



# HISTORIC DISTRICT

*A guide to historic Washington, D.C.*

## Menu

[Home](#)[Capitol\(ine\) Hill](#)

## Capitol(ine) Hill

What better way to start the comparisons between Rome and Washington, D.C. than at the center of it all – Capitol Hill.

In Rome, it's called the *Capitoline* Hill – or *Capitolium* in the original Latin, and *Campidoglio* in the modern Italian.

Ancient Rome was famously settled around seven hills. Although the Capitoline was the smallest, it was the symbolic center of the ancient city, both spiritually and politically.

On its peak was the Temple of Jupiter Optimus Maximus, dedicated to the king of the gods. And just behind it was the Forum, where all official political business took place.



A 19th Century drawing depicting the Temple of Jupiter on the Capitoline Hill during the Roman Republic.

During the peak of the Roman empire, this small hill was literally the power center of the world.

So how did Washington end up with it's very own Capitol Hill?

It was Thomas Jefferson who chose the name "Capitol" for the building that would house Congress, and the name of the hill that it would sit on.

Jefferson was Secretary of State when the federal district was still in the planning stages. He and President Washington were responsible for overseeing the designs of the city and its irascible planner, the French engineer Pierre Charles L'Enfant.

While they were all focused on building something uniquely American – the first wholly created capital for a democratic country – they also wanted to show skeptical Europeans that this experiment in government was rooted in the past – namely the ancient Roman republic.

L'Enfant had chosen the site for Congress on the top of a prominent hill that he called Jenkins Hill after a local landowner.

As he said, it was "a pedestal waiting for a monument."



The Capitol on its pedestal.

He made this hill the geographic center of the city, and had all the streets radiate out from this one point. It was a fitting place to locate Congress, making it more important in stature than the President's House, which was down the hill at the other end of Pennsylvania Avenue.

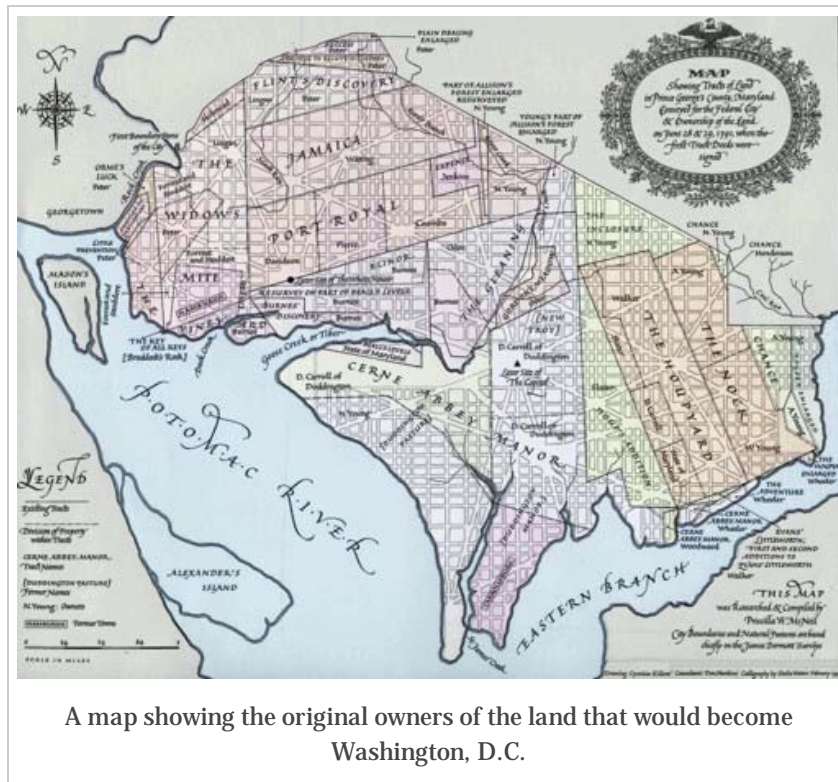
Jefferson thought that both Congress and its location deserved a more symbolically important name. On the original plans drawn up by L'Enfant, he crossed through the name

“Congress House”, and replaced it with the word “Capitol.”

And thus the Capitoline Hill was born again on the American continent.

But even before the founding of Washington, D.C. – and even before the founding of the United States – there were already some links between the ancient city of Rome and this remote bit of farmland destined to become our nation’s capital.

The area that L’Enfant called Jenkins Hill was actually known as “New Troy,” dating all the way back to the original Maryland land grant in 1663. In Roman mythology, the ancient city of Troy was a precursor to Rome.



A map showing the original owners of the land that would become Washington, D.C.

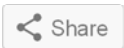
And the area around New Troy included a 400-acre farm that its owner had actually named Rome. He even renamed the modest Goose Creek, which flowed from the Potomac to the base of what would become Capitol Hill, the mighty Tiber Creek, after Rome’s Tiber River.

And his name – Francis Pope.

So there you go – even before its founding, Washington had a Rome, the Tiber, and a Pope.

Ciao, my work is done for the day.

Share this:



Loading...

From Rome with Love

A Special Birthday at the Smithsonian – Julia Child's Centennial

## 2 thoughts on “Capitol(ine) Hill”



**KJ Fleming**

August 13, 2012 at 1:09 pm

Great post! Thanks for sharing. Question: Is there truth to the rumor that DC was settled around an area of seven hills as well?

[Reply](#)



**Historic District**

August 14, 2012 at 4:56 am

Good question! I investigated that a bit, and I don't think so.

There are a lot of other capital cities that claim to be founded around seven hills like Rome (my hometown of Richmond is one of them), but I haven't found any mention of that being a consideration for the choosing of the site for D.C.

We could probably count out seven significant hills within the District today, but I

don't think L'Enfant did in his day...

Thanks for reading! Keep the questions coming...

[Reply](#)

## Leave a Reply



Email (required)

(Address never made public)

Name (required)

Website

Notify me of new comments via email.

[Post Comment](#)

### RECENT HISTORY

[Historic District Road Trip: Charleston Harbor](#)

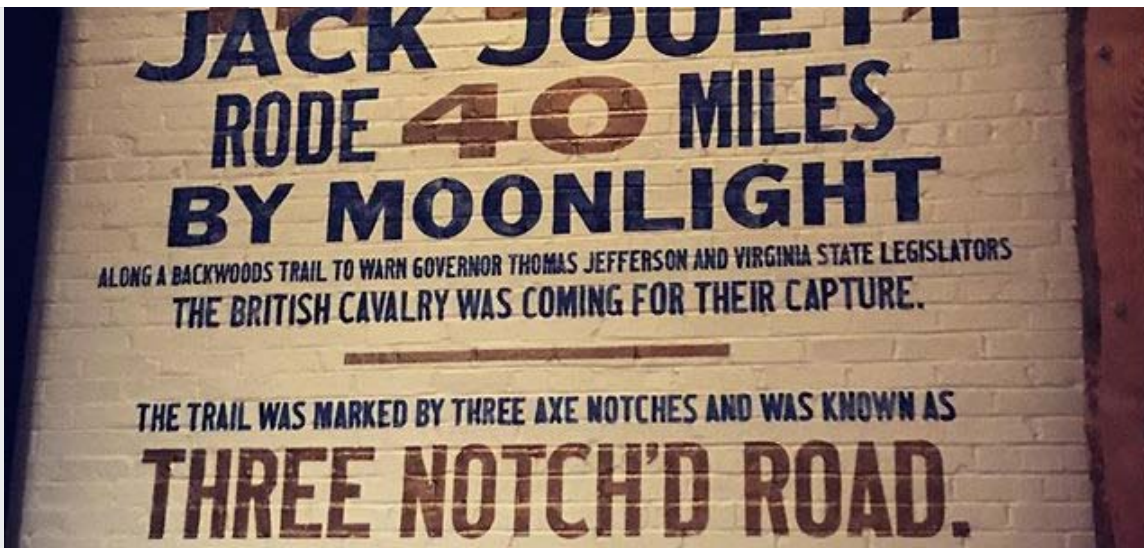
[Follow Historic District on WordPress.com](#)

### FACEBOOK

[Facebook](#)

### INSTAGRAM





[Create a free website or blog at WordPress.com.](#)

