CHAPTER IV

The Republic's Capital City

A small but significant number of those who experienced the Revolution cherished a tremendous vision of what the Revolution and its outcome promised for America's cultural future. As Joseph Ellis has described it, these Americans now possessed—or imagined they did—the one essential element, hitherto lacking, for releasing the creative energies of an already favored people. This was individual liberty. An all-but-miraculous force, liberty would give wings to every conceivable endeavor. All other obstacles were negligible, now that the main one—dependency—had been swept away. Not only would there be prodigious advances in agriculture and industry, there would also be such a flowering of the arts, literary and all other kinds, as the world had not yet seen. In addition to the "Painting, Sculpture, Statuary," and "greek Architecture" envisioned by Ezra Stiles, John Trumbull announced that

> This land her Steele and Addison shall view,
> The former glories equal'd by the new;
> Some future Shakespeare charm the rising age
> And hold in magic chains the list'ning stage.

The dream was that of "an American Athens."[1]

The dream would prove a mirage. The expected renaissance did not occur; the American Athens failed to materialize. That first generation would slip into a disillusioned old age still wondering what had happened—or rather not happened—and subsequent generations have been wondering ever since. With reference to the original meaning of "culture"—making things grow in the earth—the fields of post-Revolutionary America would of course be ever more bountiful. But under culture's later meaning, most of the country remained something of a wasteland for many years to come. We are still far from certain what all the reasons may have been.

One aspect of the imagery employed by those of Trumbull's generation lingers as a curiosity. The "Athens" they projected was not really a "place" at all; it was simply a non-specific metaphor for the artistic and intellectual outpouring about to occur all over America. They somehow did not think of their Athens as an actual city, a metropolitan center where special things occurred for special reasons and were unlikely to occur anywhere else. If enough of them had, things might (one can only guess) have turned out differently.

I
Theories of Culture

The term "high culture" was very possibly first coined in America, older civilizations having apparently felt no great urge to formulate that sort of distinction.[2] This may seem odd, inasmuch as the United States for at least the first hundred years of its national existence undoubtedly had less of it, as "culture" has since come to be understood, than any other of the world's leading national societies. Much thought has been given to the question of how to account for this lack, and of just what was missing. Literature is the case that has come in for the most attention, though a parallel impoverishment during that same period could be claimed, and has been, for the other expressive arts in America as well.[3]

It was this very barrenness that came to be seen early in the nineteenth century as the primary fact of the American cultural landscape. A body of symbolic notation adequate for mirroring the acuteness of felt or observed experience somehow did not exist. What served as a substitute language—an idiom of "refinement" and "elevation"—did not originate at home but had to be imported from other places, even from other times. That language did not seem to have many resources for depicting the contrarieties of the common life, high or low, or for taking nourishment from either great or small happenings. It might have been expected otherwise, Ralph Waldo Emerson observed in 1838. "But the mark of American merit in painting, in sculpture, in poetry, in fiction, in eloquence, seems to be a certain grace without grandeur, and itself not new but derivative, a vase of fair outline, but empty. . . ."[4]

There appeared to be an all-but-unbridgeable distance between the vocabulary of refinement and that of everyday—and even not so everyday—comings and goings. Such a disjunction in fact forms the central premise of two of the most influential statements since made on the subject, both in the opening years of the present century. George Santayana delivered a subsequently famous address in 1911 whose title contained a phrase—"The Genteel Tradition"—which everyone now knows and of which few critics of the American cultural past have since failed to make some sort of use. America, Santayana announced, was not simply "a young country with an old mentality"; it was "a country of two mentalities, one a survival of the beliefs and standards of the fathers, the other an expression of the instincts, practice, and discoveries of the younger generations." This

younger temper, he said, "is all aggressive enterprise; the other is all genteel tradition."[5] Four years later, in 1915, the young Van Wyck Brooks said much the same thing. The mind and voice of American life, Brooks asserted, had been divided between two opposing types. He therewith gave currency to a celebrated antinomy—"Highbrow" and "Lowbrow"—which has remained in the American vocabulary ever since. Between the two worlds these types inhabited there was "no community, no genial middle ground."[6]

Literary art, for both Brooks and Santayana, was the test for most of their ideas about culture in America. Part of the American mind, as Santayana put it, "has floated gently in the back-water," and even that part, according to Brooks, has tended "to suppose that a writer belongs to literature only when he is dead; living he is, vaguely, something else."[7] True, there had been a time at about mid-century (Santayana again) when

> New England had an agreeable Indian summer of the mind; and an agreeable reflective literature showed how brilliant that russet and yellow season could be. . . . But it was all a harvest of leaves; these worthies had an expurgated and barren conception of life; theirs was the purity of sweet old age. Sometimes they made attempts to rejuvenate their minds by broaching native subjects . . . [such as] "Rip van Winkle," "Hiawatha," or "Evangeline"; but the inspiration did not seem much more American than that of Swift or Ossian or Chateaubriand. . . . Their culture was half a pious survival, half an intentional acquirement; it was not the inevitable flowering of fresh experience.[8]

In short, whatever movement American writing could show was more a matter of lineal descent than of lateral outreach, a culture that was "European without the corresponding pressure and responsibility of the European mind." In the rush of contemporary life, repelled by the brute energy of a society absorbed in the pursuit of money, literature expended an excessive share of its resources simply in avoiding contamination. Not that Americans were unwilling to accord respect, of a sort, to "culture." But it was a segregated respect, not unlike that between Sundays and weekdays, and was to a significant extent prompted and even taken charge of by women.[9]

As to what this lineal descent consisted of, neither Brooks nor Santayana was able to be very circumstantial. Each perceived a gulf of abnormal proportions between the active and the contemplative sides of the American mind; each rightly saw the latter as isolated, derivative, and insubstantial. Each then attempted to locate the origins of this disjunction in the Puritan heritage, in the disembodied abstractions and "agonized conscience" of Calvinism; and a number of other writers have taken a similar line. (The early Puritans, it seems, have had a great deal to answer for, including a perverse preference by their descendants for European models.)[10] But a genetic account, whatever its merits, may not quite do as a causal explanation. The cultural state to be explained appeared in full form after the force of the Puritan way had been largely spent. The problem may have been less one of intellectual history than of cultural sociology, of the environment

in which the literary artist has functioned and of those conditions which—as most critics have tended in principle to agree—have served to cramp and inhibit the fulfillment of his work.

A companion theory is one that pictures commerce as the great destroyer. Federalist literary aspirants sounded this note very early. Winthrop Sargent wrote in 1805 that the "national maxim" was "to *get money*." "When this is the predominant passion of a nation, nothing can be expected but its concomitant evils. . . . In such a country genius is like the mistletoe on the rock; it seems to exist . . . only by its own resources, and [by] the nourishment it receives from the dews of heaven. The progress of literature has therefore been very slow. . . ." The lesson of Mark Twain's career, Van Wyck Brooks flatly asserted in 1922, was that "the acquisitive and creative instincts are . . . diametrically opposed," that Mark Twain was induced to betray his talent by the commercial values of his society, and that the artist in any writer—as in Twain's case—is bound to be stifled by "the pursuit of worldly success." Emerson undoubtedly had something of this sort in mind when he counseled that the scholar and poet "must embrace solitude as a bride," and that "if he pines," "hankering for the crowd . . . , his heart is in the market; he does not hear; he does not think." Yet a contrary theory could well say, with the examples of Dickens, Hugo, Stendhal, Balzac, and most of the other great novelists of nineteenth-century Europe, that a direct acquaintance with money, power, and the crowd is itself the very thing the writer most needs for the nourishment of his art.[11]

Others have pointed to the absence of any recognized system of patronage for things of the mind and spirit in America, official or otherwise. Robert Southey, shortly to become the poet laureate of England, wrote in 1809 that the American government was itself to be blamed "for the little encouragement it holds out to literature." Southey thought it incumbent on this nation "to set other countries an example by patronizing and promoting those efforts of genius which all civilized nations consider as their proudest boast, and their only permanent glory." Margaret Fuller in 1844 lamented, "When an immortal poet was secure only of a few copyists to circulate his works, there were princes and nobles to patronize literature and the arts. Here is only the public. . . ."[12]

No princes and nobles, no leisured aristocracy for the support of high culture: perhaps that was the fatal deficiency. Henry James might be read as having intimated something of just this sort in his famous catalogue of everything Hawthorne lacked for the completion of *his* talent: "no sovereign, no court, no personal loyalty, no aristocracy." But it is evident from the remainder of the list ("no political society, no sporting class, no Epsom nor Ascot," and so on) that James actually meant something quite different, that "support" was not primarily what he had in mind. His great point, stated at the very beginning of his essay on Hawthorne, was simply "that it needs a complex social machinery to set a writer in motion."[13]

A more recent statement, illuminated by the added dimension of modern feminist thought, contains more of the elements required of a rounded theory

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than do any of those so far noted. Ann Douglas's *The Feminization of American Culture* undertakes to account for the prominence attained by numbers of educated middle-class women in nineteenth-century America in the province of culture, especially literature, and in contrast to the relative powerlessness of women in other realms of American life. Douglas thus takes seriously a theme which for Santayana was largely marginal, and which he handled with a certain patronizing irony.

One of the most extraordinary psychic transformations in the entire American experience occurred within a surprisingly short stretch of time during the first third of the nineteenth century. The disparate voices of an entire society seemed to converge out of almost every corner to define those attitudes of mind, habits of work, social values, and differentiations of function most appropriate to the race about to be run, to the optimum workings of an emergent capitalist order. The new roles allotted to women—as administrators of the household and guardians of family morals, or else as teachers and missionaries—undoubtedly had some indirectly liberating consequences. But the net outcome for the generality of women was stifling and stultifying. It codified a special kind of isolation for women's lives, a sort of spiritual walling off of both aspiration and experience, that had no counterpart, of such completeness, in European society. Within their delineated "spheres" of domesticity and preceptorship women could, through persistence, force of character, and a degree of subversion, achieve a substantial measure of authority. But though the spheres might be widened, neither their separateness nor their boundaries were to be challenged, and they seldom were.[14]

One of the few modes whereby an educated woman might reach for some expression of both her human and feminine nature was literature. The output of such literature written by women, beginning in the 1820s, was in fact considerable. This was the one commodity women might produce which could serve the wants of a consumer market, reinforce the values of the age, and be made profitable. But the expression could seldom go very deep, and the product must make no great demands on its readers. The books and periodicals, the novels, verse, and didactic pieces of various sorts, were aimed principally at a female audience. Their tone was predominantly sentimental; they were permeated by a religiosity that tended to be long on feeling but short on doctrinal substance; and they did not resist but in fact celebrated the sacred functions that had been assigned to the women of the American republic. Either through a socialization process of extraordinary efficiency or in the absence of recognized alternative models of sensibility, American literary women found themselves contributing voluntarily to the definition of their own confinement.

Moreover, given what then passed for a critical temper, and in view of a reading public consisting more and more of women ("It is the women," wrote Nathaniel Willis, "who give or withhold a literary reputation"), this sentimentalization of literary culture could not fail to have its effect on male authors as well. Few were disposed to be venturesome, and those who were had relatively few readers.[15]

The comparative widening of the middle-class woman's visibility, as well as the style which made it allowable, are given additional persuasiveness with Douglas's description of a remarkable alliance with the liberal protestant clergy, who no longer possessed the civic and ecclesiastical authority of their Calvinist forbears. Increasingly, "the nineteenth century minister moved in a world of women." He needed their support; they needed his attention. As clergymen, these men courted and encouraged women. But as men, they did as much to keep women in their restricted sphere as did any contingent in American society. "Stay within your proper confines," they said, "and you will be worshipped . . . ; step outside and you will cease to exist." The required note of sentimental uplift accordingly sounded forth in most of what these women did as parishioners, teachers, missionaries, guardians of the home, and authors and keepers of culture.[16]

This account says something important about how the American sensibility came to be organized in the particular way it was, and about how art and expression could have become so attenuated amid the central currents of American life. It gives a resolution to previous efforts, and makes a "genteel tradition" newly plausible. Returning to the eighteenth century, and to our opening point, we might venture a corollary.

At the time of the republic's founding there was little room in the American imagination for the idea of a metropolis as the mirror of a national civilization. On the contrary, the anti-urban, anti-metropolitan component of the Revolutionary mentality would prove to be one of its most persistent and durable features. The colonial phase of their history had given Americans no experience of a metropolis other than the worst kind: the metropolis was London, a place out of sight and out of reach, where corruption permeated everything, and where, as everyone knew, all the schemes for abridging colonial liberties had been hatched. One of the earliest decisions by the fathers of the new republic was made with the more or less clear purpose not to have that kind of metropolis in America.

Less clear would be the consequences for the nation's cultural identity, consequences that have remained problematical to the present day. The growth of cities in nineteenth-century America would proceed without clear models in the American spirit for the pleasures and compensations of urban life; by the same token, a metropolitan capital as the matrix for the growth of a national society's self-knowledge was not available either. London or Paris did not, perhaps could not, serve as the model. But if they had, the result would have contained at least three lines of force, all intersecting in the same place: those of political authority, of commerce and money, and of art and intellect. The daily transactions among the men and women associated with these disparate fields of energy—transactions trivial as well as official, corrupt as well as virtuous, after dark as well as in daylight; the things they said and did in their marketplaces, their cloakrooms, at their dinner tables, on their promenades, in their back alleys and even in their bedrooms—

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In early nineteenth-century America, unlike the case in England and France, the foremost talents in politics and government, in the nation's economic life, and in the life of thought and artistic expression had no specific setting in place or time in which they could act upon each other (as a "complex social machinery") in quite this way. Each would thereupon function to most intents and purposes on a plane detached from the other two, and culture would make its terms and work out its forms without the example or authority of a metropolitan capital that was the acknowledged center of the nation's life.

That the seat chosen in 1790 for the federal government would not be such a center was evident almost from the first. In this determination, the leading spirit was no less a figure than Thomas Jefferson.

2

Jefferson and the Federal City

Thomas Jefferson's role in the final resolution of the residence-assumption issue in June 1790 was, as we have seen, a critical one. But the part he took then was only the first in a sequence of actions having to do not simply with the national capital's location but also with the planning whereby the capital city itself would be brought into being. The subject was one that had already occupied his mind for many years previously, and addressing it now was in certain respects Jefferson's first major effort of statesmanship in his new position as a member of the first administration. He subsequently gave more of his time, energy, and thought to that problem than did any other officer of state, and the consequences may be seen as having much symbolic bearing on the way Americans came to think about seats of government, and about cities in general.

Actually Jefferson's deep preoccupation with the Federal City was not without precedent. He had been similarly engaged in the state of Virginia. It was Jefferson who in 1777 sponsored a removal of the state capital from Williamsburg to Richmond—then a village of about 1,800—on grounds of greater security and centrality. The Assembly very reluctantly consented just after his election as governor in 1779. "As grandly conceived by Jefferson," writes one of his biographers, "the new capital was to occupy six large public squares, each with a handsome edifice of brick brilliantly porticoed." The first public building to be specifically designed for a republican government was the classical capitol at Richmond. It was based on the Roman Maison Carrée at Nîmes, and built from a design which Thomas Jefferson had prepared.[18]

The prestige of George Washington and the knowledge of Washington's long-cherished desire to have the capital of the Republic seated on the banks of the Potomac had had no little to do with the Virginians' eventual success in putting it there. There is no doubt at all, moreover, that the weight of Washington's moral authority was a major factor in making the decision stick. The Chief Executive lost no time in implementing the Residence Act of 1790 and setting in motion

those steps whereby the site might be made ready for its occupancy ten years hence. Washington's chief coadjutor in this work was his Secretary of State, and Thomas Jefferson's involvement with it, regarding both general conception and immediate detail, seems to have been far greater than that of Washington, and would so continue as long as he remained in office.

Jefferson's concern over the federal capital dated at least as far back as the fall of 1783, when he proposed to the Virginia Assembly that Virginia and Maryland purchase land on the Potomac, erect public buildings there, and then "tender the said buildings to Congress." He also expanded a set of notes left him by Madison, in which every advantage of the Potomac site that could be thought of was carefully listed.[19] For the time being, of course, nothing came of any of this. But while the seat of government migrated several times during the 1780s—residing variously at Philadelphia, Princeton, Annapolis, Trenton, and New York—Jefferson's dream remained undiminished. When success came at last in 1790, he drew up a memorandum for Washington concerning the speedy and efficient implementation of the Act, and assumed at once the role of Washington's principal advisor in all matters concerning the Federal City. He helped supervise the work of Major L'Enfant and the Commissioners and offered a wealth of assistance to them and to Washington on the choice of the site, the layout of the city, and the design of the buildings. The Federal City on the Potomac, in short, was one of Thomas Jefferson's dearest undertakings, and he did everything he could to make certain that Congress actually would take up its residence there when, at the end of the ten-year interim established by law, the time came to move.

Like the Philadelphians and New Yorkers with respect to their cities, Jefferson was not unmindful of the local benefits which might accrue to the Potomac area. But these did not preoccupy him, or even greatly interest him. His was not the spirit of the urban booster; his vision of the future city extended far beyond commercial advantage. Indeed, he actually hoped the new capital would remain "a secondary place of commerce," and recommended "leaving Norfolk in possession of all the advantages of a primary emporium." Rather, when Jefferson thought of the benefits to be had from locating the Federal City in Virginia he tended to conceive them in the broader categories of moral influence: the capacity of Virginia to impose its own special character on the character of the new republic. The capital would be placed amid predominantly rural surroundings, far from the corruptions "of any overgrown commercial city." Virginians, moreover, would be preferentially situated for service in the federal government and for creating "a favourable biass in the Executive officers." To be sure, such a site might also serve as the gateway to the West, and the Potomac as a highway to the interior, a vent for the agricultural surpluses which the western population might want to market in Europe and through which they might receive foreign goods in return. But the particulars of how this was to work were never very immediate in Jefferson's mind, nor did they form a very prominent aspect of his thinking. This too, when he thought of it, seems to have been largely a matter of influence: the influence Virginia might have on all activities and movements, of which commerce

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Moreover, Jefferson was fascinated by the opportunities which a capital built *de novo* would offer for giving physical form to his vision of what the new republic should be, insofar as its spirit could be embodied in its center of government. Building codes could be established in advance to assure a tasteful uniformity in the city's domestic architecture. There could be boulevards and broad avenues; generous provision could be made for spacious parks and open squares. Public buildings could be designed with imaginative sweep and nobility of scale. Thus by laying out the whole rationally and in accordance with a master plan, and insisting on both republican dignity and elevation of spirit in every phase of design and construction, the builders could make the Federal City a fit expression of America's aspirations. The City could serve, in its carefully articulated perfection, as a kind of physical counterpart to the Constitution.[21]

The plan submitted in August 1791 by Major Pierre Charles L'Enfant, the zealous French engineer who had pressed his services upon Washington, was much more ambitious than the rather simple preliminary sketch Jefferson himself had given Washington in March. It was nonetheless quite in line with Jefferson's own hopes and expectations. L'Enfant had superimposed a radial system of avenues on Jefferson's grid street design, "at the same time preserving," according to Fiske Kimball, "the general arrangement of the main elements which Jefferson had suggested." L'Enfant's "Grand transverse Avenues" would be 160 feet across, with thirty-foot-wide tree-lined walks on either side of an eighty-foot carriageway. There would be great public squares, "five grand fountains intended with a constant spout of water," extensive parks and gardens, and the public buildings so placed as to take fullest advantage of the splendid vistas across the Potomac. It was L'Enfant's claim that the plan was wholly the product of his own original genius. But one of the most noteworthy aspects of it—quite aside from the elements he took from Jefferson—was its striking correspondences with the royal French seat of Versailles. "The cardinal features of L'Enfant's plan," writes Charles Moore, "the long vista from one focal point to another, the radiating avenues, and especially the conception of the entire city as a well-articulated unity—these ideas and ideals were already realized in Versailles, planned as the capital of France, the city in which L'Enfant's early years were spent."[22]

Yet the correspondence with Versailles, at first glance inspiring, may now be seen as a bad omen. Considering the train of evils shortly to follow, it is no wonder that the city of Washington should be fated not to rouse itself from its boggy squalor for the next hundred years. Versailles was grand indeed, though it had taken the will of an absolute monarch to impose such a prodigy on the open fields of the Isle-de-France. Yet the King of France and forty thousand men had not been able to make it a capital, or even a city. At the very moment L'Enfant was projecting a republican Versailles in America, the original Versailles was ceasing to be the capital of France, and would shortly thereafter become little more than a museum of the *ancien régime*. It had been steadily losing its influence

to Paris for nearly half a century before the Revolution which gave it its final coup, Paris being the center not only of commerce and finance but of art, intellect, and every kind of talent. The King might command a small legion of courtiers to attend upon him at Versailles, but it was a dreary captivity; meanwhile the most gifted, most ambitious, most influential men in France were being drawn, steadily and inexorably, to Paris.[23]

In any case, it was to be at least a century before L'Enfant's grand conception would even begin to fit the requirements of an American capital city. During that very long interim, few places in Christendom or elsewhere would be so fervently reviled or broadly derided as Washington on the Potomac. Jean-Jacques Ampère, visiting there in 1851, still saw "streets without houses," "houses without streets," all giving "striking proof of this truth, that one cannot create a great city at will." By the early years of the twentieth century L'Enfant's plan had at last begun to appear feasible, at least in the eyes of the Park Commission of 1901 which resurrected it and proceeded at great expense to carry out various of its principal features. Though it might be suspected that any plan which takes a hundred years to implement is by definition a bad plan, the beautifications of the Theodore Roosevelt era had the effect of restoring, indeed of monumentalizing, the reputation of Pierre Charles L'Enfant. Thus it remains, more or less undisturbed, to the present day. Even so, the daughter of another American President could still refer to Washington, D.C., another half-century after that, with reference to the things that mattered most to her, as little more than a country town.[24]

What had gone wrong? The first clue may be the sea of troubles that awaited Thomas Jefferson as he turned his attention to the problems of the Federal City in 1790.

At the outset, all seemed reasonably auspicious. The Act of 1790 had given the President authority to locate the ten-mile square Federal District at any point within a specified range of some eighty miles along the Potomac. After a personal reconnaissance in the fall, and upon consultations with Jefferson and Madison, Washington announced his choice on January 24, 1791, in a proclamation which Jefferson had drafted. (Congress was by this time sitting at Philadelphia, having left New York forever on August 12, 1790.) It was to be a diamond-shaped area just above the Eastern Branch, and would include land from Virginia on one side of the river and from Maryland on the other. Within it, the only settlements of any account were the villages of Alexandria and Georgetown.[25]

Washington may have made up his mind on this as early as August 1790, inasmuch as the memorandum of procedure drawn up for him at that time by Jefferson was predicated on that same location. In this memorandum Jefferson laid down two general principles, one concerning the President's authority and the other with regard to financing, and these were to form the basis of all policy thereafter. He urged the fullest exercise of executive authority over the entire proceeding. This should include, first, the acquisition of land within the District. The Act ought to be construed liberally, so that land might be acquired sufficient

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not merely for the public buildings but for the entire Federal City. (The whole thing should be planned.) The President's authority should include the plan itself: the layout of streets, the design of the public buildings, and regulations on the construction of private houses. (Jefferson had ideas of his own on all these matters, a number of which he mentioned here.) And it should include, finally, the three Commissioners who were to have general supervision of the undertaking. The Commissioners should be appointed by the President and "be subject to the President's direction in every point." They should, moreover, "have some taste in architecture." As for the other element of general policy, that of financing, the main reliance for funds should be upon sales of lots from land ceded or otherwise acquired from the current owners. It would be best not to depend on grants of money from the states of Maryland and Virginia, though as it happened, such grants—$72,000 in one case and $120,000 in the other—had already been promised. Congress must not be counted on at all. Asking Congress for an appropriation, or for any other kind of assistance, might reopen the entire question of the residence. Herein lay the fatal weakness of the whole conception.[26]

Thus in January 1791, Washington issued his proclamation, appointed his three Commissioners, and designated Major Andrew Ellicott as surveyor. It was further understood that Major L'Enfant would make a plan of the city, design the buildings, and be in charge of the construction. Ellicott began his work during the second week in February; he was followed not long thereafter by L'Enfant, who had received his initial instructions from Jefferson early in March. L'Enfant was to reconnoiter the best sites for public buildings and make drawings of the ground; Jefferson himself, meanwhile, was brimming with visions. He thought the capitol should be of classical design and the President's house modern. He sent the Major some two dozen plates of "the handsomest fronts of private buildings" which he thought might be engraved and distributed free to the local inhabitants to educate their taste. He also forwarded a number of city plans which he had collected on his travels in Europe.[27]

At the end of March 1791, Washington met the landholders of the locality in which he had decided the city itself should be placed—the east bank of the Potomac—and made an agreement with them. They would cede to the United States a stretch of some three to five thousand acres between Rock Creek and the Eastern Branch, and upon its being laid off in lots the proprietor of each tract would retain every other lot. Such land remaining in private hands as might be taken for public purposes (excluding streets) would be paid for at a stipulated rate. The benefit to the proprietors, of course, was that the land they retained would be steadily enhanced in value with the unfolding of a golden future. L'Enfant, meanwhile, was completing his plan. After having made various alterations suggested by Washington and Jefferson, he had it finally ready by summer. It was magnificent. Jefferson saw it at the end of August and was "well pleased."[28]

A meeting of the Commissioners was held at Georgetown on September 8, with Jefferson and Madison present, at which it was decided that the city should be named "Washington" and the Federal District "Columbia." The other deci-

sions reflected the general principles laid down by Jefferson in his memorandum of the previous year. There should be a sale of lots as soon as possible, on the site. (Washington and Jefferson had already scheduled an auction for October 17 which the President, the Secretary of State, and Congressman James Madison would attend.) It would not be prudent to start borrowing money, at least until a sale should determine the value of the lots, and not without legislative authority. The proprietors should not be paid for public squares taken out of their property until the money for it should be raised from the sale of their own lands. Various restrictions were placed on private buildings; there should be no wooden houses, no projections into the streets, and no house over thirty-five feet high. The digging of earth for brick for the public buildings should begin at once.[29]

It was at about this point, however, that everything began falling to pieces, a structure of circumstances having by now been created which made such a collapse virtually inevitable.

The basic problem, which had been there from the first, was the extreme thinness of the commitment itself. The nation's capital, in being removed from the scene of any of the nation's major activities, had been stripped to an abstraction. About all the commitment consisted of was the very tenuous adherence to an agreement made by a bare majority of the First Congress—now out of existence—to move to the Potomac in 1800. On the one hand, every effort was being made by the Pennsylvanians, as expected, to undermine it. Movements were afoot in their legislature to appropriate money for federal buildings in Philadelphia; funds were also being raised to build a house there for the President. Washington brooded constantly over all these machinations, and when the house was finished he would flatly refuse to live in it.[30] On the other hand, Pennsylvanians or no Pennsylvanians, there was bound to be a limit to how much the imagination, sense of nationality, and patriotism of the society as a whole could be commanded in behalf of a blank space. So, short of forcing people to go there—as Louis XIV and Peter the Great could and did do with respect to their own self-created capitals—the only thing left was to engage their speculative cupidity, which in effect was what the policy-makers did. The financing of the Federal City was organized as a venture in real estate speculation. But even real estate ventures of this sort require a visible urban base, which did not exist, and must attract urban money, which became unlikely when no effort was made to hold the sales in centers of commerce and finance.[31] Out of this thinness of commitment arose two gross elements of liability, one of finance and the other of authority, and together they formed a kind of closed circle from which there was no escape.

Endemic to the entire undertaking was lack of money. The decision to rely principally on land sales was in effect to restrict the source of funds from the outset to a mere trickle. It would in turn be necessary to deceive Congress in reporting progress, in order to inhibit the spread of damaging rumors and to avoid depressing the confidence of the potential buying public. All of this meant formally committing the Executive and the entire

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Of profounder seriousness was that lack of money meant lack of authority. It meant impotence to command resources, manpower, or even loyalty—even within the tiny organization directly engaged in the work. With Congress in effect out of it, by necessity as well as design, all the personal authority of the President, fully supported at every point by his Secretary of State, would not be sufficient to command the structure that remained, or even to hold it together. The prime symbol of all this was Pierre Charles L'Enfant, who in a peculiar sense was the only man on the scene to act with full consistency. L'Enfant had been commissioned to do a thing; he could not get it out of his head that somewhere, somehow, the authority must exist whereby he might carry out his commission, and he proceeded accordingly. He was thus virtually bound, whatever the state of his famous temper, to be the first casualty. He would in fact be gone by the end of February 1792, having been at work not quite a year.

L'Enfant remained from first to last bitterly opposed to local land sales, having warned Washington in August—two months before the first one was held—that they would fail because the lots had as yet little value, that this policy and his plan were totally inconsistent, that the whole scheme was beneath the government's dignity, that the work should proceed on all fronts simultaneously, and that the only way to effect this was through the floating of substantial loans. Washington and Jefferson, fully committed to the L'Enfant plan but unwilling or unable to face the implications that went with it, pushed ahead with their policy, and L'Enfant's predictions proceeded to unfold.[32]

The first sale was a dismal affair, despite the presence of the nation's two highest dignitaries and the leading congressman from Virginia. Out of ten thousand lots in the government's possession only thirty-five were sold, four of them taken by the Commissioners themselves in order to keep up the bidding; and the actual cash receipts came to little more than $2,000. Trapped by his own policy, Washington in his annual message to Congress referred to the affairs of the Federal City in a manner that was anything but candid. "And as there is a prospect," he announced, "favoured by the rate of sales which have already taken place, of ample funds for carrying on the necessary public buildings, there is every expectation of their due progress."[33]

A second sale was held a year later, on October 8, 1792. It too was a failure, and Washington knew it. But he thought there ought to be another; he fidgeted over suggestions that he send an agent from city to city ("which rather appears to me to be hawking the lots about"); and in his annual message that year he told Congress nothing. The third sale was held on September 17, 1793, after great preparations had been made to render the occasion auspicious. The President came to lay the cornerstone of the Capitol, and there was a procession which included two brass bands, a company of Virginia artillery, and members of nearby Masonic lodges. In their colorful costumes they all paraded through the woods toward Jenkins's Hill (renamed Capitoline Hill), broke ranks at Goose Creek

(renamed the Tiber), and clambered across by means of a log and "a few large stones." Though the cornerstone was laid without mishap, the auction fared even worse than had the previous two. After this mortification, Washington suspended all further public sales. Again, not a word to Congress, but in a long letter to the English agriculturist Arthur Young, Washington referred glowingly to the Federal City. "It is encreasing fast in buildings, and rising into consequence; and will, I have no doubt, from the advantages given to it by nature, and its proximity to a rich interior country, and the western territory, become the emporium of the United States." This (alas for the veracity of our first Chief Magistrate) was simply not true.[34]

Major L'Enfant, somehow trusting that the President and his advisors would any day be overcome by the logic of his case, had long since plunged headlong and uncompromisingly to his doom. The engraver had no copies of the city map ready for distribution at the first sale of lots in October 1791, and the evidence suggests that sabotage by L'Enfant himself was the main cause, the Major having actually refused the Commissioners the use of his own map on the same occasion.[35] The following month he and the Commissioners came into direct collision when, despite orders to desist, he had his workmen demolish a house being built by a local landowner because it projected into his proposed New Jersey Avenue. Washington, in patching this up, had Jefferson warn L'Enfant that he must conduct himself "in subordination to the authority of the Commissioners." Then while L'Enfant was in Philadelphia completing an extended report on forthcoming operations, having left instructions with his assistant Isaac Roberdeau for the winter's work, the Commissioners decided to suspend that work until spring because of limited funds. Roberdeau, believing himself bound by his master's orders, refused, whereupon the Commissioners discharged the seventy-five workmen and had Roberdeau imprisoned for trespass. Washington's final effort to reconcile L'Enfant and the Commissioners, and to force the Major to put himself under their orders, was a failure.[36] The furious Frenchman declared that he would "renounce the pursuit of that fame, which the success of the undertaking must procure, rather than to engage to conduct it under a system which would . . . not only crush its growth but make me appear the principal cause of the destruction of it," and that with regard to the Commissioners he was determined "no longer to act in subjection to their will and caprice." Jefferson thereupon wrote to him on February 27, 1792: "I am instructed by the President to inform you that notwithstanding the desire he has entertained to preserve your agency in the business, the condition upon which it is to be done is inadmissible & your services must be at an end." L'Enfant immediately predicted that no one who succeeded him would fare any better, and once again, events were to prove him right. Andrew Ellicott and Samuel Blodgett, who followed L'Enfant, would meet a similar fate.[37]

The Commissioners themselves should probably not be blamed for this. They were men of standing and ability, personally known to Washington, and were serving without salary. Not being local residents, they were unable to meet oftener than about once a month. It is true that by this time they were held in contempt

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throughout the District, but theirs was inherently an impossible position. They were belabored from every side. To L'Enfant they had been men of "confined ideas," "ignorant and unfit," and "little versed in the minutiae of such operations." From Washington himself they heard that "if inactivity and contractedness should mark the steps of the Commissioners . . . whilst action on the part of this State [Pennsylvania] is displayed in providing commodious buildings for Congress &ca. the Government will remain where it now is." Washington warned that although such sentiments were not his own but those of the enemy, the best antidote to them was "perseverance, and vigorous exertion."[38]

The Commissioners' most persistent headaches were created by the local landowners. They had been an unruly lot from the outset, though it was the very circumstances of the case that made them so. Before the exact site of the city was revealed, they had been thrown into agitation by simultaneous surveys deliberately intended to mislead them and to inhibit speculation. Bringing them into subsequent agreement required Washington's own presence. When several backed out because of uncertainty over the boundary, the President once more had to appear in person to get them back into line.[39] Further discords were created by the emergence of a pro-L'Enfant party at the time of the Frenchman's dismissal. Captivated by the noble plans which promised so much for property values, the proprietors vainly besieged Washington and Jefferson with pleas for his reinstatement.[40] Anything the Commissioners undertook in one part of the District, such being the piecemeal way in which they had to proceed, was bound to antagonize somebody in some other part. An example was the bridge they tried to build across Rock Creek, which was denounced as an act of favoritism toward Georgetown. But then the hapless builder, one Harbaugh, turned out to be not very experienced in designing arches, and the entire matter was in a way resolved when the bridge fell down. By August 1793, two of the Commissioners, Thomas Johnson and David Stuart, had had enough and asked to be relieved. They were obliged to remain more than a year thereafter because Washington could find no one to replace them. The third, Daniel Carroll, resigned in 1795, worn out from his labors, and died the following year.[41]

This general lack of cohesion and control was even to be seen in the design and execution of the two main buildings, the President's house and the Capitol. Bereft of L'Enfant's services, Jefferson advertised in the newspapers for plans. Three months passed before a single response came in. For the President's house only two designs were offered, and the one chosen was the work of James Hoban, an Irishman from South Carolina. It was for a stately building with wings at either end, inspired by the residence of the Duke of Leinster in Dublin. The center portion, a kind of large box, was the only part that went up, and even this would be no more than partly completed when Jefferson himself moved into it in 1801. It was still not completed when the British burned it in 1814. Not until 1833, more than forty years after it was begun, would an American President have a finished house to live in.[42]

As for the Capitol, the cornerstone of which was laid before anyone knew for

certain what it would finally look like, there were even greater difficulties. In this case the prize was awarded to a Dr. William Thornton, whose principal achievement was a method of teaching oral speech to deaf mutes, and whose knowledge of architecture consisted of a hasty scanning of whatever books he could collect just prior to preparing his design. In the meantime another man, Stephen Hallet of Philadelphia, who did know something about architecture, had been encouraged to believe the prize would go to him. Hallet had been at work for some time trying to realize the various suggestions with which he was besieged by Jefferson. He struggled unsuccessfully with the Roman temple form, which Jefferson had persuaded the authorities at Richmond to adopt, and then with something on the order of the Pantheon, of which Jefferson had made a sketch of his own. Hallet was still at it when Thornton's design—projected on similar lines—came in, and the Thornton plan, "simple, noble, beautiful," according to Jefferson, "captivated the eyes and judgment of all."[43]

But Dr. Thornton had no qualifications or experience in making working drawings, so that chore was turned over to none other than "poor Hallet," his disappointed competitor. Hallet duly reported that in consideration of time, practicality, and expense, serious modifications would be necessary. Jefferson had to supervise these matters in Washington's absence, Washington helplessly observing from Mount Vernon that it was unfortunate they had not done this figuring before they took the plan. But by now Washington was ready to settle for almost anything: "a Plan must be adopted; and good, or bad, it must be entered upon." He informed the Commissioners that what Jefferson and a conference of architects now recommended was a "plan produced by Mr. Hallet, altho' preserving the original ideas of Doctor Thornton, and such as might, upon the whole, be considered as his plan [Thornton's]," but which "according to Mr. Hallet's ideas would not cost more than one half of what it would if executed according to Doctr. Thornton's." With various details still unsettled, such as whether or not to have a portico or a recess at the east front, the cornerstone was laid on September 18, 1793. These ambiguities seem to have remained, inasmuch as Hallet as superintending architect was discharged the following year for persisting in his own plans rather than Thornton's. Hallet's successor, George Hadfield, fell into similar errors with similar results, Dr. Thornton having meanwhile become one of the Commissioners. The Capitol would be completed, after various other modifications, in seventy-one years.[44]

Thus lack of cohesion, lack of control, and lack of money all came to the same thing. Most of what was used for operating expenses had had to come from the original grants by Maryland and Virginia. Sales of lots languished, and the Commissioners with Washington's approval furtively began borrowing money, or rather trying to borrow it, though not authorized by law to do so. A syndicate was formed by three men of acknowledged standing in financial circles, James Greenleaf, John Nicholson, and Robert Morris. The syndicate was to purchase several thousand lots, pay for them in seven annual installments, sell a portion to private buyers at the enhanced prices which would presumably be created by

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With the Commissioners forced to carry on operations with local bank loans on their own notes, Washington—no doubt with many inward groans—finally faced the bitter choice early in 1796 of asking Congress for authority to borrow money openly on the security of public property. His message was a true masterpiece of evasion. He transmitted a memorial from the Commissioners praying that an act to this effect be passed, and he told the House and Senate that in such an enterprise as the building of a capital "difficulties might naturally be expected: some have occurred; but they are in a great degree surmounted, and I have no doubt if the remaining resources are properly cherished, so as to prevent the loss of property by hasty and numerous sales, that all the buildings required . . . may be compleated in season, without aid from the Federal Treasury." But Washington and the Commissioners understood full well that what they were asking for was not really a loan after all, but "aid from the Federal Treasury," and the reason was the same as that for which all the other schemes had failed. The key phrase in the memorial was the final one: "that, in case the property so pledged shall prove inadequate to the purpose of repayment, the United States will make good the deficiency." That is, the lots may not have been quite worthless, but they certainly were "inadequate to the purpose of repayment," because few really believed anything would come of the Federal City. The question was dragged out four months before a loan of $500,000 was finally authorized.[46]

Even so, a loan authorized was not the same as a loan in hand. Even this guarantee, that "the United States will make good the deficiency," was not enough to attract subscribers. It was only when the state of Maryland came to the rescue with $100,000 that the Commissioners were enabled to keep things going, and then on a very thin shoestring. Nor, obviously, was the problem that of "loss of property by hasty and numerous sales." The Commissioners had done everything they could, not to "cherish" such property but to persuade people to buy it and build houses there. The building code had long since been abandoned. But all was in vain, and when the government moved to the City of Washington in 1800, President Adams's Secretary of the Treasury found to his dismay that there were "but few houses at any one place and most of them small miserable huts." Many years later, one of the original proprietors was offering "to give lots away in certain sections of the city if people would come and build on them."[47]

And yet no factual account of the founding of Washington, however melancholy its details, can begin to plumb the implications of what was done, and not done,

at that time and place. L'Enfant, the author of the grand plan, had acted in a spirit fully in keeping with the plan's requirements and scope. But what of the plan itself? Either in form or in function, as Lewis Mumford has stated, it had little to do with republican government. It was a plan for a baroque city—the essence of baroque being absolutism, regularity, and display.

The ruling principle of the baroque design, as Mumford observes, is the abstract geometrical figure, the execution of which no obstruction can be allowed to spoil. The plan has for its focal points those edifices and other monuments which are the visible symbols of majesty and authority. Its lines of access and communication, its avenues and boulevards, are designed almost exclusively for the requirements and convenience of the nobility. There is no real place in it for work: no provision for the common life of the community, or for the way in which its people get their living. All of this is kept out of sight, and in a sense out of mind. The plan, moreover, must be executed at one grand stroke or it cannot be executed at all. It is thus—as with Versailles—frozen in time, with no allowance for future growth, except insofar as growth will mar and violate its very perfection. And finally, the stroke whereby the baroque plan is imposed must be an act of despotism.[48]

As a baroque conception, L'Enfant's plan certainly had its elements of technical virtuosity. The artist-engineer began not with the street system but with the principal public buildings and squares, and these served as the cardinal points which gave the law to everything else. He made the most of a difficult site, and his inspiration, for example, of having a cascade, using water from the Tiber, flowing down Capitol Hill was, in Mumford's words, "worthy of Bernini himself." What L'Enfant brought forth had all the surface aspects of "a superb baroque plan: the siting of the public buildings, grand avenues, the axial approaches, the monumental scale, the enveloping greenery."[49] But as an American community, as the center of a republican nation's life, what did it mean?

The "grand avenues" may serve as the central anomaly. These avenues, 160 feet in width, took up with their tributaries a total of 3600 acres, more than all the remaining land that was available for private residences and public buildings together. A population of half a million would have been required to justify them, whereas in fact they left room for a population of little more than a hundred thousand. To pave them would have required a sum equal to perhaps a quarter of the entire national debt. Two assumptions with regard to avenues lurked behind all baroque planning. One was that width and linear straightness—neither of which had been typical of medieval or Renaissance cities—were ideal, and indeed indispensable, for the fast-moving carriages and spirited horses of the aristocracy in their daily comings and goings. Thus one of the most compelling spectacles in the life of the baroque city, gaped at from the sidewalks by the common herd, was "the daily parade of the powerful." The other assumption was that such avenues, for the same reasons, were ideal for military display and columns of marching men.[50]

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ington to either of these uses, though Thomas Jefferson, for one, would have been horrified at the least thought of it. But there was of course no danger; such streets required the invention of the internal combustion engine before they could make any sense at all, and the reaching of that point would itself be the beginning of their obsolescence.

But far more fundamental than the street system was the question of what, besides the activities of government, was to sustain the city's life. This was never L'Enfant's main concern, nor was it really that of anyone else. The central drama of the baroque city was that not simply of government in itself, but of majesty—physically embodied in its court, its display, and its monuments. But what of the daily life behind all this? What was to bring people, resources, prosperity, refinement, and vitality to this place? What sorts of people? Why should they come at all, and what were they to do?

In the "Observations" and "References" attached to L'Enfant's plan there is much about "grand fountains," "grand edifices," and "grand avenues," but not a word about works for the facilitation of commerce, except for mention of an arcade under which "shops will be most conveniently and agreeably situated." In his plan L'Enfant did provide for a canal from the Eastern Branch across part of the city, but judging from his reports it seems that what he had in mind was a facility not so much for making the place a commercial entrepôt as simply for supplying the city itself. Indeed, the idea of the Potomac as an artery of navigation to and from the West had been a piece of wishful thinking all along, probably subordinate to the urge simply to place the capital in Virginian hands. The river, with its five major falls and shallow channel, was a dubious proposition from the outset, and all efforts to reach the Ohio through canals, dredging, and the building of locks—all dragged out over many decades—were to end in failure. Commerce at the port of Georgetown, at best amounting to no more than two or three ships a month, actually began to decline during the 1790s. Out of the four commercial enterprises that were founded in Washington during its first decade, only a brewery survived.[51]

> In consequence, there was "not a single great mercantile house" in the District of Columbia, observed a foreign dignitary in 1811–12; "no trade of any kind" (1828); a "total absence of all sights, sounds, or smells of commerce" (1832). "The greatest and most respectable business that is done in Washington," read a handbook for newcomers in 1829, "is keeping boarding houses."[52]

It was not even possible to attract with wages enough men to work on the public buildings. Thus a considerable portion of the labor was performed by slaves, which was the only element of baroque, the only aspect of despotism, that the city saw. One thing that Washington and St. Petersburg did have in common, as John C. Miller has remarked, was that both were largely built with unfree labor. As for the government establishment itself, the court and nobility, as it were, who would reside there and display themselves on the grand avenues, there would be an unhappy total of less than three hundred persons straggling into the woods

and marshes of Washington in 1800. The local population that greeted them were a disquieting lot. Drifters, vagabonds, and adventurers, these birds of passage did little for the tone of the place except to depress it still further. "The people are poor," observed Oliver Wolcott, "and live like fishes, by eating each other."[53]

3
The Idea of a City

The failure of Washington was certainly a failure of execution; it could also be seen as a failure of the plan itself, full of anomalies as the plan was. But one may well wonder what the alternatives were. Would some other plan have been any better? Would another design have been more suited to a successful execution? Judging from historical precedent, one is inclined to doubt it.

Historically it seems that cities—capital cities or any other kind—have not been "created" at all; they have germinated and grown. Not that such growth has been uncontrolled, or even unplanned. But with the cities of medieval Europe, the "planning" that went into them tended to consist first of a rudimentary initial layout—an ecclesiastical seat, a military garrison, a market—and then of civic supervision, under civic standards, of piecemeal expansion over time. The energy behind such planning and supervision was a reflection of clearly recognized needs, and of the values inherent in what was already there. Therein lies a major difficulty with regard to the city of Washington. That enterprise was in the hands not of a nascent communal body but of men who had no feeling for cities at all, little sense of what a city was, and little experience of what urban life meant.

The emergence of the towns and cities of the Middle Ages is itself a subject in whose intricate fascinations it is easy to lose oneself. Yet even a casual survey discloses a truism: that the indispensable term in accounting for these places is commerce. (Henri Pirenne went so far as to say that without a market one could not speak of a city.) Other functions, military or ecclesiastical, seldom existed independently of the town's commercial life. Even the Norse invaders, as the old chronicles go, came to plunder and stayed to trade. The counts of Flanders, in making their regions defensible in the eleventh century, intentionally created the conditions for a peaceable commerce; "they stimulated town and country alike," as John Mundy has written, "by building fortified bourgs and by draining marshes." The Church did even more, mobilizing vast amounts of capital and at the same time, with the celebrated laws on usury, making great exertions to police its employment.[54] In the earliest known writing, as Robert S. Lopez has pointed out, the hieroglyph for "city" is a cross within a circle. The cross stands for converging roads which bring in and redistribute people, merchandise, and ideas. The circle indicates a moat or wall—morally if not physically present—which serves to bind the citizens together, shelter them from the world without, and fortify their pride in being members of a community. "The city," as Richard L. Meier puts it, "is not only a crossroads, a place for outsiders to meet and trade,

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it is a living repository for culture—high, low, and intermediate." Cities exist "to promote access, under conditions of relative security . . . , not only to people, artifacts, and services, but also to accumulated stores of information."[55]

The expansion of commerce and its corollary features in the late Middle Ages—more sophisticated legal forms, modes of economic organization such as guilds and trading companies, new political forms for acquiring local control of urban communes, and such newly recognized social classes as merchants and artisans—made for the emergence of an urban culture strikingly distinct from that of the peasant countryside. People saw more outsiders, saw more of each other, traveled more, and talked more. Education became itself a commercial commodity, indispensable in such trading centers as, for example, Genoa, where illiteracy was virtually unknown.[56] And it was in the cities and towns, not the country, that the medieval universities grew. All of this made for a pattern of social existence that had taken on complexity, diversity, and energy.

Such a mode of life generated many strains. But it also developed a set of values and loyalties whose force depended on the city's character as a corporate entity, and on the recognition that it gave its citizens benefits which they could claim only in their capacity as a civic body. It is remarkable how much of the building, public and private, during the Middle Ages and later was carried out under municipal control. The important guilds were represented in the town councils, and again and again projects of planning and construction would be supervised by master builders who were also acting as municipal officials. "From the thirteenth century onwards," writes Fritz Rörig, "it was a municipal building committee which constructed the whole of Bruges in the subsequent centuries. It fixed the rows of buildings with a deliberate, even exaggerated stress on differences in balustrades; it looked after the paving of the roads and the water supply of the town; it encouraged the replacement of thatched roofs in favour of tiled roofs through a kind of bonus system; and in short it intervened in everything."[57]

An invariable element of such planning was its explicit recognition of sociability. The prime example is the *piazza* of the Italian Renaissance city. The *piazze* of Florence, Siena, Pisa, and Venice served a wide variety of communal uses. The square, lined with shops where the craftsmen worked subject to the inspection and criticism of the passersby, with restaurants and tables along the *trattorie* and the church at one end, was at once a marketplace, a playground, a promenade for lovers, a place to meet, mingle, and gossip, and an *al fresco* stage for civic pageants and religious processions. The *piazza* was the mirror of the city's being.[58]

The very tangled diversity of urban life provided a setting for the most diverse and complex urban personalities. Florence, for example, while producing and trading tons of cloth over the centuries, also produced Dante, Boccaccio, Savonarola, Giotto, Donatello, Ghiberti, Brunelleschi, Michelangelo, da Vinci, Masaccio, Fra Angelico, Fra Lippo Lippi, Alberti, della Robbia, del Sarto, Ghirlandaio, Machiavelli, Cellini, and Galileo, not to mention the Bardi, the Pitti, the Medici, and the legendary Buondelmonte, whose picturesque murder is said to have given history the Guelfs and the Ghibellines. For a man who appeared and flourished

under such circumstances, his city, for good or ill, was inseparable from both his inner and outer self. Dante, exiled from Florence, saw himself as ceasing to exist.[59]

In the America of the late eighteenth century, there was none but the palest reflection of the city as any such idea as this: as a corporate body, a cross in a circle, a living community. This was a concept either unknown to or hardly felt by the planners of what was intended as America's first city.

4
The Idea of a Capital

One may say (at the risk of circularity) that most of the world's great cities have grown out of something that was already there. A similar logic applies to capital cities: these are not created at will; it is all but impossible to make them appear out of nothing.

But there have been exceptions. A delightful example is that of St. Petersburg, built early in the eighteenth century by Peter the Great and substantially completed during Peter's own lifetime. The case even contains certain parallels to that of Washington. The site which Peter personally chose was hardly auspicious, the estuary of the Neva being an inhospitable wilderness—foggy, unhealthful, and marshy—and virtually nobody in all Russia wanted to go there but the Tsar himself.

But the Tsar was no ordinary man. Peter Romanov was nearly seven feet tall, massively built, and bursting with demonic energy. He could never watch craftsmen at work without wanting to master the craft himself, which in instance after instance he did: stonemasonry, blacksmithing, carpentry, printing, and even watchmaking. The Russians of his day knew absolutely nothing about ships, navigation, or shipbuilding; Peter, with the assistance of foreigners, taught himself everything that could be learned about each of these mysteries. He even took a small retinue to England in 1698, occupied a house at Deptford on the Thames next to the royal docks, worked in the shipyards by day, caroused by night, and left the house a shambles. It was Peter who, almost single-handedly, created the Russian navy. He was a man of great charm, also of ferocious will and volcanic rages. The occasional uprisings of the *streltsi*—a professional military class bearing some resemblances to the *condottieri* of Renaissance Italy—would be suppressed by Peter with hair-raising brutality amid scenes of mass rackings, disembowelings, and gibbetings. Such was the father of his people, Autocrat of the Russias, the man who built St. Petersburg and named it after his patron saint.[60]

Peter wanted a capital; he also wanted a great commercial center with a port and naval base on the Baltic whereby he might turn Russia economically, politically, and culturally toward Europe. In his mind, in fact, the "window to the West" idea had preceded that of a capital. When work began in 1703, Peter was on the ground in person, staying in a small house that had been built for him there in two days' time. The initial undertaking was the fortress of Saints Peter

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and Paul on Yanni-Saari, or Hare Island; it consisted of six great bastions, the construction of one of which Peter supervised himself. Earth being scarce and wheelbarrows non-existent, long lines of laborers had to carry loads of earth in the skirts of their tunics or in bags made of old mats. The technology was somewhat primitive.

For labor, men were arbitrarily conscripted from all parts of the empire to the amount of some forty thousand a year. (One of Peter's earliest levies was for "several thousand thieves": criminals sentenced to Siberia were to go to the Neva instead.) The mortality—from dysentery, plague, malnutrition, exposure, and overwork—was frightful. Through it all, the ebullient Peter in sending out his letters headed them "From Paradise."

He employed foreign architects, the two principal ones being men of exceptional ability. Domenico Trezzini was responsible for a large number of the more imposing public buildings, including the Peter and Paul fortress, and it was Trezzini's authority that directed the design of the several classes of dwelling houses. Alexandre Jean-Baptiste Leblond was the man who designed and set into execution the baroque street plan, which included two grand *prospekts,* the Nevsky and the Vosnesensky. Nevsky Prospekt, two and a half miles long, was paved in stone by Swedish prisoners, who also had to clean it every Saturday. Leblond, who had studied under LeNôtre, the landscape architect of Versailles, built grottoes and fountains in the Tsar's garden, using water from the Fontanka canal for his cascades. He was given a very free hand.

Since few would have dreamed of settling in St. Petersburg of their own free will, Peter blithely populated his city by force. According to one of his ukases, a thousand of the leading noble familes were to come and build houses along one side of the Neva; five hundred merchants and five hundred traders would do the same on the opposite bank; and two thousand artisans of every sort "must settle themselves on the same side of the river. . . ."[61] Fires being a constant danger, Peter decided (like Jefferson some eighty years later) that houses should all be built of brick or stone, and he issued another ukase to that effect. He also specified that meanwhile no stone edifices were to be erected anywhere else, to make sure that every mason in the empire would be available, if and when needed, for the work at St. Petersburg.

Peter gave endless attention to the city's commercial and port facilities. He built extensive wharves and shipyards on the left bank of the Neva, and for protection of the sea approaches he established a fortress on Kotlin Island, later called Kronstadt. (He prepared the drawings himself, after personally taking the channel soundings around the island.) For access from the interior he began the building of a direct road to Moscow, and supplemented it by a canal around Lake Ladoga linking the Volga and the Neva. This remarkable canal was begun in 1718 and completed shortly after his death. The Tsar went to great lengths—including the reduction of port dues and the offering of bargain prices on various Russian products—to induce foreign merchantmen to call regularly at St. Petersburg. When the first one arrived in 1703, the jubilant Peter sailed out incognito, piloted

the ship into port himself, and presented the dumfounded master a purse of five hundred ducats, together with gifts for the entire crew.

Despite the fervent prayers of Tsarevna Maria that St. Petersburg might once more become a desert, the place grew and prospered. The imperial family and all the agencies of government took up permanent residence there in 1710; foreign trade increased year by year; and a building census of 1714 reported—perhaps with some exaggeration—that houses of all kinds totaled 34,550 in number. At any rate by 1725, the year of Peter's death, the city had a population of a hundred thousand.[62]

St. Petersburg is the only case known to the Western world of a created city that successfully served all the functions of a true capital.[63] A society's "capital" in the fullest sense consists not only of its political center but of its economic and its cultural center as well; only the power and the will represented by a Peter the Great could successfully bring all three out of nothing and make them survive. Aside from this extraordinary example, which even Louis XIV could not duplicate, the most organic expressions of national civilization have been such capital cities as London and Paris, where the elites of government, of money and trade, and of intellect and art have regularly met and intersected for centuries. "The kings might prefer Winchester," Denis Brogan has written, "but the nature of things preferred London." By Edward III's and Geoffrey Chaucer's time in the fourteenth century, the kings preferred it too. London by then was being referred to in royal documents as "a mirror to all England."[64]

5
An Imaginary Capital City

Washington, D.C., remained a slatternly miserable village throughout much of the nineteenth century, hardly endurable even in the barest physical sense, and it has never had, even in our own day, any of the characteristics of those capitals selected by "the nature of things." In the humiliations and failures of Washington and Jefferson, we have already seen something of the price of imagining that a selection could be made with impunity on some other basis.

Perhaps an inkling of it might be gained by venturing a counter-factual projection. The choice that was actually made in 1790 could be seen as altogether arbitrary; conceivably the "nature of things" pointed in a different direction. What might have been the consequences if in 1790 the capital had simply been allowed to remain where it was?

As a matter of record, New York was an older city than either St. Petersburg or Versailles. Peter Minuit's famous purchase of Manhattan in 1626 followed rather than preceded the first settlement and planning of the Dutch post of New Amsterdam. Since Hudson's explorations of 1609, trading companies had been making voyages up the river and around its mouth, erecting buildings on Manhattan for

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temporary headquarters. (In fact, a century before Minuit's time Verrazano had described the place enthusiastically to Francis I after his own reconnoiterings of 1524, and a map of unknown authorship exists in Paris, dated 1570, which shows the topography of the area in considerable detail.) In any case, the Dutch West India Company's plans had been completed by 1625, and the instructions to the Company's engineer for laying out the fort bear a date of that year. With its great natural advantages New Amsterdam was an immediate success as a trading center, though the Company's conception of it was not very imaginative, and its initial intentions were rather limited. The emphasis was on trade and military protection rather than the development of a colony, and this tended for some years to keep the population lower than it might otherwise have been. Nevertheless, the cosmopolitan and polyglot character of the town seems to have emerged quite early; Father Isaac Jogues reported eighteen languages spoken there and in the vicinity when he visited it in the 1640s. When the British took it over in 1664 they found a bustling mart of commerce, with wharves, warehouses, brick buildings, and cobblestoned streets. These streets, established along the natural paths taken by people and animals in their earliest comings and goings, made an irregular pattern that survives in some measure to the present day. Beyond the north line of fortification across the island (a line to be known, logically, as Wall Street) were various hamlets, such as Bowery Village and Harlem, which would eventually be absorbed in the city's growth. Travelers in the mid-eighteenth century invariably commented on the exceptional cleanliness of the town, with its gabled houses, neatly paved streets, and flatstone sidewalks. Its population on the eve of the Revolution was about 25,000.[65]

In the face of the British occupation, New York's population dropped to about 5,000; it rose again with the subsequent influx of Tory refugees and British soldiers; and it dropped once more with the British evacuation in November 1783, when it amounted to between 10,000 and 12,000. But in the next three years the population more than doubled, and in 1786 it stood at 23,614. New York's remarkable expansion in commerce as well as population during these years made it seem more than likely that the city would eventually pass Philadelphia in both, as in fact it shortly did. The census of 1790 gave New York 33,131 and Philadelphia 28,522, though prematurely: if the adjoining "liberties" of Philadelphia had been properly counted, New York would not have moved ahead until shortly after 1810. But its special advantages over Philadelphia for commerce were already apparent in the 1790s, and were clearly perceived by such visitors as Talleyrand and La Rochefoucauld-Liancourt. New York, already ahead in enrolled tonnage used in the coasting trade in 1789, passed Philadelphia in total tonnage in 1794, in the value of imports in 1796, and in exports in 1796–97.[66] By 1800 New York could already imagine itself becoming what it would in fact become during the nineteenth century, the greatest port in the world. Were New York to become America's political as well as its commercial capital, it would do so under a certain historical logic.

As soon as Congress voted in December 1784 to move to New York, civic groups and associations of individuals began exerting themselves to the utmost

in plans and projects for accommodating the government. It was determined to transform City Hall into Federal Hall through extensive alterations and rebuilding, and the Chamber of Commerce brought incessant pressure on both municipal and state authorities for hurrying up the work. Money was appropriated; immediate cash was borrowed from public-spirited citizens; and the work was carried out in accordance with plans prepared by Pierre Charles L'Enfant. The final cost of $65,000 was twice as much as had originally been appropriated, but the city was vastly proud of the result. Under a city-appointed commission, work was also begun in May 1790 on a house for the President on the site of Fort George, just below Bowling Green and overlooking the Battery. It was a fine structure, completed the following year, though by then the government had departed. Still, there had been great hopes and great plans, one group of promoters having even worked out a scheme for erecting a kind of great Acropolis for the government atop Brooklyn Heights.[67]

What all this represented was a concentration of energy, money, public spirit, and civic pride that could be of immense benefit to a new and groping federal government in establishing the appropriate setting, consistent with its own future dignity, in which to conduct its business. The most obvious and immediate expression of this civic energy would be found in the physical appurtenances of the government's capital city. But there would be less tangible ones as well. As with Paris and London, the resources of an ascendant city were there to be combined with those of government, and the product could well exceed the sum of their parts.

In addition, it would be an *available* capital: available not only to the members of Congress, officers of state, and employees of government, but available to the people of the entire country. The "centrality" argument for the Potomac, heard so often during the debates on the residence question, was an abstraction, even in 1790. It was based not on population (though the Virginians insisted that the growth of the Southwest would some day make it so) but rather on geography. And yet even with centrality argued on that basis, the operative variable was logically not a place on the map but speed and convenience of travel. Readily accessible by water from everywhere along the Atlantic coast, and by river from upper New York and western New England, and with more coasting ships moving in and out than was the case with any other port, New York City was already in 1790 probably easier to reach from more points than was any other place in the country. This was true even for the South. One could reach New York from New Orleans—or indeed, from anywhere in the Mississippi Valley—more quickly and easily than one could reach Washington. Even from Charleston, Washington was less convenient than New York.

Still, the real meaning of "centrality" does not lie in geography at all, or even in convenience of travel. Centrality in the last analysis concerns the place to which more people have more different and various reasons for going than they do to anyplace else. For the people of the United States, including a steady flow of southern planters coming north for their annual shopping, New York, even with-

out its being the center of government, would increasingly take on this character in the course of the nineteenth century.[68]

And a capital of that sort could do some remarkable things for the federal government itself. It would bring the government into contact with the nation at the peak point of the nation's visibility, possible only at a real crossroads. It would be the place from which the people's chosen representatives might return home wider in sense and spirit than when they came—supposing they were offered at the very least a life of some grace and civility while there. Even this was to be denied them in the barracks-like, company-town, celibate existence of nineteenth-century Washington, where congressmen "lived like bears, brutalized and stupefied."[69] But a real capital would represent a great deal more than a decent existence for congressmen. The people's deputies would be surrounded by forces, other than simply one another's company, for enlightening them as to what the character of their country was. Their capital could serve them as "a mirror to all America."

We are thus brought back to the question of culture, and to what it is that relates a nation's capital to a nation's culture. If culture is perceived simply as objects of art on display, then it is easy enough to set up "culture" almost anywhere. Yet if culture is seen as what brings the objects themselves into being, it becomes a very complicated subject indeed. Perhaps culture may itself be thought of as a kind of mirror, held up to us at critical moments by our wisest or most agitated spirits. In it we are allowed glimpses of important knowledge: of who and what we are, and of the powers by which we rule ourselves. Those who hold the mirror up need to be standing in some sense at the crossroads of our corporate life. We then see ourselves, our customs, aspirations, and delusions, our houses, cities, and countryside; we even see a little more clearly those whom we choose to govern us, government itself being an item in culture. So a fair fraction of the artists and thinkers who define a society's visions ought to be located at the center of things, while those who embody authority must be there too, and must take account of *them*.

The structural support of culture—the social, and indeed the downright physical, context in which a republican society's cultural resources are husbanded and renewed—seems to be a subject we do not know very much about. But judging from what we do know, without a legitimate capital city the process has been at best a very erratic one. The early experience of New York—in which many of the elements for a focusing of national culture were present, but from which, on the other hand, certain critical elements were missing—may offer a few clues to how it might or might not have worked.

A nice case of cultural logistics is that of the New York theater, which seems to have enjoyed a clear preeminence over that of other American cities from the first. Yet this preeminence, seen as the intersection of certain influences occurring at a critical time, cannot have been altogether accidental. In 1785 Lewis Hallam, whose father's American Company had opened the John Street Theater a few

years before the Revolution, returned to New York and revived the company at the same theater. There they played a repertory of Shakespeare, Sheridan, Addison, and Goldsmith, and in 1787 they brought out Royall Tyler's *The Contrast.* Tyler thus became the first American playwright to have his work performed professionally. Tyler's success was directly responsible for the decision of William Dunlap, a rather remarkable young man just returned from a sojourn in England where he had studied painting under Benjamin West, to try his own hand at playwriting. Dunlap's comedy *The Father, or American Shandyism* was performed in 1787, also with success.[70]

But the New York theater was itself the object of considerable social opposition. The home-front morality of the Revolution had frowned heavily on frivolous amusements. Stage plays continued to be denounced by the clergy and many others, and a number of petitions to the Common Council and the state legislature urged that such spectacles be suppressed. No action was taken, but a good number of New Yorkers in 1789 remained in some uncertainty as to just how they ought to think about such matters. The decisive cues were given by the President of the United States. Washington loved the theater; he got up theater parties during the season of 1789 and took various high dignitaries and members of Congress with him. John Street on November 24, 1789, had the fullest house ever seen, according to the *Daily Advertiser,* "owing to the President and Lady being there, and its being previously known." The piece being played happened to be a new farce by William Dunlap, *Darby's Return,* and this is said to have been the only public occasion at which George Washington was observed to laugh. William Dunlap (1766–1839) thus began a career as author, translator, impresario, and manager that would, by the time it closed fifty years later, establish his reputation as "the father of the American theater." Dunlap was a man of extraordinarily wide interests. Since his theater ventures kept him in chronically poor financial straits, he made ends meet through his second profession, which was painting. (He had done pastel portraits of General and Mrs. Washington in 1783, when he was only seventeen.) He seems to have known everyone in town, was very kind to young writers and artists, and had a wide circle of friends in the world of letters, painting, theater, and commerce. Two of Dunlap's books, *The History of the American Theatre* (1832) and *The History and Progress of the Arts of Design in the United States* (1834) remain valuable sources to this day.[71]

Among the painters Dunlap knew who lived and worked in New York were Gilbert Stuart, John Vanderlyn, Edward Savage, John Trumbull, Thomas Cole, Asher Durand, Samuel F. B. Morse, and John Wesley Jarvis. The fame of these men, with the exception of Cole and Durand, rested largely on their portraits of statesmen. But statesmen, to be painted, have to be there; otherwise the painter has to follow them about. Gilbert Stuart, for one, simply closed his New York studio and moved to Philadelphia in 1794. It was there that Stuart executed his best-known portraits, foremost of which were those of Washington.[72]

A decade and a half after William Dunlap's death, New York was visited briefly by the Edinburgh publisher William Chambers. "Without a court," Chambers wrote, "and not even the seat of the state legislature, New York cannot be

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described as the place of residence of a leisurely or a numerous literary class." Chambers was simply taking for granted the intimate relationship between literature and political power, and the consequences of a serious disjunction between them. Conceivably such a connection should have been especially urgent in America, whose culture since at least the 1760s had been so specially political, and where so much of the society's creative energy had been put to purposes political in nature. "When the United States began its national existence," Richard Hofstadter has written, "the relationship between intellect and power was not a problem. The leaders *were* the intellectuals." Why, he asks, should politics and intellect then have gone their separate ways? No doubt there were a number of reasons. But sheer physical separation—not having a capital city where writers as well as politicians could function, and in which they would want to live—has to be counted as one of them.[73]

Actually the leading literary figures of William Dunlap's New York—Washington Irving, James Fenimore Cooper, and William Cullen Bryant—never suffered from obscurity. For holding up the mirror to whatever extent their talent allowed them, each was probably as well rewarded as any man of letters could have expected in the America of that time. Each of the three, moreover—Federalists in their youth and Jackson Democrats in maturity—was well acquainted with figures of power. Irving (who as a small boy had been blessed on Broadway by General Washington) acted as secretary to the American legation in London and was for a time in charge of it; he was a good friend of Martin Van Buren, who wanted to make him Secretary of the Navy when he became president; and he served for several years as United States minister to Spain. Cooper's father was a prominent upstate landholder and a member of Congress. His family and that of John Jay were very close, and it was in fact Jay who had told Cooper the story upon which *The Spy* was based. Cooper was active politically for DeWitt Clinton, and he wrote extensively on political questions. The memorial gathering which was held in New York at the time of his death was presided over by Daniel Webster. Bryant was bound up in politics all of his life. He too was a friend of Van Buren, whom he supported for the presidency. From the editorial throne of the New York *Evening Post,* which he occupied for half a century, Bryant himself received the homage of all the leading political figures of the day. It was Bryant, by then a patriarch, who introduced Abraham Lincoln at Cooper Union in 1860.[74]

Such were among the conditions that sustained them; other conditions kept their company very sparse. It could even be guessed that had there been more such company, these particular three would not have been as consequential as they were.

For the stream of foreigners who began entering the national life from the beginning, New York was the major port of entry. This was undoubtedly the chief factor in the early ascendancy of New York's musical life over that of other cities. For example, the influence and presence in New York of Lorenzo da Ponte, who had given Mozart his libretto for *Don Giovanni* and who would end his days as professor of Italian at Columbia College, was responsible for initiating the performances of Italian opera which would occur more or less regularly from the

mid-1820s on. Much of the impetus for the founding of the Philharmonic Society in 1842 came from Daniel Schlesinger, a pianist who had been trained by a pupil of Beethoven and who was the best musician in town. The success of the Society's orchestra, moreover, was largely due to its corps of German musicians.[75] In this there was nothing unusual for a cosmopolitan city; the musical life of London was by no means all English, nor that of Paris all French. With immigration destined to be a highly significant element in the national experience, New York as a capital as well as a cosmopolitan city might have made that experience a good deal more vital than it actually was. There was a time when the republican myth of America served as an inspiration for half of Europe, and the promise of a great capital might have drawn steady and substantial numbers of the most creative spirits of European culture.

One of George Washington's fondest hopes for his federal seat was a national university. The hope was shared by Thomas Jefferson, who had the happy thought that the entire faculty of the University of Geneva might be brought over and reinstalled on the banks of the Potomac. Nothing ever came of these fancies, nor was anything resembling higher education to appear in Washington for a long time to come. In New York on May 6, 1789, a week after his inauguration, President Washington attended the annual commencement of Columbia College, where his stepson had once studied briefly but which was not at that time an institution of great consequence. But it had at least one thing upon which futures are built, a prior existence. It already had a tradition of sorts that went back thirty-five years, a small endowment from Trinity Church and other sources, and among its alumni were men of some influence. They included the Chief Justice, the Secretary of the Treasury, the delegate who had penned the United States Constitution, and the Chancellor of the State of New York. If the support given in the 1790s by the city and state, which was not inconsiderable, had been continued into the nineteenth century, and if to this had been added no more than the moral support of the federal government, Columbia might indeed have become a national university, and one of the world's leading centers of learning, well before it in fact did.[76]

Things done for the first and only time exert, by definition, the most coercive weight as precedents. Such was the case with virtually all the precedents set in the first year or so of the federal government's existence, and none more so than with the decision made in 1790 to remove the capital from New York and subsequently from Philadelphia. That decision entailed a renunciation of whatever moral authority the national government might have had over the public imagination in matters of urban development and design. By that choice, made at a critical moment, a quasi-official benediction was in effect laid upon a set of values which had no real place in them for cities. This would not have occurred if the government had committed itself to an existing city at the outset and had concerned itself, as it would in some sense have been forced to do, with its future welfare and growth. Henceforth there would be few models and few standards, except for negative ones. Cities were not destined to be defined as publicly super-

vised emplacements of civilized life. Henceforth cities as anything but excrescences, necessary evils free to grow unchecked however they might, were to have little standing in America's official folklore.

The alternative fabric of values which the Founders bequeathed to the nation, though it would have the effect of rendering culturally odious the very idea of the city, was nevertheless not an unpleasing one. Permeated by an agrarian imagery and an ideal of rural prosperity and peace, it certainly had its attractive side for most of the people of that day. In many a sense it still does. It was fully harmonious, moreover, with those ideological aspects of the Revolution which had been inspired by the classical tradition: the Roman Republic, Cincinnatus, Cato, the Sabine farm.

In the nation's cultural memory this rural vision is referred back more often to Thomas Jefferson than to any other of the Founders' generation. And rightly so, for in Jefferson it receives its most complete and most compelling expression.