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Washington: “A Discouraging Site Bordered by a Swamp”

The history of the capital city of the United States has often been told and is part of schoolbook mythology that Washington and the White House, the Presidential residence, were built in a swamp. The designers of Washington, as Sennett (1994: 265) puts it, had “to transform a near-tropical swamp into a national capital.” Building the city, as Dickey (2014: 25) elaborates, meant that it was “rising on one of the marshiest and swampiest tracts in the region—and the lowest point of a huge drainage basin stretching miles north of the city”—hardly an ideal location for a city. Nor was the location for the White House any better as it “sat in an unhealthy location prone to pollution and flooding.” In the 1860s the site was described in terms typical of the time and the prevailing theory of disease as marshy, swampy, and unhealthy. In 1861 Anthony Trollope ([1862] 1951: 316) remarked that “the President’s House . . . is built on marshy ground . . . and is very unhealthy . . . all who live there become subject to fever and ague,” or malaria. An 1864 engineering report concurred that the site is “a dangerous miasmatic swamp” emanating “noxious exhalations” thus making “the Presidential mansion so notoriously unhealthy as a place of residence” (cited by Dickey, 2014: 212).

So entrenched and intractable is what Bowling (1991: 238) calls “the swamp myth” about the history of the national capital that he devotes several pages of an epilogue to trying to counter it. “Early Washington” for him is “popularly believed to have been a swamp. Dozens of observers of the young town . . . indicate otherwise. Almost all agreed that . . . it had a stunning natural setting” (237). Bowling implies that a swamp would have not been a stunning natural setting

thus repeating some dictates of conventional landscape aesthetics and landscape architecture, especially when it comes to swamps. Early Washington may not have been a swamp, but the birthplace of Washington was indisputably in or by a swamp. Civil War and post-Civil War Washington was also metaphorically a swamp for some observers of the developing town (as we will see later).

Bowling (191) is a revisionist historian who tries to correct the schoolbook mythology and “talk up” the location. He is at pains to point out that

no part of the well-drained city supported a swamp, a wetland where trees stand in water ... Even given the loose definition of the word “swamp” in the late eighteenth century—it could mean swamp, marsh, fen, bog, brushy area of just river bottom land—only a few of the dozens of descriptions of the early federal city mention swamps in this area. (238)

Taking “swamp” in this loose eighteenth-century definition, it would include “the reed tidal marshes” along some of the local rivers and “smaller inlets and creeks” that Bowling describes on the previous page (237). Despite conceding the loose eighteenth-century definition of swamp, Bowling uses the twentieth-century definition of swamp as “a wetland where trees stand in water” and insists that Washington did not have “trees in standing water.” Certainly it had swamps in the eighteenth-century definition, including marshes as the few early descriptions and he attest, and it had wetlands in the twentieth-century definition.

Bowling (1991: 237) concludes with his most compelling argument against the “swamp myth.” He argues that “most importantly, George Washington, whose eye for good land had few rivals, would never have selected swampy lowlands for the seat of an empire which he expected to perpetuate his name and reputation. The swamp myth simply lacks credibility whether one reads the landscape or the documents.” Bowling implies that “swampy lowlands” are not “good land.” Documents already cited, observers to be cited, and readers of the documents and landscape (both before and after Bowling) indicate that the “swamp myth” has credibility. Like the “alligator-in-the-sewers” of New York myth, the “Washington-and-White-House-in-a-swamp” myth has more than a grain of truth.

Washington was bitten by both the “Potomac Fever” bug, “the delusion-inducing obsession with the grandeur and commercial future of the Potomac

River” as Bowling (1988: 39; see also 1991: 13) defines it, and by the “pleasing prospect” bug (as we will see later). The combination of both bugs may have led him to overlook the downside of swampy land as a suitable site for Washington as the seat of empire. The swamp myth lends credibility to the “seat of empire” myth of an empire rising out of a swamp, of the empire triumphing over the swamp as a display of its power, a myth that had its prototype in St. Petersburg and its ultimate expression in Fascist Italy. The lower the point from which the empire started, the higher it could and would rise out of the swamp. Locating the city on the Potomac would mean that it would become what the hyperbolic Irish pamphleteer John O’Connor (cited by Bowling, 1988: 56) called “a center without parallel on the terraqueous globe,” a wetland central city for a wetland world—wetland central.

As with a number of other cities, such as Perth, Western Australia, for Dickey (2014: 45) “the key reason for locating the capital so far upstream [was] wartime defense.” As with Perth and Toronto and their adjacent swamps or marshes, the swamps behind Washington may also have been envisaged as a means of defense from an attack from the rear. Yet, as with Toronto, the location of Washington was not a defense as the British took it in 1814 as revenge for the American taking of Toronto (York). All three cities are linked by the 1812 War during which James Stirling, the founder of Perth, fought as the commander of a gun sloop and also by the fact that they were located where they were in preparation for war.

The history of Washington has not so far been told linking it to these and other swamp cities and other seats of power sitting in swamps, such as St. Petersburg, the sometime capital of imperial Russia. Perhaps the comparisons might end at this point as St. Petersburg was a monument to autocratic power, whereas Washington is a monument to republican and democratic power. What is unquestionable is that both are monuments to power (irrespective of the type of political power), not least to power over wetlands. Capital cities are like that. The design for both cities was baroque in style and the setting for both was in a swamp. The similarity in baroque style between the two cities attests to the power of style to mould a city; the similarity in site between the two cities attests to the power of the city to modify its site, and be modified by it. Baroque style was adaptable to, and usable by, both autocratic and democratic power.

Despite its baroque beginnings, Berg (2007: 112) argues that the city of Washington combined “all the sophistication of the European baroque ... with a good dose of [President] Washington’s republican sensibilities.” In other words, the city of Washington tried to combine the best of both worlds, to marry together both types of politics (autocratic and democratic) and both sorts of style (baroque and demotic), and be paradoxically both autocratic baroque and democratic republic. Despite their differences, both types of politics and style involved draining and filling wetlands as a defining feature of modernity and urban development. The city of Washington for Bordewitch (2008: 6) was “the first national capital to be established by a republic in modern times.” By contrast, St. Petersburg was the first national capital to be established by an autocracy in modern times. Both cities are iconic not only because they are baroque but also because they are modern cities set in premodern swamps; in and with them modernity clashes with and overcomes premodernity found in the swamp. Both cities mark their modernity by distinguishing themselves from, and dredging and draining, their wetland sites. Despite the ostensible differences between the nations and their polity, both cities enacted the same modern politics—both autocratic and democratic (and later fascistic)—of wetland destruction.

Washington himself thought the national capital was to be “the seat of Empire” (cited by Bordewitch, 2008: 60), though for Anthony Trollope ([1862] 1951: 454) during the American Civil War the city of Washington was “under the empire of King Mud.” The seat of empire, the American empire, was set in a swamp and reverted to swamp. “Empire,” of either the republican or autocratic sort, cannot abide unruly water and must regulate it, or try to or risk being inundated by it. Land and water dispute empire in the swamp, as John Muir (cited by Giblett, 2014: 157) suggested, but empire had to win land from water or risk being destroyed by flooding or engulfed in the mud of its own making. The importance, as Deleuze and Guattari (1986: 21) put it following Wittfogel, of “large-scale waterworks for an empire” applies not only to aqueducts and dams needed and used to supply domestic water to the imperial city, but also to the draining and filling of swamps for the building of the city in the first place and for the development of the agriculture to sustain it. Rome, St. Petersburg, and Washington (the city) as the seats of empire are exemplars.

Yet, rather than looking to St. Petersburg as a modern national capital designed in baroque style set in a swamp, the boosters, backers, and builders of

Washington looked to imperial Rome as their model and exemplar, for Rome was “the so-called eternal city” (Harrison, 1992: 46) and what Bordewitch (2008: 6) calls “a sacred repository of republican values” that would reside and find concrete expression in the “new Rome” of Washington (see also Berg, 2007: 108–109). Dickey (2014: xv) argues that Washington was “imagined as a massive neo-classical metropolis with giant radial avenues and boulevards.” Washington may have been imagined as neoclassical, but its designer Pierre Charles L’Enfant imagined and constructed it as baroque (as Dickey says later [19]), two quite different styles that derive from two different periods of European history.

The similarities between Washington and Rome did not end in the imagination or its possible design as part of the Potomac River was renamed the new Tiber, though “the American ‘Tiber River’” was, as Sennett (1994: 265) points out, “a mosquito-infested creek running through swampland.” Moreover, whereas the Pontine Marshes would not be drained successfully until Mussolini did so in the 1930s in the kind of war Fascists liked to fight (because it could be won so easily), the Potomac swamps had to be drained so the city could be built in the first place.

When the site for a new national capital was being considered away from the pernicious atmosphere of New York as the leading commercial city and away from the patrician associations of Philadelphia as the birthplace of the nation, the swampy valley of the Potomac was proposed as one possible site. Although the Potomac valley may not have been, as Bordewitch (2008: 5) suggests, “the wilderness or swamp that legend has sometimes suggested,” it certainly was swampy. Similarly, Berg (2007: 77) agrees that “the core of the federal district had never been the swamp that schoolbook history made it out to be, but it did contain patches of soggy land.” Schoolbook history subscribed to, and perpetuated, the nationalist and imperial mythology of a city rising out of a swamp and conquering it along similar lines to the St. Petersburg myth. Both autocratic and democratic power were exercised over and against wetlands.

On the founding of the capital city of the United States, Mumford (1961: 405) relates how its designer L’Enfant had

no single big city, not even St Petersburg, available to serve him as model, L’Enfant had nevertheless succeed in envisaging what a great capital,

conceived in baroque terms, might be ... And he had even made the most of what was, before the hand of man touched it, a discouraging site: bottom land, bordered by a swamp on the Potomac side, and dissected by a small river, ironically called the Tiber, which soon became a sewer.

Had he had St. Petersburg as a model he might have taken heart from knowing that a Czar had also founded a baroque capital in a swamp, or at least in a marsh.

Like St. Petersburg with its designers Joseph-Gaspard Lambert de Guerin and Alexandre Jean-Baptiste LeBlond, Washington also had a French designer in L'Enfant for whom, as a former Parisian, Paris rather than Rome and St. Petersburg were models. Or perhaps more precisely, as Berg (2007: 14) puts it, Washington would be "a Paris reborn as a Republican Rome" in "the American Paris, but better than Paris, a seat of wisdom and power on display for the rest of the world"—albeit set in a drained swamp like Paris and implying that Paris was not a seat of wisdom and power, and not on display for the rest of the world.

Like St. Petersburg with its prospects, Washington in L'Enfant's design schema incorporated a desire to take advantage of those points or "spots" in the site for the city that in his own words "commanded the most extensive prospect of the water" (cited by Berg, 2007: 74). For him "the gradual rising of the ground" of upper levels of the site "present a situation most advantageous to run streets and prolong them on a grand and far distant point of view. The remainder part of the ground ... is more broken—it may afford pleasant seats [. . . and] can command as grand a prospect as any of the other spots."

Not only had L'Enfant been bitten by the pleasing prospect bug, but also he was using Paris as his model for Washington, for, as Berg (2007: 13–14) puts it, "the former Parisian had seen his native city opening new and dramatic corridors during his childhood and knew firsthand the value of monumental view in juxtaposition with intimate spaces, of streets running straight to create vistas or subtly shifting to corral one's line of sight, or experiencing both awe and small delights in the same casual walk across town." L'Enfant had seen Paris transformed by Haussmann blasting boulevards through working-class areas in order to provide access for troops to quell rebellion. L'Enfant was successful in part in realizing his vision of creating in Washington what

Berg (2007: 162) calls “a shining city of monumental spaces,” though not perhaps in emulating Parisian intimate spaces of a walkable city with its arcades. Washington was what Dickey (2014: xv) calls a “the city of angles,” rather than the city of angels like Los Angeles, or the city of light like Paris.

The city of Washington became in Berg’s (2007: 105; see also 128) words “a city full of grand avenues,” the grandest of which became known as “the National Mall ... the largest governmentally administered green place in America until the designation of land for New York’s Central Park in 1853,” another gentleman’s park estate in the city built partially in a swamp. The pastoro-technical idyll brought the country into the city.

President Washington’s own estate of Mount Vernon reproduced all the conventions of the pleasing prospect in the form of the gentleman’s park estate built in the country (see Berg, 2007: 94), whereas the city of Washington reproduced similar conventions of slopes, vistas, and avenues in the form of the gentleman’s park city—albeit built in a swamp. The ambiguity of the very word “avenue” as either a tree-lined approach to a country house or a wide city street lined with trees attests to the metaphorical transformation of the former into the latter and the way in which country and city could be mutually reinforcing with similar aesthetic conventions, political power, and class connotations.

The repressed swamp before and beneath the city invariably returns. Dickey (2014: 19) relates how “what looked so elegant on L’Enfant’s blueprint—a web of radial baroque avenues overlapping a rectangular street grid—in practice became a confusing network of ragged and rutted strips of mud.” The seat of empire became stuck in mud; the city of angles became the city of mud. After Anthony Trollope ([1862] 1951: 454) had described how Washington during the Civil War was submerged “under the empire of King Mud” he went on to wonder

how the elite of a nation—for the inhabitants of Washington consider themselves to be the elite—can consent to live in such a state of thralldom, a foreigner cannot understand. Were I to say that it was intended to be typical of the condition of the government, I might be considered cynical; but undoubtedly the sloughs of despond which were deepest in their despondency were to be found in localities which gave an appearance of truth to such a surmise.

The sloughs of despond in Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* were encountered by Christian on his progress from "this world to that which is to come," from the earthly city of destruction to the heavenly city of creation, and so perhaps it was only appropriate that Washingtonians struggled through such a slough on their journey from this world to the new world of the republican United States with Washington as what James Greenleaf called "the 'New Jerusalem,' a veritable City of God" (cited by Dickey, 2014: 6). The American "New Jerusalem" was set for Greenleaf, like William Blake's "Jerusalem" in England's "green and pleasant land," in New England's, or at least America's, "green and pleasant land," or more precisely wetland.

In the same lower psychopathological register as the slough of despond and in accordance with the prevailing theory of the elements and the humors, marshes for Trollope ([1862] 1951) are not only bad for physical health as in the miasmatic theory of disease, but also bad for mental health. He repeatedly describes Washington as "a melancholy place," especially in winter, but as "the saddest spot of earth" in summer (309; see also 325). Later he describes the site of the Washington obelisk as "a sad and saddening spot was that marsh" (318).

The city of Washington as a whole may have been the City of God, but one infamous area in the backblocks and slums of Washington was known as "Hell's Bottom," which, according to Dickey (2014: 198), sat on "low-lying marshy ground that bred malaria and other waterborne diseases" (though marshy ground does not breed malaria (marshy ground is the habitat for anopheles mosquitoes that are the vector for malaria) and malaria is not a waterborne disease, but an animal-borne disease). Another area of Washington known as "Foggy Bottom" is described by Dickey as "the capital's own disease central" (169). The grotesque lower bodily and earthly strata are used to figure the grotesque lower urban stratum.

Trollope ([1862] 1951: 455) switches register from Christian piety to Greek mythology in his call for a new Hercules to cleanse the Augean stables: "of dirt of all kinds it behoves Washington and those concerned in Washington to make themselves free. It is the Augean stables through which some American Hercules must turn a purifying river before the American people can justly boast either of their capital or of their government." Such a Hercules was not forthcoming immediately after the Civil War if Mark Twain and Charles

Warner are anything to go by in their satirical novel *The Gilded Age* (in turn satirized by Dickey (2014: chapter 11) as “The Gilded Cage”) set in and about post–Civil War Washington.

Twain and Warner ([1873] 2001: 171) were much more disparaging than Trollope about the city and “the mud and slush deep and all-pervading.” They describe how

you stand at the back of the capitol to treat yourself to a view, and it is a very noble one. You understand, the capitol stands upon the verge of a high piece of table land, a fine commanding position, and its front looks out over this noble situation for a city—but it don’t see it, for the reason that when the capitol extension was decided upon, the property owners at once advanced their prices to such inhuman figures the people went down and built the city in the muddy low marsh *behind* the temple of liberty.

Similarly they describe how “the Monument to the Father of his Country towers out of the mud—sacred soil is the customary term” (172) and wonder why “the city fathers ... did not dilute the mud a little more and use them for canals” (173). What Twain and Warner did not know is that the city fathers did construct canals for a short period in the early days of the city (Dickey, 2014: chapter 2).

Mud provides Twain (just as we saw in his case with New Orleans and we will see with Chicago) and Warner with the opportunity for satirical mirth rather than pause for reflection on the vexed relationship historically and geographically between cities and wetlands, on the monumental and muddy (such as in St. Petersburg), on birth metaphors and cities as brain-children, on secular phallic monuments, and on sacred maternal marshes. If the mud had been diluted and the canals viable, Washington would have been a canal city like Venice, rather than a city with pretensions to be the Rome or Paris of the new world as the location of the city in a swamp was not viable as a canal city (as Dickey (2014: chapter 2) discusses with regard to its trenches [50]).

With its mud and its trenches, Washington, like London (as we saw in Chapter 4), was a precursor to the landscape of World War I trench warfare. By an irony of history lost on most historians, the urban landscape of the slum and the muddy and sewery street ended up becoming, and looking like, the

military landscape of trench warfare. With its canal trenches before the Civil War and its muddy streets in the aftermath of the Civil War, Washington was a precursor to the mud of World War I battlefields and its trenches. Washington as Trollope's "empire of King Mud" was transformed into western Europe's, or at least the western front's, empire of mud in which "King Mud" reigned supreme for much of the temporal duration and geographical extent of World War I, a fact remarked upon at length by many of its writers and a product of it being fought in an artificial swamp and feral quaking zone (see Giblett, 2009: chapters 1 and 4), just as Trollope, Twain, and Warner remarked upon Washington's mud, a product of it being set in a swamp and a native quaking zone.