

Pierre L'Enfant creates a City

Lead: Brilliant or not, dealing with the designer of the District of Columbia was tough going.

Intro.: *A Moment in Time* with Dan Roberts.

Content: From his arrival in America French engineer Pierre Charles L'Enfant earned a reputation for brilliant design, careful construction, and prickly personality. When the deal was cut to place the new Federal city in the south, George Washington chose the Pierre L'Enfant to lay it out. In mid-March 1791,

L'Enfant began combing the territory which was in a geographical depression at the juncture of the Potomac and Anacostia Rivers. His plan called for avenues 160 feet broad and a huge mall extending west from the base of Jenkin's Hill the future location of the Capitol Building. Instead of laying out street while running survey lines, he selected dominating sites, a Capitol on the promontory, the President's house on flat low ground, and as his unique contribution to urban planning he laid radial avenues which theoretically at least, made travel within the city more efficient.

However, because of his personality L'Enfant came into conflict with the

people who were actually living there. Once he ordered a home torn down because it lay seven feet within the survey lines of New Jersey Avenue. The home owner Daniel Carrol, happened to be the uncle of one of the commissioners of the federal district which did little to endear the architect to his employers. In exasperation Thomas Jefferson, finally told Washington, "L'Enfant must know there is a line beyond which he will not be suffered to go."

Pierre L'Enfant lasted only one year as architect of the federal city, but the basic outlines of his plan remain to this day. When Charles Dickens visited in 1842, though he admired the Capitol Building and the

White House, said the problem with Washington was it had "spacious avenues that begin in nothing and lead nowhere. It is sometimes called a city of magnificent distances but it might as well be termed (a City) with magnificent intentions." Charles Pierre L'Enfant could not have agreed more.

At the University of Richmond, this is Dan Roberts.

Resources

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