

EVOLVING ACCURACY

THE DERMOTT “TIN CASE” MAP

TITLE: The Dermott or Tin Case Map of the City of Washington, 1797-1798

DATE DEPICTED: 1797

DATE ISSUED: May 4, 1888 (facsimile)

CARTOGRAPHER: James Reed Dermott

PUBLISHER: U.S. Coast and Geodetic Survey Office, Washington, D.C.

*Colored map on 4 sheets; scale (ca. 1:7000), 125 x 135 cm, sheets 89 x 73 cm
Library of Congress, Geography and Map Division, G3850 1798 .D4 1888*

ESSAY BY WAYNE S. QUIN

Following the dismissals of first Pierre Charles L'Enfant and then Andrew Ellicott—whose maps of Washington were considered not yet complete—President Washington, in June of 1795, called on James R. Dermott. Washington instructed Dermott to draw a plan of the City; Dermott would eventually complete the map in 1797, and he would incorporate the field surveys completed by him and other surveyors between 1793-1795.

The Dermott Map was the third of the early historic maps depicting the plan of the City of Washington—following the L'Enfant and Ellicott Plans. It is sometimes referred to as the “Tin Case” Map because it was for many years stored in a tin case among the records of the Surveyor of the City of Washington. It was likewise named for the large tin case in which it was transported to Philadelphia in 1797. The map was to be used for, among other things, the establishment of boundaries and the clarification of the ownership of the streets, public reservations (term for federal public open space), and usable land vested in the public domain and the original private sector proprietors. Accuracy of identification of the extent of the squares (term for city blocks) to be divided between the original proprietors and the city was another goal. (The specific divisions of lots and alleys within the squares were denominated in separate large volumes.)

President Washington sent a letter (March 2, 1797) to the city Trustees, who were holding land in trust while the federal city was being planned, instructing them to convey all city

streets as they were laid out and shown on Dermott's plan. This included as well the squares, parcels, and lots appropriated to the use of the United States for seventeen separate sites. However, President John Adams stated in a letter of July 23, 1798 that “in the press of business” the Dermott Map had been omitted as an attachment to President Washington's letter, and that it was then being resubmitted to the Trustees with the same instructions of the late President (Morris at 254). Thereby, the Dermott Map became the first map of the national capital signed by United States presidents.

In *Morris v. United States* (1899) (174 U.S. 196, 208-209, at 256), the U.S. Supreme Court determined that the Dermott Map, of the first three historic Washington plans, was the most complete for purposes of implementing the Deeds of Trust (which provided for the disposition of land within the limits of the City of Washington). However, as the Supreme Court stated:

...while we regard the Dermott Map as officially authenticated, we do not accept the contention that it is to be considered as the completed and final map of the city...

On the contrary, we think it plain, upon the facts shown by this record, that the President, the Commissioners, and the surveyors proceeded, step-by-step, in evolving a plan of the City. Under each of the plans mentioned [the L'Enfant, Ellicott, and Dermott Plans], lots were sold and private rights acquired. Changes were, from time to time, made to suit the demands of interested parties, and additions were made as the surveys were perfected. Even

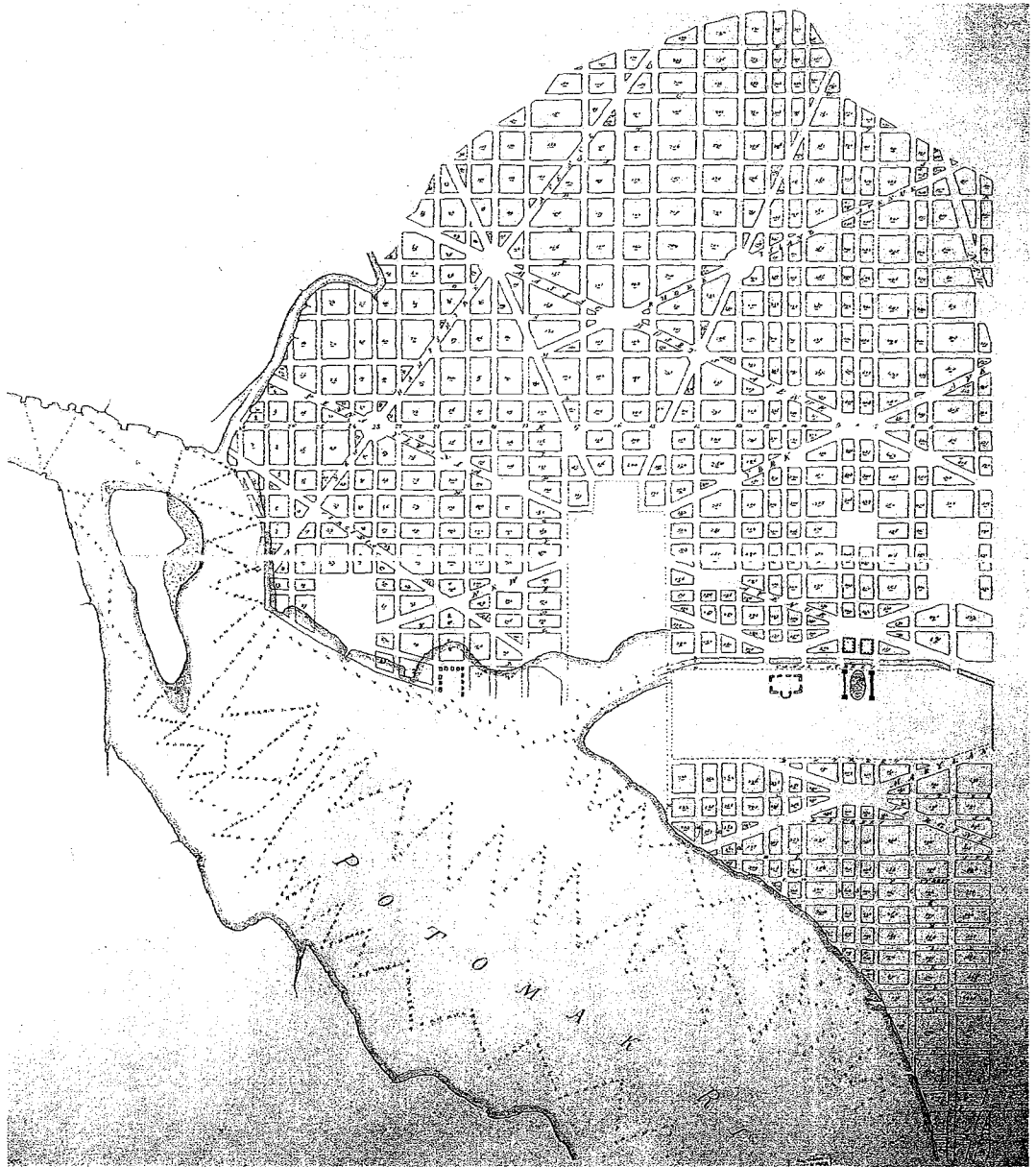
the last map as approved by President Washington [the Dermott Plan], as was said by President Jefferson in 1804, left many things unfinished, some of which still remain to be declared.

In short, we think that these several maps are to be taken together as representing the intentions of the founders of the City, and, so far as possible, are to be reconciled as parts of one scheme or plan.

The Court went on to illustrate the importance and shortcomings of each of the plans. It said the L'Enfant Plan, “Contains all the essential features of the City of Washington as they exist today” (Id. at 258). However, there was significant open space on the plan, “undoubtedly intended as a thoroughfare and for public purposes,” which was not named as a street, and none of the other streets or avenues were named.

The Ellicott Plan, frequently referenced as the “engraved” plan, “shows the squares numbered, the avenues named, and the numbered streets all designated.” But as the court pointed out, it neither showed all the squares nor correctly placed the public reservations and, indeed it was made before the completion of the surveys of blocks and boundaries (Id. At 257).

The Dermott Map showed the progress that had been made since 1792. It indicated the location and extent of the public reservations or appropriations and also certain new squares not previously shown on the Ellicott Plan which were laid off at the intersection of the streets that did appear on the engraved plan. But Dermott's plan, according to President Jefferson's letter of July 14, 1804, “left many things unfinished, some of which still remain to be declared” (Id. At 258).



In summary, comparison of the three plans shows a significant progression in accuracy and redrafting of the location of squares and streets as well as the reservations. Of the three plans, the Dermott Map was the most complete and was the one that President Washington intended to be annexed to his instructions (as stated in his letter of March 2, 1797) as the basis for the Trustees to approve the location and boundaries of the streets, reservations and squares.

[Note: At the time of its publication as a photolithograph by the United States Coast and Geodetic Survey Office in 1888—nearly ninety years after its completion—several items were added to the bottom of the map. These items

include: letters originally attached to the map (to Thomas Beall of George and John M. Gantt), signed by Presidents George Washington and John Adams; an 1854 letter by Joseph Elgar verifying that the original signed presidential letters had been attached to the map; and an accounting of Dermott's connection with the city as a surveyor, in a letter by B.A. Colonna, Assistant in Charge, United States Coast and Geodetic Survey.

A copy of a third note, written in 1854 by the then Commissioner of Public Buildings, Joseph Elgar, was also attached attesting to the letters by both Washington and Adams. The letter reads:

This Plan of the City of Washington I recognize as the plan of the City to which were attached two papers; one signed by George Washington, March 2nd 1797—the other by John Adams, July 23rd 1798, which papers I have this day identified as having been attached to this plan; this being the plan referred to in the first paragraph of the paper first above mentioned. The said papers having become very much disfigured and torn by the unrolling and rolling up of the plan, I detached them, in order to prevent their entire destruction.

Joseph Elgar (signed)

Late Commissioner of Public Buildings

Witness

B. B. French, Commr. Of P.B.