

# District of Columbia Research Guide



## Family History Sources in the Nation's Capital

### District of Columbia History

Congress created the District of Columbia as the seat of the federal government on 16 July 1790. On 9 September 1791 George Washington appointed three commissioners to lay out the city, although the federal government did not relocate to the District of Columbia until 1801. The area chosen as the seat of government was carved from Fairfax County, Virginia (created in 1742), and from parts of Prince George's (created 1695) and Montgomery (created 1776) counties, Maryland. The area taken from Virginia was returned to that state in 1846.



By 1800 the District's population was about 14,000, but the federal government was still operating in Philadelphia. In the interim before the government relocated, residents of the District used record-keeping services in Fairfax County, Virginia, and Montgomery County, Maryland, until local government offices were established. By 1820, the population had grown to about 33,000 as more government jobs were made available and retail businesses grew to accommodate the populace. Those moving into the area came mainly from surrounding states, but some merchants arrived from Europe. African Americans have always been a major element of the District's population, and their number increased dramatically during the Civil War and Reconstruction era. Nearly twenty percent of the total population in 1860 was made up of free African Americans; slightly more than four percent were slaves.

Tracing families in the District of Columbia requires a complete understanding of the record periods and jurisdictions and the tenacity to track them down in one of the many repositories. Records for those living in the area created for the District of Columbia before 1801 have to be sought either in Maryland's or Virginia's records. When the portion of Virginia originally taken to create the District of Columbia was returned in 1846, the pre-1846 records were returned as well.

The above section is from *History of the District of Columbia* in the [Ancestry.com Wiki](#), and was originally published in *Red Book: American State, County and Town Sources*, ed. by Alice Eichholz, CG, Ph.D., chapter by Johni Cerny.



### Help and Advice

- [Map of the District of Columbia](#)
- [District of Columbia Family History Research](#)

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## District of Columbia Census Records

When the first federal census was taken in 1790, residents of Washington D.C. were enumerated in two separate states. Those living north of the Potomac River were enumerated with Prince George's and Montgomery counties in Maryland. Those south of the river were listed with Virginians; however, Virginia's census for 1790 was destroyed. Although the 1800 census has survived, no federal census returns exist for the District of Columbia for 1810. Beginning in 1820, enumerations exist for each decennial except for the mostly destroyed 1890 census. All of the population schedules are available at the National Archives in the Microfilm Reading Room, and through the Family History Library and its centers. The following census collections are available on Ancestry:

- [U.S. Federal Censuses, 1790-1940](#)
- [District of Columbia, Compiled Census and Census Substitutes Index, 1800-1890](#)
- [U.S. Federal Census Mortality Schedules, 1850-1885](#)
- [1890 Veterans Schedules](#)
- [U.S. Enumeration District Maps and Descriptions, 1940](#)
- [1860 U.S. Federal Census - Slave Schedules](#)
- [1850 U.S. Federal Census - Slave Schedules](#)

<b>Population</b>	
<b>1800</b>	<b>8,144</b>
<b>1810</b>	<b>15,471</b>
<b>1820</b>	<b>23,336</b>
<b>1830</b>	<b>30,261</b>
<b>1840</b>	<b>33,745</b>
<b>1850</b>	<b>51,687</b>
<b>1860</b>	<b>75,080</b>
<b>1870</b>	<b>131,700</b>
<b>1880</b>	<b>177,624</b>
<b>1890</b>	<b>230,392</b>
<b>1900</b>	<b>278,718</b>
<b>1910</b>	<b>331,069</b>
<b>1920</b>	<b>437,571</b>
<b>1930</b>	<b>486,869</b>
<b>1940</b>	<b>663,091</b>

## District of Columbia Vital Records

- [District of Columbia Department of Health – Vital Records Division](#): Holds records of births and deaths from August 1874 to the present. See the FAQ for information on how to request records.
- [District of Columbia Archives](#): Holds certificates of birth (1874-1928), death (1874-1932), and marriage (1870-1991).
- [Superior Court of the District of Columbia – Marriage Bureau](#): Holds marriage records from the District from 1811.

### Vital Records on Ancestry

- [District of Columbia, Select Deaths and Burials, 1840-1964](#)
- [District of Columbia, Select Marriages, 1830-1921](#)
- [District of Columbia, Select Births and Christenings, 1830-1955](#)
- [Washington, D.C., Marriages, 1801-1825](#)
- [Washington, D.C. Marriages, 1826-50](#)
- [U.S., Hochheimer Marriage Records, 1850-1900](#)
- [Historical court records of Washington, District of Columbia \(deaths\)](#)
- [Historical court records of Washington, District of Columbia \(marriages\)](#)
- [Washington, District of Columbia, Battleground National Cemetery, 1864-1936](#)
- [U.S., Find A Grave Index, 1600s-Current](#)

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## Other Collections

- [Washington, D.C., Military Naturalization Petitions, 1918-1924](#)
- [Washington Post, \(Washington, D.C.\)](#) (Historical newspaper)
- [The Daily Globe \(Washington, D.C.\)](#)
- [Washington, D.C. City Directory, 1890](#)
- [Washington, D.C. Directory, 1827](#)
- [Register of the Society of Mayflower descendants in the District of Columbia, 1970 : in commemoration of the 350th anniversary](#)
- [A Directory of churches and religious organizations in the District of Columbia, 1939](#)
- [U.S., Register of Civil, Military, and Naval Service, 1863-1959](#)
- [Washington, D.C., Slave Emancipation Records, 1851-1863](#) (Free)
- [Washington, D.C., Slave Owner Petitions, 1862-1863](#) (Free)
- [Washington D.C., Ex-Slave Pension Correspondence and Case Files, 1892-1922](#) (Free)
- [Washington D.C., Habeas Corpus Case Records, 1820-1863](#)
- [Washington County, D.C., Indentures of Apprenticeship, 1801-1811](#) (Free)
- [Washington, Past and Present: A History](#)
- [U.S., Indexed County Land Ownership Maps, 1860-1918](#)
- [U.S. Map Collection, 1513-1990](#)
- [Historic Land Ownership and Reference Atlases, 1507-2000](#)
- [U.S. IRS Tax Assessment Lists, 1862-1918](#)
- [U.S. School Yearbooks, 1880-2012](#)
- [U.S. City Directories, 1821-1989](#) (Use the browse box in the upper-right corner to determine what directories are available for your ancestor's area. If they lived in a rural area, check to see if that area was included with a larger city in the vicinity.)

## Other D.C. Resources

The organizations listed below provide information about District of Columbia history and genealogy. In addition to these state-level resources, many counties and towns maintain important genealogical collections in local repositories, so check for local resources when researching.

- [District of Columbia Public Library – Special Collections](#): The Washingtonia Collection holds genealogy resources, including birth, marriage, and death indexes and selected vital records; obituaries; newspapers; census records; directories; and other resources.
- [District of Columbia Archives](#): In addition to early birth, marriage, and death records, the Archives holds records of wills, probate, administration cases, guardianship, and other records for Washington, D.C.
- [Historical Society of Washington, D.C.](#): The library holds photographs, maps, manuscripts, vertical files, and more. See the helpful family history research guide for detailed information.
- [District of Columbia GenWeb](#)
- [National Archives and Records Administration \(NARA\) - Washington, D.C.](#): This facility maintains records from federal agencies and courts in District of Columbia.

### Significant Dates (through 1925)

1789 – Georgetown University was founded by Jesuit priests in what would soon become the District of Columbia.

1790 – The Residence Act was passed making a 10-mile, diamond-shaped tract at the confluence of the Potomac and East Branch Rivers the permanent capital of the United States. It was established on land chosen by George Washington and ceded to the federal government by the states of Maryland and Virginia.

1791 – Pierre L'Enfant, commissioned by George Washington, began planning the city of Washington.

1800 – The White House was completed and John and Abigail Adams became its first residents. The 6<sup>th</sup> U.S. Congress was the first to meet in the new, unfinished U.S. Capitol, also home to the Library of Congress, D.C. courts, and the Supreme Court.

1814 – The British burned the new Capitol building, the White House, the Treasury, and the building housing the Departments of State, Navy, and War. Americans began the burning of the Navy Yard prior to the arrival of the British, and the British burned what was left of it. A severe thunderstorm the following day, wrought even more damage to the city.

1815 – The Library of Congress was re-established with Thomas Jefferson's personal library of 6,487 books.

1829 – The inauguration of Andrew Jackson got out of hand when hordes of people showed up at the White House for his open house. The president escaped the festivities, while the crowds ruined the furnishings and carpets.

1839 – Dueling was outlawed in Washington, D.C., although this did not stop the practice as parties could circumvent prosecution by crossing over to Maryland, where it remained legal.

1844 – Samuel F.B. Morse sent the first message by telegraph from Washington, D.C. to Baltimore, Maryland. His message read, "What hath God wrought?"

1846 – The Smithsonian Institution was established by an Act of Congress thanks to the generous gift of James Smithson, a British scientist, who bequeathed 100,000 gold sovereigns to the United States to found "an establishment for the increase and diffusion of knowledge."

1847 – The portion of Washington, D.C., on the Virginia side of the Potomac River was returned to the state of Virginia.

1848 – The cornerstone of the Washington Monument was laid, although it would not be completed until 1884.

1850 – The Compromise of 1850 banned the sale of slaves in the District of Columbia, although slavery was still permitted.

1851 – A Christmas Eve fire destroyed two-thirds of the Library of Congress.

1860 – There were three times as many free African-Americans in Washington, D.C. as slaves.

1861-1865 – The Civil War brought the need for defenses in and around the capital. By 1862 a network of 48 forts and batteries protected the city and by the end of the war, there were 68 forts and 93 detached batteries defending the city.

1862 – Slavery was abolished in Washington, D.C.

1864 – Confederate forces under General Jubal Early attempted to take Washington, D.C.

1865 – President Abraham Lincoln was shot and killed at Ford's Theater in Washington, D.C. The plot also included plans to assassinate Vice President Andrew Johnson and Secretary of State William Seward, and while Seward was attacked in bed and stabbed, he survived. George Atzerodt, who was tasked with killing the vice-president didn't go through with his assignment.

1867 – African American men 21 or older were granted the right to vote in Washington D.C.

1867 – A charter is granted to Howard University in Washington, D.C. Initially a theological school for African American ministers, but it expanded to educate former slaves in the fields of the liberal arts and medicine, as well.

1870 – The 15<sup>th</sup> Amendment was passed, stating the "right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any state on account of race, color, or previous condition of servitude."

1877 – The *Washington Post* newspaper began circulation.

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1888 – The Washington Monument opened to the public.

1890 – The Daughters of the American Revolution was founded in Washington, D.C.

1894 – Following the economic Panic of 1893, unemployed workers led by Ohio businessman and politician Jacob Coxey marched across the country on Washington, D.C. The goal of "Coxey's Army" was to pressure Washington to allocate funds to government projects that would create jobs.

1897 – The Library of Congress building was completed and opened its doors to the public.

1901 – President Theodore Roosevelt invites Booker T. Washington to dine at the White House, sparking outrage.

1907 – The foundation stone of the Washington National Cathedral was laid. The cathedral was completed in 1990 after 83 years of construction.

1918 - The Spanish influenza pandemic arrived in Washington, D.C. It went on to claim 3,000 lives in the city.

1918 – The first air mail service in the U.S. began between Washington, D.C. and New York City.

1919 – General John J. "Black Jack" Pershing led a victory parade down Pennsylvania Avenue.

1919 – White mobs outraged by inflammatory newspaper headlines attacked African Americans on Washington, D.C. streets sparking race riots that lasted for four days, during which six people were killed and many more injured.

1922 – The Lincoln Memorial opened to the public.

1924 - Calvin Coolidge took to the airwaves, addressing the country for the first time via radio from the White House.

1925 – Members of the Ku Klux Klan marched on Washington, D.C.



[Pershing at head of 1st Div. in parade, September 17, 1919, Washington, D.C., from the Library of Congress Photo Collection, 1840-2000](#)