

# The Rambler Takes a Walk Pennsylvania Avenue Washington, DC 1989

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## The Rambler Takes a Walk

### Pennsylvania Avenue

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*The Rambler has long followed a simple rule: if you have to go outside to write about it, don't write about it. The Rambler violated that rule only once, in June 1989, and this website has decided to blow the whistle on him despite his protests. A junior school class in England had been given the assignment of writing to a celebrity and asking for a description of "the road you live on." One of the students, Neil, wrote to President George H. W. Bush, whose White House staff asked the Federal Highway Administration to reply. The Rambler's initial reaction (naturally) was to dig out some history books and magazines to write about President Bush's road, Pennsylvania Avenue. But then, an impulse apparently struck the Rambler, and before he could repulse it with chocolate or the TV remote, he decided to tour Pennsylvania Avenue and write about what he saw.*

*What follows is the reply to Neil. The reply was signed by Lawrence A. Staron, then the Chief of the Federal-Aid Division.*

Dear Neil:

Thank you for your April 12 letter to President George H. W. Bush. You asked about the road he lives and works on. The President's staff forwarded your letter to the Federal Highway Administration for reply and I will be happy to do so.

The President lives and works in the White House at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue here in Washington, D.C. Pennsylvania Avenue is our grand ceremonial street, the street of Presidents. You may have seen pictures of President Bush and his wife Barbara on the day he became President, January 20, 1989. After he took the oath of office, they left the Capitol building-where our Senate and House of Representatives meet-to ride to the White House. They got out of their car and walked part of the way, waving to the hundreds of thousands of people lining the parade route. They were on Pennsylvania Avenue-and they were followed by a parade of hundreds of floats and bands. After reaching the White House, the President went into a reviewing stand and watched the parade pass by on Pennsylvania Avenue in his honor.

Not so long ago, a little more than 200 years ago, Pennsylvania Avenue did not exist. Washington did not exist. Our new country had not yet decided where its permanent capital would be. Instead, the capital moved from place to place. Our first President, George Washington, took office in New York City. Later, the capital moved to Philadelphia. One of President Washington's important jobs was to decide where the permanent capital should be. Many parts of the narrow country along the Atlantic Coast wanted the honor. Finally, though, President Washington made his choice. The site included two small port towns, Alexandria (no longer part of the city) and Georgetown. Otherwise, it had small patches of cropland, with a few rivers and streams running through it, as well as swamps, bogs, and forests. During the summer, more ducks lived in the area than people.

President Washington selected Major Pierre Charles L'Enfant to plan the Federal City. L'Enfant decided to put the Capitol, the home of the United States Congress, on Jenkins' Hill. (To clarify the difference between the "a" and the "o," this city is the capital with an "a" of the Nation while the Congress meets in the Capitol with an "o" building.) The President's House, as it was called then, would be about a mile away near the site of David Burnes' farmhouse.

(President Washington wanted the two buildings separated so Members of Congress wouldn't stop by to see him as often as had been the case, much to his annoyance, when the capital was in New York City.) Between the two sites, L'Enfant wanted "a grand and majestic boulevard." He described his idea this way:

. . . as grand as it will be agreeable and convenient . . . and all along side of which may be placed houses, rooms of assembly, academies, and all such sort of places as may be attractive to the learned and afford diversion to the idle.

The broad avenue was named after the State of Pennsylvania. No one is sure why. At the time, some people the name was chosen so Pennsylvania officials would not be so disappointed that Philadelphia was not chosen as the permanent capital of the Nation. Until the name was chosen, the city's planners called the avenue "the broad one."

Workers began building the new city in July 1791. But work on Pennsylvania Avenue had to be delayed. David Burnes was in no hurry to move from his home. He had not wanted to sell his property in the first place. Anyway, he was not going to let work begin until he harvested his crop. Then construction of Pennsylvania Avenue could begin.

Our second President, John Adams, ordered the government to move from Philadelphia to its new home in May 1800- "ready or not," as one writer put it. Here is how a writer recently described the new capital of the United States of America:

By the time the government moved from Philadelphia in 1800-a few months after the death of George Washington-the capital was still a primitive place. Its population was about 3,000, and the houses, about half of them brick and the other half wooden, were scattered sparsely across the landscape. The roads alternated between mud and dust, and on moonless nights a carriage ran the risk of losing a wheel to a tree stump. Cattle browsed throughout the area, and a hunter could shoot quail within a hundred yards of the Capitol.

In the winter of 1800-1801, Pennsylvania Avenue was finally cleared of stumps and bushes. It was now 160 feet wide, as L'Enfant had planned.

Some Members of Congress found homes for their family in Georgetown. However, after a rainy day, the Members could not get home at night-Pennsylvania Avenue was too muddy. One of the first things the Congress did, therefore , was to vote \$10,000 to install sidewalks on the north and south sides of Pennsylvania Avenue.

Thomas Jefferson, our third President, was the first to take the oath of office in the new capital city. It happened on March 3, 1801. At about noon, he left his boarding house, the Conrad and McMun, and walked along New Jersey Avenue to the capital. He was accompanied by friends and well wishers. After taking the oath and delivering his Inaugural Address so weakly that few people could hear it, he returned to his boarding house.

Jefferson's second inauguration in 1805 established the practice of Pennsylvania Avenue parades. However, the parade was in reverse of present practice. As he rode from the White House to the Capitol, spectators, Members of Congress, and the Marine Corps greeted him. After the oath and speech, he headed back to the White House without fanfare.

President Jefferson was particularly disturbed by the condition of Pennsylvania Avenue. He was particularly disturbed by the condition of Pennsylvania Avenue. President Jefferson made sure that Congress provided \$13,466.69 to improve "the broad one." Drains were built and the avenue was surfaced with gravel. President Jefferson decided that Lombardy poplar trees should be planted along the avenue. He often went on horseback to see how the work was progressing.

Still, Pennsylvania Avenue was a poor excuse for a "grand and majestic avenue." Dr. William Gunton of Norfolk, England, described what he saw when he visited Washington in 1807:

Many parts of Pennsylvania Avenue touched the water's edge . . . . Logs were piled to fill up mud holes and miry places along the route. Once crossing the Avenue at 7th Street, our young druggist lost a shoe, which sank into the ooze and was with some difficulty recovered.

President Washington led the first parade on Pennsylvania Avenue. That was in September 1793, when Pennsylvania Avenue was more a theory than a road. He was at the head of a group of citizens who marched around the stumps and by the mudholes to lay the cornerstone of the Capitol on Jenkins' Hill. Thomas Jefferson, however, was the first President to travel the avenue in a parade after taking the oath of office. It was after he was sworn in for his second term as President, on March 3, 1805. Back then, the parade took place from the President's House to the Capitol, where the President was sworn in. Now, the parade goes in reverse, from the Capitol to the White House.

Over the years, all our presidential parades have followed President Jefferson's example by using Pennsylvania Avenue. The avenue has also been the parade route on many other occasions. The Marquis de Lafayette, the French officer who helped this country win its freedom from England during the Revolutionary War, was honored with a huge parade on Pennsylvania Avenue in 1824. Many other parades have taken place on the avenue, including one honoring General Ulysses S. Grant, who led the Union forces that defeated the Confederate forces during the Civil War. Later heroes-for example, the aviator Charles Lindbergh, General Dwight David Eisenhower, the astronauts, and our soldiers after the two World Wars-were honored by Pennsylvania Avenue parades.

August 24, 1814, was a bad day for Pennsylvania Avenue. The United States of America was at war again with England. On that day, Rear Admiral Sir George Cockburn invaded Washington. He defeated the city's defenders at Bladensburg in Maryland, and marched to the Capitol. He set the building on fire. Then he went to the other end of Pennsylvania Avenue to burn the President's House. Along the way, he and his troops also burned other public buildings, including the Library of Congress, the Navy Yard, and the War and Treasury Departments, before putting the President's House to the torch. President James Madison and his wife Dolley escaped to Virginia. The British forces did not, however, burn any private property.

Admiral Cockburn spent the night in Mrs. Suter's boardinghouse at the corner of 15th Street and Pennsylvania Avenue. The next day, a terrible storm hit the city. Roofs were ripped off houses and featherbeds went flying through the air. Admiral Cockburn decided to return to his ships to be sure they were in good shape. After his departure, the citizens returned and began restoring the city, a process that took several years. The repainted President's House was soon given a new name: the White House.

The 1814 burning of official Washington was the first of three times the Department of the Treasury was destroyed by fire. The third fire, on March 30, 1833, destroyed the three-story building on the corner of Pennsylvania Avenue and 15<sup>th</sup> Street. The new Treasury Building was built alongside the White House blocking the view of the Capitol that L'Enfant had planned for the two major buildings. It also created an interruption in Pennsylvania Avenue at 15<sup>th</sup> Street that survives to this day.

Some histories claim that President Andrew Jackson, known for his impatience, decided on the location after growing tired of delays in getting his new Treasury Department built. One morning, he walked out of the White House, pointed with his cane, and said "Put it here." That's a pretty good story, but most historians believe the reason was much simpler: money. Congress wanted to keep costs down, so putting it on Pennsylvania Avenue, which was Federal property, instead of alongside it on private property, saved money on the cost of land.

By 1820, the gravel put on Pennsylvania Avenue during President Jefferson's term had washed away. Pennsylvania Avenue was again a dirt road. That meant it was muddy in the rain and dusty at all other times. The residents of the city had chopped down many of President Jefferson's poplar trees for firewood. In 1832, Congress approved \$62,000 to put a macadam surface on Pennsylvania Avenue and to replace the trees. "Macadam" is named after John Loudon MacAdam, a Scottish inventor who created a road paving method involving layers of broken stone.

Although macadam was the best pavement design system during its day, it was not the final surface for Pennsylvania Avenue. The avenue was repaved with cobblestones in the late 1840's and wooden blocks in 1871. Unfortunately, the

wooden surface began to splinter and it was slippery when wet. So the avenue was resurfaced with asphalt in 1876. Pennsylvania Avenue was resurfaced in 1907 and has been improved many times since.

The first automobile appeared on Pennsylvania Avenue on May 11, 1896. It was one of the 13 cars manufactured that year by the Duryea Motor Wagon Company. Barnum and Bailey's Circus brought the "horseless carriage" to Washington. It was driven on Pennsylvania Avenue as part of the circus's parade into town. Nobody then imagined how important automobiles would be just a few years later. This first car on Pennsylvania Avenue was just a circus novelty, like the other parts of the parade, which included O'Brien's trained horses, a gorilla named Joanna, and 16 adult elephants and 8 baby elephants.

An assassination attempt took place on Pennsylvania Avenue on November 1, 1950, at around 2:15 pm. President Harry S. Truman was taking a nap at Blair House, across the street from the White House. He was living in Blair House, usually reserved for foreign dignitaries, while the White House was being reconstructed and refurbished. Down below, on Pennsylvania Avenue, the two assassins, Puerto Rican nationalists, were stuck in traffic, so they got out of their car and headed toward Blair House. One of them strolled up to the entrance of Blair House, pulled out a gun and opened fire on White House guard Donald Birdzell in an attempt to gain entrance. Birdzell ran into the middle of the avenue to draw the assassin's fire. Meanwhile, the second assassin opened fire from the other direction. In the end, the second assassin was dead, the other wounded. White House guard Leslie Coffelt was dead, while Birdzell and another guard were injured.

President Truman, awakened by the gunfire, looked out the window to see one of the assassins laying on the stairs leading to Blair House, "blood flowing from the middle of his chest and staining his blue shirt," as *The New York Times* described the scene. A policeman saw the President and shouted, "Get back! Get back!" The President did as he was told. Later, after the threat was over, the President was calm and went on to his next appointment without difficulty. He told reporters, "A President has to expect those things."

One of the most important events in the history of Pennsylvania Avenue occurred on January 20, 1961. That was the day John F. Kennedy became our President. As he rode from the Capitol to the White House, he noticed how shabby Pennsylvania Avenue had become. He saw pawnshops, souvenir storefronts, boarded up buildings- "all but derelict," in the words of one observer. Later that afternoon, President Kennedy asked his advisors, "Can't we do something?"

The result was the Pennsylvania Avenue Development Corporation. It developed a plan to restore Pennsylvania Avenue as a "grand and majestic avenue." It paid for some of the improvements and helped find money for the rest. The shabbiest old buildings were torn down and new buildings put in their place. Some of the old buildings were improved. When George H. W. Bush traveled on Pennsylvania Avenue on his first day as President, the grand avenue had been revived.

I am enclosing [a special tour of Pennsylvania Avenue](#). I hope it will give you a good idea of what you would see if you walked from the Capitol to the White House today.

In writing this letter, I have used several sources. One is Mary Cable's article on the "Main Street of America" from the magazine *American Heritage* (February 1969). The other Marjorie Ashworth's book, *Glory Road: Pennsylvania Avenue Past and Present* (Link Press, 1986).

I like your class's road project and am curious who else you wrote to. I hope my comment's about Pennsylvania Avenue will help make your project a success.

With best wishes,

L. A. Staron  
Chief, Federal-Aid Division

[Enclosure](#)

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