The nation’s capital was pieced together from the new states of Maryland and Virginia with their small towns, plantations, and farms, following Congress's passing of the Residence Act of 1790. Through this mapping activity, you’ll become familiar with the initial geography of the District of Columbia, and chart its changing boundaries over time.

The initial distinct components of the District of Columbia (Georgetown, Alexandria, Alexandria County, City of Washington, and Washington County) all had individual governments.

Congress returned Alexandria and Alexandria County to Virginia in 1846.

The Organic Act of 1870 combined the remaining separate governments of Georgetown, Washington City, and Washington County into a single government, today's Washington, D.C.

Let's take a look.
The Residence Act of 1790 created this diamond-shaped District of Columbia.

The boundaries of today’s Washington, D.C. are indicated by the orange shading.

The picture was scanned from a hand-colored glass lantern slide of an undated map. The underlying map has been tentatively identified as drawn from data compiled by the U.S. Coast and Geodetic Survey about 1900.
On the left, shaded in tan, is land that consistently remained part of the State of Virginia.

On the right, shaded in yellow, is land that consistently remained part of the State of Maryland.
The Town of Alexandria, VA, circled, was founded in 1749. It became the City of Alexandria, D.C., in 1791, and retained its own government. The town and its surrounding green county were retroceded (returned) to Virginia in 1846, becoming, once again, Alexandria, VA.
The circled town of Georgetown, MD, *circled*, was founded in 1751. It became Georgetown, D.C. in 1791 and retained its own government. That government was abolished when it was absorbed into the District of Columbia in 1871.
In green is land ceded from Virginia to form the Alexandria County portion of D.C. in 1791. Like the City of Alexandria, it was retroceded (returned) to Virginia in 1846.
The City of Washington, circled, was planned by Peter C. L'Enfant for the seat of the federal government within the District of Columbia.

The City of Washington was originally much smaller than the diamond, bounded on the west by Rock Creek, on the east by the Anacostia River, and to the south by the Potomac River. The northern limit of the city was named Boundary Street (today's Florida Avenue NW).

Land beyond the city shown in orange was Washington County until 1871.
Test your memory! Identify the various physical components of the District of Columbia and surrounding area.
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<td>1</td>
<td>Town of Alexandria, VA, founded 1749. Became City of Alexandria, D.C., then once again Alexandria, VA.</td>
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<td>7</td>
<td>City of Washington as planned by Peter C. L'Enfant for the seat of the federal government within the District of Columbia.</td>
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You can learn more about the geography of Washington, D.C. through *Washington History*, which the Historical Society has published since 1989. *Washington History* is filled with scholarly articles, reviews, and a rich array of images. It is written and edited by distinguished historians and journalists.

The full runs of *Washington History* (1989-present) and its predecessor publication *the Records of the Columbia Historical Society* (1897-1988) are available through JSTOR, an online archive to which many educational institutions subscribe. It’s also easy to set up a personal JSTOR account, which allows free online reading of six articles per month from the vast array of JSTOR journals. Membership in the Historical Society at the Membership Plus level includes full access to the entire run of both of our publications.

Go to [https://www.jstor.org/journal/washhist](https://www.jstor.org/journal/washhist) for the direct link to explore the full run of *Washington History*.

Go to [https://www.jstor.org/journal/recocoluhistsoci](https://www.jstor.org/journal/recocoluhistsoci) for the direct link to explore the full run of the *Records of the Columbia Historical Society*. Note: All *Records* articles from 1897 to 1924 are available for free online access as well as free PDF downloads with no membership or JSTOR account required.