

# Founders Online

## MEMORANDUM FOR THOMAS JEFFERSON, 27 AUGUST 1791

### Memorandum for Thomas Jefferson

[Philadelphia, c.27 August 1791]

Will circumstances render a postponement of the Sale of Lots in the Federal City advisable? If not

Where ought they to be made

Will it in that case, or even without it, be necessary or prudent to attempt to borrow money to carry on the diff't works in the City?

Whether ought the building of a bridge over the Eastern branch to be attempted—the Canal set about—and Mr Peter's proposition with respect to wharves gone into *now*—or postponed until our funds are better ascertained & become productive?<sup>1</sup>

At what time can the several Proprietors claim, with propriety, payment for the public squares wch is marked upon their respective tracts?

Ought there to be any wood houses in the town?

What sort of Brick or Stone [Houses]<sup>2</sup> should be built—& of wht height—especially on the principal Streets or Avenues?

When ought the public buildings to be begun, & in what manner had the materials best be provided?

How ought they to be promulgated, so as to draw plans from skilful Architects? and what would be the best mode of carrying on the Work?

Ought not Stoups & projections of every sort & kind into the Streets to be prohibited *absolutely*?

What compromise can be made with the Lot holders in Hamburg & Carrollsburgh by which the plan of the Federal City may be preserved?

Ought not the several Land holders to be called upon to ascertain their respective boundaries previous to the Sale of Lots?

Would it not be advisable to have the Federal district as laid out, (comprehending the plan of the Town) engraved in one piece?

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AD, DLC:GW. These queries are in GW's hand, but the page also bears later replies written by Thomas Jefferson, who also numbered some of the queries and wrote seven additional notes, numbered 14–20, at the bottom of the page before returning the document to GW under cover of a letter from Georgetown, Maryland. See Jefferson to GW, 8 Sept. and note 1.

When Pierre-Charles L'Enfant arrived in Philadelphia sometime during the last week of August, he presented to GW his plan of the Federal City and his letter of 19 Aug. to GW and discussed with him on or before 26 Aug. the postponement of the first sale of city lots. On that date Jefferson invited James Madison to dinner and noted: "Since writing the above the President has been here, & left L'Enfant's plan, with a wish that you & I would examine it together immediately, as to certain matters, & let him know the result. As the plan is very large, will you walk up & examine it here?" (Madison Papers, 14:74). GW's memorandum may have been presented to Jefferson that day or as late as 29 Aug., when GW wrote to Jefferson about Jefferson's impending meeting with the commissioners for the federal district. GW's queries probably were drafted for Jefferson to pose to the commissioners, suggesting that they were written on 27 Aug., when GW conferred with Jefferson, Madison, and L'Enfant. On this day Tobias Lear wrote to L'Enfant that GW "wishes to see you about 5 O'clock—or from that to 6 as you can make it convenient—this afternoon" (DLC: Digges-L'Enfant-Morgan Papers). Jefferson and Madison may have been present at this meeting and may also have met with GW earlier this day to present their views on the matters committed to them on 26 August. Jefferson's letter of 28 Aug. to the commissioners mentions these meetings without revealing their chronology or participants: "Major Lenfant also having arrived here and laid his plan of the Federal city before the President, he was pleased to desire a conference of certain persons, in his presence, on these several subjects. It is the opinion of the President, in consequence thereof, that an immediate meeting of the Commissioners at George town is requisite, that certain measures may be decided on and put into a course of preparation for a commencement of sale on the 17th. of Octob. as advertised. As Mr. Madison and myself, who were present at the conferences, propose to pass through George town on our way to Virginia, the President supposes that our attendance at the meeting of the Commissioners might be of service to them, as we could communicate to them the sentiments developed at the conferences here and approved by the President, under whatever point of

view they may have occasion to know them." Jefferson wrote that he and Madison would arrive 7-8 Sept. and proposed to confer with the commissioners on 8 Sept. (*Jefferson Papers*, 22:88-89). Jefferson reported on the conference to GW on 8 September.

1. For "Mr Peter's proposon," see [GW to the Commissioners for the Federal District, 24 July](#) and [note 1](#).
2. This word was inserted by Jefferson.

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[Back to top](#)

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## ENCLOSURE: MEMORANDUM FOR THOMAS JEFFERSON WITH JEFFERSON'S ANSWERS AND NOTES, 27 AUGUST-8 SEPTEMBER 1791

### Enclosure

#### Memorandum for Thomas Jefferson with Jefferson's Answers and Notes

[Philadelphia, c.27 Aug.—8 Sept. 1791]

- Will circumstances render a postponement of the Sale of Lots in the Federal City advisable? If not not advisable?
- [2.] Where ought they to be made left to be considered ultimately on the spot, the general opinion being only that the leading interests be accommodated.
- [3.] Will it in that case, or even without it, be necessary or prudent to attempt to borrow money to carry on the diffit works in the City? doubtful if a loan can be proposed without previous legislative authority, or filled till a sale shall have settled something like the value of the lots which are to secure repayment. the ready money payment increased to one fourth.
- Whether ought the building of a bridge over the Eastern branch to be attempted—the Canal set about—and Mr Peter's proposion with respect to wharves gone into *now*—or postponed until our funds are better ascertained & become productive? Must wait for money. the property of reclaimed lands to be considered of.
- At what time can the several Proprietors claim, with propriety, payment for the public squares wch is marked upon their respective tracts? Whenever the money shall have been raised by the sale of their own lands.
- Ought there to be any wood houses in the town? No.
- [7.] What sort of Brick or Stone [Houses] should be built —& of wht height—especially on the principal Streets or Avenues? liberty as to advancing or withdrawing the front, but some limits as to height would be desireable.<sup>1</sup> no house wall higher than 35 feet in any part of the town; none lower than that on any of the avenues.<sup>2</sup>
- When ought the public buildings to be begun, & in what manner had the materials best be provided? the digging earth for bricks this fall is indispensable. provisions of other materials to depend on the funds.
- How ought they to be promulgated, so as to draw plans from skilful Architects? and what would be the best mode of carrying on the Work? by advertisement of a medal or other reward for the best plan. see a sketch or specimen of advertisemt.
- Ought not Stoups & projections of every sort & kind into the Streets to be prohibited *absolutely*? no ineroachments to be permitted.
- [11.] What compromise can be made with the Lot holders in Homburgh & Carrollsburgh by which the plan of the Federal City may be preserved? a liberal compromise will be better than discontents, or disputed titles.
- Ought not the several Land holders to be called upon to ascertain their respective bounderies previous to the Sale of Lots? certainly they ought.
- [13.] Would it not be advisable to have the Federal district as laid out, (comprehending the plan of the Town) engraved in one piece? it would.
- to be done; but whether by the Commissioners or Artists, to be considered of.<sup>3</sup>

- [14.] Names of streets, alphabetically one way & numerically the other. the former divided into North & South letters, the latter East & West numbers from the Capitol.
- [15.] lots with springs on them to be appropriated to the public, if practicable without much discontent, & the springs not to be sold again.
- [16.] The public squares to be left blank, except that for the Capitol, & the other for the Executive department which are to be considered as appropriated at present, all other particular appropriations of squares to remain till they are respectively wanted.
- [17.] Soundings of Eastern branch to be taken in time for the engraving.
- [18.] Post road through the city, will see to it immediately.
- 19 Name of city and territory, City of Washington & territory of Columbia.
- [20.] Meeting of President & Commis on afternoon of Oct. 16.

AD, DLC:GW. The queries on the left are in GW's hand, and the replies were written later by Thomas Jefferson, who also numbered some of the queries, inserted the word in square brackets in query 7, and wrote the notes at the bottom of the second page before returning the document to GW.

Jefferson seems to have written most of his answers to GW's queries before meeting with the commissioners on 8 Sept. and might have written them as early as late August when he discussed the memorandum with GW. That GW and Jefferson, and probably also James Madison, conferred in August about GW's questions is indicated by Jefferson's comment in the covering letter that the commissioners had "concurred unanimously in . . . every point with what had been thought best in Philadelphia." Notes fourteen through twenty were added by Jefferson on 8 September.

1. This part of the answer to query 7 seems to reflect a general principle agreed to in Philadelphia before Jefferson's departure.
2. This part seems to reflect a decision made by the commissioners on 8 September.
3. This response suggests that Jefferson wrote most of the answers to GW's queries before the specific decision made by the commissioners on this point at the meeting of 8 Sept. and described by Jefferson in the covering letter (see also n.4 to that letter).

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[Back to top](#)

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## TO GEORGE WASHINGTON FROM THOMAS JEFFERSON, 8 SEPTEMBER 1791

From Thomas Jefferson

Sir

George town [Md.] Sep. 8. 1791.

We were detained on the road by the rains so that we did not arrive here till yesterday about two o'clock. as soon as horses could be got ready, we set out & rode till dark, examining chiefly the grounds newly laid open, which we found much superior to what we had imagined. we have passed this day in consultation with the Commissioners, who having deliberated on every article contained in our paper, & preadmonished that it was your desire that they should decide freely on their own view of things, concurred unanimously in, I believe, every point with what had been thought best in Philadelphia, they decided also the following additional matters.<sup>1</sup>

Quere 2. lots to be sold in four places, viz., on the Eastern branch, near the Capitol, near the President's house, & in the angle between the river & Rock creek.<sup>2</sup>

3. The ready money payment at the sale to be increased to one fourth, & so advertized immediately. they will send advertisements to some printer in every state.

7. the houses in the avenues to be *exactly* 35 feet high, that is to say their walls. none to be higher in any other part of the town, but may be lower.

11. the compromise stated to you by mister Johnson has put this matter out of all dispute.<sup>3</sup>

13. the map to be engraved on account of the Commissioners, & the sales of them for the public benefit.<sup>4</sup>

19. they have named the City & the territory, the latter after Columbus.<sup>5</sup>

Tomorrow they meet to take measures for carrying into execution all the several matters contained in the paper which I have the honor to return to you, as I believe you have no copy of it.<sup>6</sup> Mr Madison & myself propose to pursue our journey in the morning, four days more will bring me to my own house. we were told in Baltimore that that place was becoming better humored towards this, and found it better that the government should be here than in Philadelphia. I have the honor to be with sentiments of the highest respect & attachment Sir Your most obedt & most humble sert

Th: Jefferson

ALS, DLC:GW.

For background to this document, see Memorandum for Thomas Jefferson, c.27 August.

1. On 31 Aug. Jefferson invited Pierre-Charles L'Enfant to dine with him and James Madison the next day "to converse with him before their departure on several matters relative to George town" (Jefferson Papers, 22:112). Whether L'Enfant accepted is uncertain. Jefferson and Madison left Philadelphia on 2 Sept. and arrived at Georgetown on 7 Sept., spending that afternoon examining the ground selected for the Federal City, where workmen under the direction of L'Enfant and Andrew Ellicott were busy opening paths through the woods for streets. On 8 Sept. Jefferson and Madison met with the three commissioners for the federal district.

2. The decision to sell lots at four widely separated places in the Federal City was undoubtedly intended to appeal to the interests of all of the proprietors. As indicated by Jefferson's notes on GW's second query in the enclosure below, the commissioners postponed designating the specific location of the lots to be sold. On 9 Sept. Ellicott suggested to the commissioners selling lots near the Eastern Branch and Georgetown, since these could be readily developed for commercial purposes, but he urged them to delay selling lots around the federal buildings, shrewdly noting that these would rise considerably in value once the buildings were constructed. Instead, he suggested selling lots on the edges of the city that might be appropriate for gardens or pasturage. The commissioners considered Ellicott's recommendations but did not instruct him specifically which lots should be surveyed before the October sale. Ellicott also sent to L'Enfant a report on the commissioners' meeting, expressing surprise that they had not rendered a decision about the lots to be sold (Arnebeck, Through a Fiery Trial, 61).

3. Jefferson is alluding to the problem of acquiring the lots in Hamburg and Carrollsburgh from dozens of owners. Earlier efforts at outright purchase had been unsuccessful (see William Deakins, Jr. and Benjamin Stoddert to GW, 9 Dec. 1790, and GW to Deakins and Stoddert, 17 Feb. 1791). Thomas Johnson apparently had suggested to GW exchanging each lot in the undeveloped towns for one lot in the Federal City (see Jefferson's note to query 11 in the enclosure below). This was the solution adopted by the commissioners in 1793-94.

4. This decision resolved an issue raised in Jefferson's letter of 19 Aug. 1791 to L'Enfant: "A person applied to me the other day on the subject of engraving a Map of the Federal territory. I observed to him that if yourself or Mr. Ellicot chose to have this done, you would have the best right to it." The commissioners did not agree with Jefferson that L'Enfant or Ellicott possessed the right to publish a map of surveys performed while employed by the federal government, and Jefferson's opinion might have contributed to L'Enfant's belief that he was independent of the authority of the commissioners (*Jefferson Papers*, 22:47-48).

5. The commissioners had agreed to name the Federal City "Washington" in honor of the president, as Jefferson informed GW in a note at the bottom of the enclosed memorandum. The idea of naming the Federal City in honor of GW had been proposed publicly as early as August 1789 (*Bowling, Creation of Washington, D.C.*, 225). William Loughton Smith had suggested to L'Enfant in April 1791 "calling this new Seat of Empire, Washingtonople" (*Matthews, Journal of William L. Smith*, 62).

6. On 9 Sept. the commissioners drafted a memorial to the state of Maryland seeking legislative sanction for the proposal to exchange lots in Hamburg and Carrollsburgh for lots in the Federal City and requesting authority to license the sale of liquor and the building of wharves in the district, as well as to regulate the disposal of earth displaced for cellars, wells, and foundations, to establish a registry of deeds for the district, and to give a bill of sale from the commissioners the same legal force as a deed. They also asked that the Maryland legislature pass a law permitting foreigners to purchase land in the District of Columbia. On 9 Sept. the commissioners officially informed L'Enfant of the names of the Federal City and the district as well as the alphabetical and numerical system for naming streets. They also instructed him to have 10,000 engraved copies of his plan prepared in advance of the October sale (*Arnebeck, Through a Fiery Trial*, 61-62).

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[Back to top](#)

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