "five grand fountains intended with a constant spout of water."²⁸ Historian Michael Bednar explained that some have "speculated that L'Enfant intended this site for the city's civic center, with the city hall or a cathedral on a great plaza. Both the L'Enfant and Ellicott plans show a large symmetrical building on axis with G Street, with a plaza fronting the canal."²⁹ It is now Garfield Park, with tennis courts and playground equipment. Reservations 44-46, at the intersection of

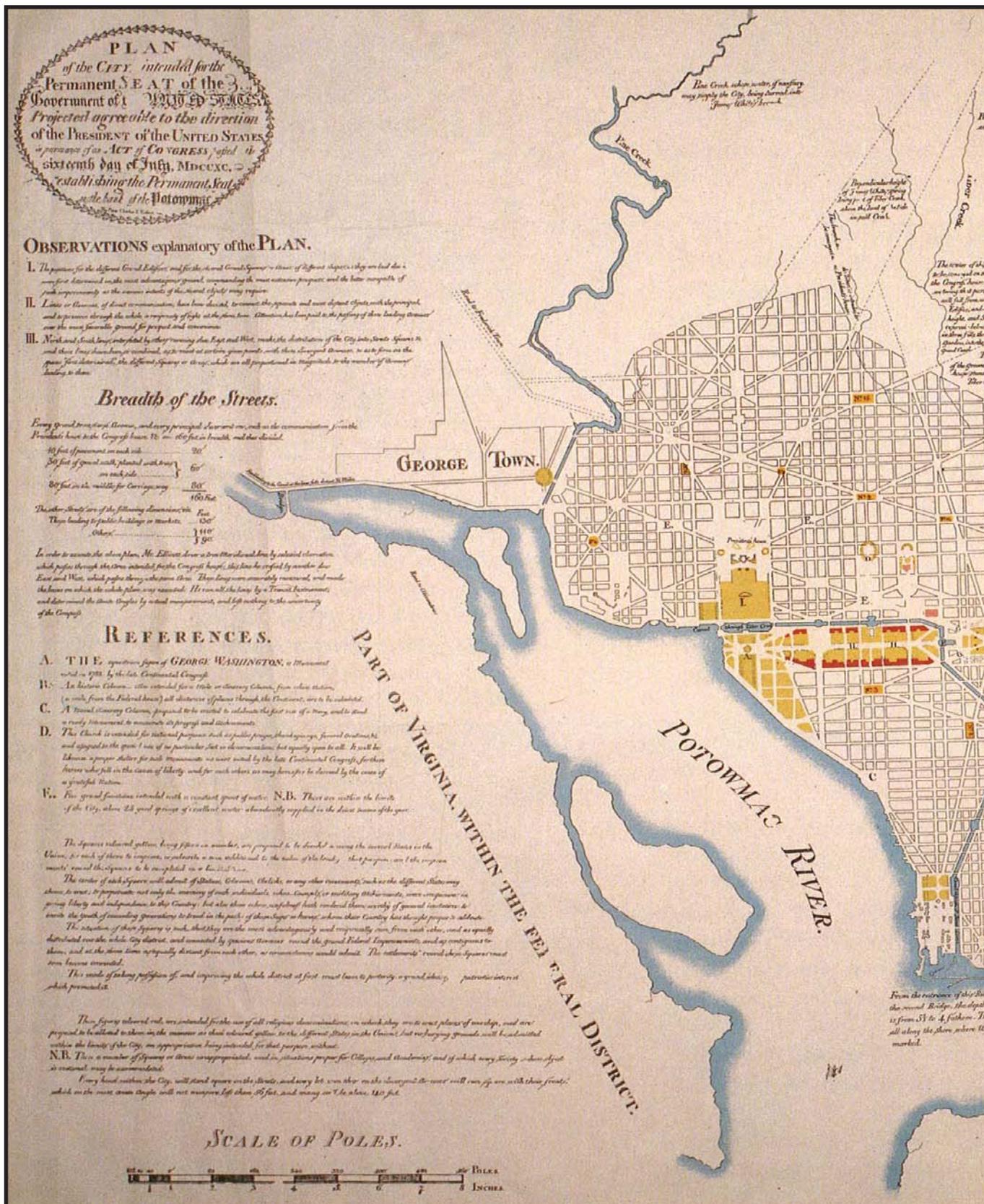


FIGURE 7: Pierre Charles L'Enfant, Plan of the City Intended for the Permanent Seat of the Government of t[he] United States. John W. Reys, Washington on View: The Nation's Capital Since 1790 (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 21.

