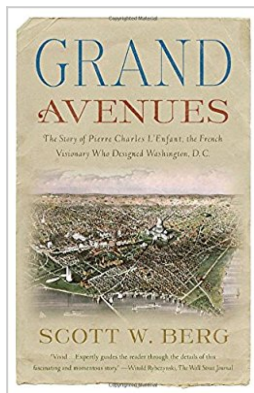

Grand Avenues: The Story of Pierre Charles L'Enfant, the French Visionary Who Designed Washington, D.C.

By Scott W. Berg

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Editorial Review

Review
"A lively and literate view of Washington's early history, with liberal dashes of intrigue for good measure." –*Kirkus*

"L'Enfant's idiosyncratic personality interfered with his complete success yet only serves to make this biography a fascinating read." –*Booklist*

"A welcome narrative… Berg performs sterling service in excavating this little-known story from the archives."—*Publishers Weekly,* starred review

"The reader never will be able to walk the streets of Washington again without envisioning the haughty genius of Major L'Enfant on horseback, oblivious to the rain and cold, looking down from Jenkins Hill, and with a vision of pre-revolutionary Paris in his mind's eye, seeing one of the world's great capital cities spread out before him." –*Buffalo News* (New York)

"Scott Berg has created a readable portrait of Pierre Charles L'Enfant that shows the artist in full, with both his great gifts and his Icarus-like ambition. It is fascinating to speculate how America's federal government might have emerged differently over the centuries if it had been seated in Thomas Jefferson's simple 'federal town' rather than in L'Enfant's grandiose city. The character of the capital city today is inseparable from its designer's personality and vision." –David A. Price, author of *Love and Hate in Jamestown: John Smith, Pocahontas, and the Start of a New Nation*

From the Hardcover edition.

About the Author
Scott W. Berg holds a BA in Architecture from the University of Minnesota, an MA from Miami University and an MFA in Creative Writing from George Mason University where he is now teaching non-fiction writing and literature. Since 1998, Berg has published over 60 pieces in the *Washington Post* on various subjects, many of them historical, including a lengthy feature story about L'Enfant out of which GRAND AVENUES grew.

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Chapter 1: A Pedestal Waiting for a Superstructure

WEDNESDAY, MARCH 9, 1791

Major L'Enfant entered Georgetown well after dark, nearing the end of one exhausting journey and anxious to begin another. He arrived on foot, blanketed by a steady rain, his breath visible and his overcoat wet, his boots caked with mud, and his belongings packed onto his horse. The stagecoach that had been L'Enfant's southward conveyance had broken down many miles back, but the architect had not waited for another, eager to get to the banks of the Potomac River and begin what promised to be the culminating work of a lifetime.

The major was alone. He was unmarried, without family in the United States, and if there had been any romantic ties in New York City, where he'd lived for most of the past five years, they had been cut. His father, once an accomplished painter of battle scenes for the court of Louis XV, had died three years earlier. His mother was at home in Paris leading a widow's life in her apartment at the royal tapestry manufacture, sheltered by the king's soldiers from the strikes, protests, and bread riots proliferating elsewhere in the city. The French Revolution was gaining steam, but L'Enfant was not dwelling on the troubles in his homeland. He had already helped to bring about one revolution in America, and that was where his sights and thoughts remained.

The name and talents of Peter Charles L'Enfant were well known to many of America's most influential citizens, and his Federal Hall in New York was the most famous building in the nation. Now he had embarked upon a task that he knew would eventually require the labor of many thousands of men and the outlay of vast sums of money, a task that would also require that he maintain the approbation of the young nation's most eminent leader. Still the major thought of himself as the man who would single-handedly bring forth an entire city through the force of his own will. For other men it would have been a waking dream, but L'Enfant saw it as his destiny and his due.

He carried a letter dated the first of March from Secretary of State Thomas Jefferson. Jefferson's instructions, approved by the president, gave L'Enfant the task of surveying the area along the Potomac River between Rock Creek, bordering Georgetown, and the mouth of the Eastern Branch, more than three miles to the southeast, in order that some section of that ground might be transformed into the new and permanent seat of government for the United States. The project was not just ambitious, it was unprecedented: the capital of a new world empire was to be set down in a quiet, sparsely inhabited territory of hills, forests, farms, and wetlands.

This city would not take shape through the slow accretion of time. It would not *happen*; it would be *made*. If it were to succeed, L'Enfant believed, it had to be planned by only one man. Though Jefferson's letter did not ask him to create a plan for the capital, L'Enfant had every expectation that his would be the hand holding the pencil, his the mind shaping the streets, squares, and monumental spaces, and his the name most closely associated with its realization. It was a deed in need of a fertile and tireless imagination, and he knew of only two individuals who possessed the necessary breadth of vision and reservoirs of commitment for its accomplishment: himself and the president. He had never failed George Washington in fifteen years of service to the American cause, and he would not do so now.

The spring was shaping up to be dour and difficult, and as L'Enfant moved downslope in the direction of the Potomac, past modest, well-kept structures of wood and brick, the streets were quieter than usual thanks to the chill and rain. The long journey surely would have awakened the old twinges in his leg. He had taken the wound eleven years earlier during the siege of Savannah, when, as a Continental Army captain desperate for distinction, he had rushed forward with a squad of men in a doomed attempt to set fire to a British infantry barrier. A musket volley at close range had ended his brief career in battle, and the resulting injury would eventually, in his old age, require the use of a cane. The wound would also become a badge of honor, an irrefutable soldierly credential he would invoke again and again when he felt his adopted country had turned its back on him.

Accustomed to the patient rhythms of agriculture and dominated by the wealth of a very few intertwined families, Georgetown in 1791 was a prosperous port town finishing the fourth decade of a growth spurt fueled by the proceeds of tobacco exportation. Situated on a sedate stretch of water just below the Potomac's final set of falls, peopled by roughly twenty-five hundred whites and five hundred African slaves, the town was a convivial stopover for travelers taking overland trips along the eastern seaboard. Provincial and

unassuming as it could seem, Georgetown was also familiar with the dialects of all fourteen states and the accents of many countries; its leading ladies dressed in European fashions, and its harbor was often host to foreign ships.

L'Enfant passed homes, attorneys' offices, and dry goods emporiums, watchmakers and barbershops and furniture stores, until he reached his destination just a few storefronts from the lapping waters of the Potomac. The Fountain Inn was a simple two-story wooden tavern and hotel with a stable on the premises. The entire operation was better known as Suter's, thanks to the popularity of its proprietor, John Suter, friend and host to politicians, businessmen, ambassadors, and other varieties of wandering gentlemen. L'Enfant was a distinguished arrival, sent to Georgetown by the president himself, but he made little time for conversation. Rather than settle into his rooms for the evening, he asked for directions and went back out into the damp toward the home of Mayor Thomas Beall. According to Jefferson's instructions, that was where L'Enfant was to make arrangements for the assistants and materials necessary for his surveying work.

L'Enfant was thirty-six years old in March 1791 and, aside from any lingering ache in his leg, in good physical health. It is one of the many blunt ironies of the major's life story that no authenticated image of him exists, outside of a single small silhouette made around 1785. Contemporary observers never quite agreed on a physical description, supplying only a vague outline of a man on the tall side with a prominent nose who, at least in the period before his work on the capital, usually presented an elegant appearance and carried himself as a gentleman. But those who crossed professional paths with L'Enfant were unanimous in describing him as a passionate talker, an unquenchable egoist who was monomaniacal about his work and convinced that he was the only person who could do that work so well. He certainly wasn't the kind of man to wonder if others might prefer that he wait until morning to begin.

Mayor Beall might have been taken aback by the late hour, but he had no reason to be anything but affable and offered the major a greeting and an apology, for it turned out that he knew nothing of the architect's needs and had no help at hand. L'Enfant was quickly able to establish his bona fides and receive the necessary assurances, but the mix-up was vexing. How had Jefferson, Washington's second on matters regarding the federal city, failed to prepare the mayor of Georgetown for this moment? L'Enfant knew that the surveyor Andrew Ellicott had also taken a room at Suter's and was already four weeks into the arduous work of setting off the ten-by-ten-mile square, tilted on its point, that was to contain the new seat of government. Had Ellicott's arrival met with a similarly unaccountable lack of advance notice? Workers had to be hired and paid, tools procured; there were myriad moving parts to put in motion.

An artist in possession of the most advanced professional training available in Europe, L'Enfant had left Paris at the age of twenty-two, arriving in America early in 1777 as a temporarily commissioned lieutenant in the Continental Army. Over the next six years he'd risen to the rank of captain and finally to major as he experienced firsthand the physical deprivation, precarious progress, and principled sacrifice of the War for Independence. The list of men he'd befriended and impressed along the way included many of the most famous soldiers and politicians of his time. Still, all that adventure was only a prelude: this inchoate seat of federal government along the Potomac was now of paramount importance, and here the greatest of L'Enfant's ambitions would be fulfilled.

The next day he rose to an unfortunate sight: the rain through which he'd slogged the night before had not lessened in vigor. The survey he was to perform for Washington and Jefferson required visibility, the ability to find high ground and grasp the rise and fall of hundreds and even thousands of acres of land. Given the conditions, he might have been forgiven for staying inside to rest and catch up on some long-overdue correspondence. But he had waited years for this opportunity and was past ready to begin. Without bothering to wait on the supplies and assistants that Mayor Beall was hastily arranging, L'Enfant donned his hat and

coat, retrieved his horse, and rode off into the rain.

The largest stone in the political foundation of L'Enfant's journey had been laid eight months earlier, in July 1790, with the passage of the Residence Act. These six paragraphs of federal legislation authorized President Washington to place a district of one hundred square miles somewhere along the Potomac between the Eastern Branch and the Conococheague Creek, eighty miles upriver, for the establishment of a national capital. No state would have jurisdiction in this territory following the transfer of the federal government from Philadelphia, a move set for December 1800. It was a deadline so close—less than ten years away—as to seem fanciful, even laughable, to many Americans.

The establishment of the federal city spoke of the preeminence of George Washington, who'd been given control over nearly every aspect of its creation, from the choice of its location to the appointment of surveyors and commissioners. But it spoke just as loudly of angry divisions between North and South, both of which had schemed and argued since the end of the War for Independence to claim the national capital. Not only was the presumed political, economic, and social bounty of the seat of government at stake; so too was something more ineffable: the chance to become the locus of the world's next great empire. Washington's proclamation placing the district just upriver from his home at Mount Vernon, at nearly the precise halfway point between northernmost Maine and southernmost Georgia, had finally quieted nearly a decade of backroom deal making, congressional oration, and fiery newspaper editorializing over more than thirty potential locations, including undeveloped sites along the Delaware and Susquehanna rivers as well as the existing locales of New York, Baltimore, and Philadelphia. From this point forward, the arguments would circle around what the city should be, not where to put it or whether it should be built at all.

For the residents of the region where the Potomac and the Eastern Branch met, the choice of ground was not a matter of ideological symbolism or sectional disputes. It was, rather, a matter of sizable personal gain. L'Enfant's arrival was important to the propertied men of Georgetown and other landholders within the limits of the new federal district, who were ready to watch his every move—what he viewed and measured—because these movements would presumably offer their best clues to the president's intentions. It was something of a lottery: once Washington pointed to a surveyor's map of the district and said the capital would rise *here*, the landowners in and around that spot might find their financial dreams come true. As L'Enfant headed out of Georgetown on the morning of March 10, there were eyes on his back and talk behind it.

In a set of notes on the implementation of the Residence Act written for Washington in November 1790, Thomas Jefferson had proposed making a direct appeal to avarice:

"When the President shall have made up his mind as to the spot for the town, would there be any impropriety in his saying to the neighboring landowners, "I will fix the town here if you will join and purchase and give the lands." They may well afford it from the increase of value it will give to their own circumjacent lands."

Washington agreed and wanted any announcements or visible preparations to strongly suggest that the city's exact location was open to negotiation should one group of landholders be willing to offer more advantageous terms than another.

The president and the secretary of state had reasons to prefer either one of two sites: the ground just across

Rock Creek from Georgetown or the unrealized "paper town" of Carrollsburg on the prong of land where the Potomac met the Eastern Branch, 160 acres laid out on speculation into 268 building lots but still absent of streets and new structures. The Rock Creek choice meant immediate proximity to a preexisting social and commercial infrastructure, while the other boasted excellent undeveloped terrain and shoreline on two navigable rivers. Though today these spots both rest comfortably within the capital, in 1791 Washington and Jefferson viewed them as entirely separate contenders for the location of the seat of government. They knew that the asking price of lots circling the area they designated for the Capitol and the President's House would climb steeply the moment their decision was made public, and so they were looking to obtain as much land as possible before such an announcement was made.

Washington had begun this quest by supplying William Deakins and Peter Stoddert, two of the district's property owners, with survey maps and telling them to acquire as much land as possible in their own names. Provided these were clean buys, free of legal baggage or disputed boundary lines, the lots would be transferred to the federal government and paid for "so as to excite no suspicion that they are on behalf of the public." Even a few hundred acres in hand as L'Enfant began his work would give the government some leverage going into what threatened to become bare-knuckle negotiations. It needed that leverage soon: Deakins, Stoddert, Jefferson, and Washington were all racing against the creation of eminent domain laws in Maryland that would require the payment of more than fifty dollars per acre, a price the president thought well out of the reach of the federal treasury.

These undercover preparations help to explain why L'Enfant was told to begin his work on the Eastern Branch. In theory, his presence along that river with surveyor's tools in tow would create the impression that the president was about to make his choice. Should the ruse succeed, went the logic, those with property near Georgetown—a much larger and more vocal group of men than the wealthy few with an interest in and around Carrollsburg—would sell more quickly and cheaply rather than watch the center of American government, and the profit, head to their neighbors' ground.

From the Hardcover edition.

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From reader reviews:

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