

Washington, D.C.

Some people believe that when elected officials go to Washington, D.C., they lose touch with the “regular folks” back home. But the desire for less public input is one reason why the nation's capital was established where it is in the first place.

After the Revolutionary War ended, there was little money left in the American treasury. Most of the soldiers who had fought in the war were owed back wages. On June 20, 1783, an angry mob of soldiers invaded government offices, then headquartered in Philadelphia. The soldiers wanted to complain to Congress about not getting paid. They were not the first citizens to appear in Philadelphia to voice their concerns to lawmakers. On that day, a group of congressmen began an effort to move the nation's capital to another city, where it would be more difficult for people to gather and try to intimidate those charged with making the country's laws.

Congressmen from the North wanted a northern capital city, but those from the South, including Thomas Jefferson of Virginia, called for a southern location. In 1790, George Washington, the country's new President, was looking for a city somewhere in the middle that might make both sides happy. Washington chose a site about 20 miles from his home in Mount Vernon, Virginia. It was between two well-known seaports: Alexandria, Virginia, and Georgetown, Maryland. The site was named after Washington, but in those days it was little more than unsettled frontier.

At first, no one was very happy with the new capital. Many said it was too isolated. By 1809, when Jefferson was leaving office, only about 5,000 people lived in the new capital. The streets were dirt and often became mud streams when the Potomac River flooded. But the city took on new meaning for Americans in 1814 when the British invaded Washington and burned the city during the War of 1812. Americans responded patriotically to the invasion and worked together to rebuild the city. From that time, Americans began to embrace the idea of Washington, D.C., as the nation's capital.

