

This Day in History... September 18, 1793

Washington Lays Cornerstone of U.S. Capitol

On September 18, 1793, President George Washington laid the cornerstone of the US Capitol building in Washington, DC.

Philadelphia was America's first capital city starting in 1774. In 1787, the delegates at the Philadelphia Convention granted Congress the power "To exercise exclusive legislation in all cases whatsoever, over such District (not exceeding 10 miles square) as may, by cession of particular states, and the acceptance of Congress, become the seat of government of the United States." James Madison added that the national capital should be separate from the rest of the states, being responsible for its own maintenance and security.

Maryland, New Jersey, New York, and Virginia all offered territory for the capital. Eventually, James Madison, Thomas Jefferson, and Alexander Hamilton selected the area around the Potomac River to serve as the national capital.

By 1789, Maryland and Virginia ceded a combined 100 square miles to serve as the capital. Two years later, President George Washington appointed three commissioners to oversee the planning, design, and creation of property. They named the Federal District "The Territory of Columbia," and the Federal City "The City of Washington."

Around this time, President Washington hired Pierre Charles L'Enfant to design the capital city at the center of the federal territory. L'Enfant's plan revolved around the US Capitol Building on top of Jenkins Hill with wide diagonal avenues crossing the city's layout. He also designed the narrow Pennsylvania Avenue to connect the Capitol Building and White House. After L'Enfant became involved in several conflicts with the city's commissioners and refused to provide planners with an engraved city plan, he was let go. Andrew Ellicott made several changes to L'Enfant's plan and had it engraved, making it the first distributed plan of the city.

However, with L'Enfant's departure, a new architect was needed to design the Capitol and President's House (now the White House). Thomas Jefferson suggested they hold a design competition. Though most of the Capitol building designs were unusable, President Washington praised a late entry by William Thornton for its "Grandeur, Simplicity, and Beauty." Thornton's design was in part inspired by the east front of the Louvre as well as the Paris Pantheon. His design was approved, with modifications by Benjamin Henry Latrobe, and planning began immediately.

Today, the Capitol has 540 rooms.



Issued as part of a series to replace the Washington-Franklins.

Excavation of the Capitol site began in July 1793. Two months later, they were ready to lay the cornerstone. At 10:00 a.m. on September 18, President Washington crossed the Potomac into the capital city where he was joined by the Alexandria Volunteer Artillery and members of the Virginia and Maryland Masonic lodges. Marching 1.5 miles to the construction site, Washington met with the grand master of the Grand Lodge of Maryland, Joseph Clark. Clark handed Washington a silver plaque that read:

"This South East corner Stone, of the Capitol of the United States of America in the City of Washington, was laid on the 18th day of September 1793, in the thirteenth year of American Independence, in the first year of the second term of the Presidency of George Washington, whose virtues in the civil administration of his country have been as conspicuous and beneficial, as his Military valor and prudence have been useful in establishing her liberties, and in the year of Masonry 5793, by the Grand Lodge of Maryland, several Lodges under its jurisdiction, and Lodge No. 22, from Alexandria, Virginia."

Following Masonic rituals, the cornerstone was then checked with a square, level, and plumb (a tool used to ensure the stone was upright) and deemed perfectly cut. It was then sprinkled with wheat (a symbol of nourishment), wine (for health and refreshment), and oil (for peace and tranquility). Washington then tapped the stone three times with a gavel (part of Masonic tradition) and marched away to a 15-gun salute.

Though still under construction, the first session of Congress to be held in the Capitol was on November 17, 1800. The rest of the building was completed a few years later, only to be burned by the British during the War of 1812. Luckily, it was saved from total destruction by a sudden rainstorm. Latrobe was contracted to restore the building after the fire, but resigned when criticized for the cost of the project. He was replaced by prominent Boston architect, Charles Bulfinch, who completed the restoration in 1826. Bulfinch rebuilt the dome with a larger, copper-covered wooden version. However, that wasn't the end of changes to this magnificent structure. In 1855 Thomas Ustick Walter designed a new fireproof cast iron dome weighing almost 9 million pounds! This new dome had to be lifted into place by steam-powered derricks.

When the Civil War erupted in 1861, President Lincoln insisted work continue on the Capitol, claiming, "If people see the Capitol going on, it is a sign we intend the Union shall go on." And in 1863 the *Statue of Freedom* designed by Thomas Crawford was placed atop the dome. The statue features a female symbolizing freedom draped in classical robes. Her left hand holds a laurel wreath of victory and the shield of the US with 13 stripes. She wears a helmet encircled by stars and topped by an eagle's head and talons. The statue weighs nearly 15,000 pounds and is over 19 feet tall.

The cornerstone laid by Washington has been lost to time. Some believe it was removed and destroyed when the Senate chambers were built in 1850. In 1893, President Grover Cleveland led the centennial rededication of the Capitol, attended by some 150,000 people. He followed the same route as Washington and was also accompanied by Masons, as well as other societies including the Sons of Cincinnati and the

Aztec Club. The US Marine Band played while a 1,500-person choir sang. This was followed by a two-hour speech from William Wirt Henry, grandson of Patrick Henry. A much smaller bicentennial ceremony was held in 1993.

Stamp pictures the Statue of Freedom from atop the Capitol.



Type 1 stamp from the Series of 1851-57

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