

# D.C. General Land-Grab Insults the City and the Founding Fathers

by Edward Spannaus

During the bitter battle throughout 2001 to save D.C. General Hospital—the only public hospital in the nation’s capital—Lyndon LaRouche, and other leaders of the Coalition to Save D.C. General, warned that the plan to shut down the hospital was part of a billion-dollar real estate scam in this poorer quadrant of the city. Researchers working with the Coalition found the details of plans on the drawing boards for the 2012 Olympics, and for the development of high-rise residential and office buildings and even a boating marina at the foot of Massachusetts Avenue.

All such land-grab plans were vehemently denied by the Mayor and other District officials involved in ramming through the shutdown of the hospital, which has cost the lives of scores of Washington residents since. Those who issued those denials, are now exposed as blatant liars.

Coalition leader Dr. Abdul Alim Muhammad, speaking to rallies and mass demonstrations at the D.C. General site, passionately described the land on which the hospital stood as “sacred ground . . . consecrated,” and declared it a travesty to hand it over for exploitation by private interests. Reference was often made to the 200-year history of the hospital, and the fact that the land had been designated for hospital use by no less than the Father of our country, George Washington.

But now, D.C. Mayor Anthony Williams and other city officials are rushing to have the U.S. government transfer jurisdiction over the land on which the thousand-bed hospital building sits, so that the District may proceed to tear down what is left of the hospital, and “redevelop” the area with private retail stores, sports facilities and parks, and luxury housing—including high-rise buildings.

## Public Health Sold for ‘Our Olympic Bid’

In January, legislation was introduced in the D.C. Council requiring the submission of a draft development plan for the 67-acre campus by March 31. A few days after a contentious hearing in the Council, Williams admitted that the land would be “a component of our Olympic bid”—referring to the District’s bid to host the 2012 Summer Olympics. The planning committee for the bid has drawn up detailed plans to turn the area around RFK Stadium—which sits just north of the D.C. General campus—into a huge “Olympic sports and entertainment complex.”

While a health-care clinic or some sort of outpatient facility may be included as a sop to the citizens of the city, the planning process to date has brushed aside proposals and demands that the site include a full-service public hospital. At one time, citizens were told that Congress would have to approve the transfer of jurisdiction; but District and Federal officials have apparently now concluded that they do *not* need Congressional approval, but that the whole thing can be handled simply by having the Federal General Services Administration (GSA) declare the land as “surplus,” and transfer jurisdiction over it to the District. Title would apparently remain vested in the United States government, but the District could determine its future use. “Home rule” for the capital is invoked by those who want to loot it and depopulate it of its citizens of color—but only when such “home rule” suits their purposes.

But, as we shall see herein, the land on which D.C. sits indeed is “sacred”—it was designated for hospital use from the earliest days of our Republic, and the designation of that site and other areas of the newly formed City of Washington as “public reservations” *to be used for the public good*, was regarded as a perpetual, sacred trust. An “administrative” determination that the land is no longer needed for hospital usage, but can be used for private development, violates every intention that the Founders of this nation had, with respect to the creation and development of the national capital in the City of Washington.

## The History of ‘Reservation 13’

Once the general location for the national capital (on the Maryland-Virginia line along the Potomac), had been settled, in 1790, Congress authorized President George Washington to designate the exact location, and to undertake the planning and design of the new seat of the national government, in preparation for the planned removal, set for 1800, of the government from Philadelphia to the new Federal District.

The original plan for the City of Washington (it was, at that time, only one part of the Federal District which also included the cities of Georgetown, Alexandria, and other towns) was drafted by the French military engineer, Charles Pierre L’Enfant, in 1791. Washington himself, in his modesty, always referred to it as the “Federal City,” while everyone

else called it, “Washington.”

Washington was unique among national capitals, in that it did not emerge first as a commercial center, but was designed as a republican capital from its inception. L’Enfant’s grand design for the city included a generous supply of open spaces and vistas, utilizing his scheme of diagonal avenues and public squares at their major intersections. Additionally, he set aside numerous reservations for public buildings and for other public uses. For various reasons, L’Enfant was discharged from his duties, and the final version of the plan was drafted by Andrew Ellicott, with the able assistance of the freeman Benjamin Banneker; the final plan was engraved and ordered by Washington to be published in 1792, and it was circulated throughout the capitals of Europe.

One of the public reservations in L’Enfant’s and Ellicott’s plans was that bounded by 19th Street East, B Street, G Street, and the “Eastern Branch” (the Anacostia River). This was *always* designated for hospital and public health purposes, and in early maps of the City, it is generally designated as either “Marine Hospital Square” or simply “Hospital Square.”

Marine hospitals had been created to serve the merchant marine on which the new nation was so dependent—healthy and able-bodied seaman being necessary both for trade, and also as a reserve for regular naval forces. In 1798, Congress passed the nation’s first public health law, an act for the care and relief of sick and injured merchant seaman, which established Federal government responsibility for creating and maintaining a chain of marine hospitals along the East Coast. This developed into the Marine Hospital Service, the predecessor of today’s U.S. Public Health Service—which officially dates its founding as 1798.

Two years before this, in a letter to the Commissioners of the Federal District, dated 21 October 1796, President Washington discussed his plans for a national university as well as his ideas about a marine hospital. For a period of time, Washington had doubted the wisdom of locating a hospital within the city itself, for hygienic reasons, but he was then convinced that this was, in fact, feasible. Washington said that, were the square reserved for the national university found not to be large enough, “the square, designated in the plan of Major L’Enfant for a marine hospital, is susceptible of that institution and a botanical garden also.” (Ultimately, Congress refused to authorize the national university which Washington had envisioned.)

Reflecting the controversies over possible sale of some of the public reservations for private use, Washington said that it would impair public confidence, “to convert them to private uses,” and any innovations with respect to the official plan would “produce consequences, which cannot be foreseen, nor perhaps easily remedied.” He then explained his hesitations about a hospital:

“My doubts, therefore, with respect to designating the square on the Eastern Branch for a marine hospital, did not proceed from an idea that it might be converted, advanta-



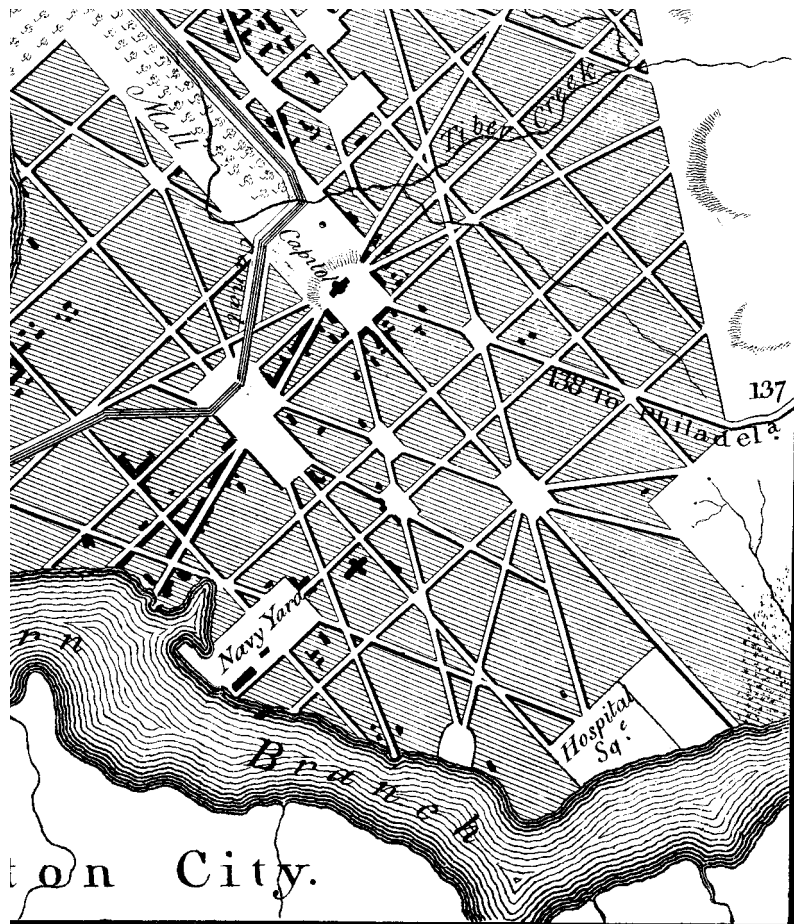
*President George Washington personally decided, after much study of the subject, to have a public hospital built where D.C. General Hospital has stood, and said that such “appropriations of open areas cannot be diverted to private uses, but must remain sacred, inviolate, and forever considered the property of the United States of America.”*

geously, into saleable lots, but from the utility of having a hospital in the city at all. Finding, however, that it is usual in other countries to have them there, the practice, it is to be presumed, is founded in convenience; and, as it might be difficult to procure a site *out* of the city, which would answer the purpose, I confirm the original idea of placing it where it is marked in L’Enfant’s plan.”

### **Matter of National Importance for 200 Years**

On March 2, 1797, as his last official act as President, Washington drafted a letter (today, we would call it an “Executive Order”) to the Trustees for the property owners of the District, which identified 17 public reservations, and ordered them to be set aside for public use. Paragraph 13 identified that area bounded by South B Street, 19th Street East, South G Street, and the Eastern Branch or Anacostia River—hence its subsequent designation as “Reservation 13.”

However, due to an oversight, the map, known as the “Appropriations Map,” was not attached to Washington’s letter, and on this technical ground, various landowners refused



The area set by President George Washington for the public hospital was designated "Hospital Square" (see lower right of map) as early as the time of the Civil War. Generations of citizens and public officials reiterated President Washington's pledge, for its use for the public's good and health.

to convey their property to the Trustees. Therefore, on July 23, 1798, the new President, John Adams, signed an order remedying the omission.

But as various alterations had been made in the plan, and disputes arose over the small parcels of land created by the cutting of the diagonal avenues, various citizens presented a memorial, or petition, to President Adams at the end of 1798, and the entire matter was referred to the Congress for resolution in 1802. Many property owners naturally desired to maintain the open spaces and broad vistas of the L'Enfant plan, and feared the consequences of selling off for private use, parcels which were originally designated as public areas.

The citizens noted that these were matters of national importance, and that the project of the design of the city had been entrusted to President Washington by the Congress of the United States. The memorial noted that both the streets, and "such squares or grounds as the President should deem proper to appropriate for public purposes" were conveyed to

the United States, and that even though the proprietor received less compensation for such lands, than had they been divided up into building lots, "he cheerfully complied herewith, when he considered the advantages in point of health and beauty which the city received therefrom."

"Appropriations so extensive in themselves, so conducive to the beauty and health of the city, so gratifying to the public and proprietor, were deemed sacredly devoted to the purposes for which they were designated," the citizens declared.

In arguing against any changes in the designation of the public areas, the citizens noted that title to the public appropriations "was to reside and forever continue in the United States," for public use. They concluded by expressing their certainty to the President "that your excellency will clearly perceive the necessity of convincing the public mind that appropriations of open areas cannot be diverted to private uses, but must remain sacred, inviolate, and forever considered the property of the United States of America."

The Commissioners of the District were asked by the chairman of the Congressional Committee reviewing the matter, to submit their opinions, which they subsequently did, on March 23, 1802. They confirmed that Washington's description of the public appropriations and other legal documents had been authenticated by the Attorney General of the United States as vesting title to the property in the Federal government.

The Commissioners also asked George Washington, now retired, for his opinion; he responded on June 1, 1799, that he had always been of one opinion on the subject: "that nothing ought to justify a departure from the engraved plan, but the probability of some great public benefit, or unavoidable necessity."

### Why 'Hospital Square'?

In subsequent decades, the dedication of the public reservations for public purposes, was reaffirmed.

An 1843 resolution of the Board of Alderman and Board of Common Council of the City of Washington, stated the general wish of the citizens of Washington, that the public reservations should only be used for public purposes, and asked the President to recall any authority which may have been granted by him with respect to certain specified public reservations.

On May 17, 1848, Congress passed an act extending the 1820 incorporation of the City of Washington, etc., which

declared: "And no open space, public reservation, or other public ground in the said city shall be occupied by any private person, or for any private purposes whatever." This act was considered as part of the Charter of the City of Washington.

Histories trace the lineage of D.C. General Hospital to 1806, when the first public hospital in the District was established, with an appropriation of \$2,000 from the U.S. Congress "the more effectually to provide for the poor, disabled, and infirm persons." This was known as the Washington Infirmary, but was also called the City Poor House, or the Washington Asylum (to be differentiated from the insane asylum, a separate facility), and it was located between 6th and 7th Streets, and M and N Streets, Northwest.

But in fact, D.C. General Hospital could just as well be dated even further back, to 1791.

During the construction of the Capitol building and the President's house, records submitted to the Congress show that the Commissioners of the District allocated funds—between \$2,000 and \$3,000 in 1791-96—for a "Hospital for sick laborers." This facility was located at Judiciary Square, and it was this which eventually developed into the "poor house" and the Washington Infirmary.

In 1832, an epidemic of Asian cholera broke out among laborers who had come to Washington to build public improvements (paving Pennsylvania Avenue, and digging a canal and trenches for water pipes). The epidemic overwhelmed the Infirmary; three hospitals were established by the Board of Health in houses leased for the purpose. This showed again, the need for a general hospital, and for six years, Congress was petitioned to establish a general hospital in Washington, but failed to act. This, despite the fact that three out of four patients cared for at the Washington Asylum were not residents of the city.

In 1839, application was made to President Martin van Buren for erection of a public hospital, on "Marine Hospital Square." The application was granted, but the first specific site was found to be inadequate, and the original grant was extended. An Act of Congress of Aug. 29, 1842, authorized and directed that the old jail at Judiciary Square be altered to accommodate the insane, disabled and infirm seamen, soldiers, and others.

### **It Was Good Enough for Washington. . .**

This location was found to be clearly inadequate for a public hospital, but the facility remained there, and was used as a teaching hospital by the medical faculty of Columbian College. It was taken over as a military hospital in 1861, and soon thereafter, destroyed by fire.

Meanwhile, a temporary hospital for contagious patients was built on Reservation 13 in 1841. And on May 10, 1843, an ordinance was passed providing for erection of a new asylum on Reservation 13. In 1846, the almshouse was moved to Reservation 13, and the inmates of the poorhouse and its Infirmary were also moved there, to what became known as

the "Washington Asylum Hospital." The new building was destroyed in 1857, and another, brick building was finished in 1859—which was still standing in 1946.

During the 1920s, a new and magnificent municipal hospital was constructed, again on Reservation 13, which was named for Sen. Jacob Gallinger of New Hampshire, who chaired the Senate Committee on the District. Newspaper clippings from that time demonstrate that District citizens were justifiably proud of the new public hospital, which today would be called "state of the art," one of the largest, most modern, and best in the nation.

This was expanded during the 1930s with Federal grants, so that in 1940, a new 226-bed tuberculosis hospital and a new 276-bed medical hospital building was opened. In 1948, a further 125-bed facility for pediatric treatment and crippled children was begun, financed by a Federal grant under the Hill-Burton Act.

Periodic additions and improvements were made thereafter, until the evil and scandalous plan to close down the hospital took root in the late 1990s. The hospital was grossly underfunded, and the subject of many scandals, editorial attacks and the like throughout much of its history, but it provided top-quality medical care to the District's citizens and visitors to the nation's capital, regardless of ability to pay. That is a vital part of the 200-year history of "the Federal city" of Washington, which now must be restored.

## **DO YOU KNOW**

- that the American Revolution was fought *against* British "free trade" economics?
- that Washington and Franklin championed Big Government?
- that the Founding Fathers promoted partnership between private industry and central government?

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