



# Empire of Mud: The Secret History of Washington, DC

*Jeff D. Dickey*

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Washington, DC, gleams with stately columns and neoclassical memorials today, but for decades it was one of the worst excuses for a capital city the world had ever seen. Unfilled swamps, filthy canals, and rutted horse trails littered its landscape. Beneath pestilential air, the town's muddy roads led to a stumpy, half-finished Washington Monument and the wasteland of the national Mall. Boarding houses and slums lined the streets, and opposing factions of volunteer firefighters battled one another in gang warfare. Legendary madams entertained clients from all stations of society, duelists killed one another and mobs ran riot, and political bosses dispatched hooligans and thugs to conduct the nation's affairs. Featuring a rich cast of characters from radical journalists and political demagogues to corrupt policemen and insidious slave traders, *Empire of Mud* unearths and untangles the roots of our capital's beginnings and explores how the city was tainted from the start, its turbulent history setting a precedent for the dishonesty and mismanagement that have prompted generations to look suspiciously on the deeds of Washington politicians ever since.

## **Empire of Mud: The Secret History of Washington, DC Details**

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## **From Reader Review Empire of Mud: The Secret History of Washington, DC for online ebook**

### **Kyla Timberlake says**

A fun non-fiction read if you're interested in the shambles that is the history of 1800s DC.

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### **Elizabeth says**

Yes, we are talking about our nation's capitol. D.C. (the Washington part is actually incorrect and has been since 1871) has had a tempestuous history. From housing bubbles, building codes that were too restrictive, to public works that failed miserably (and with a rather noisome smell), to swindlers and confidence men, and don't forget the politicians, the District of Columbia, previously Washington City, took nearly a century to become the city we recognize (and hate) today.

A city built on mud, poverty, disease, and corruption on all levels it nevertheless is home to our federal government. And several thousand people. Tourists from all over visit the city every year. A city full of history which owes it's existence to several men and it's continued existence at it's location on several more.

The book is divided into several chapters that cover D.C.'s history from it's founding in the later part of the 18th century up to 1930. Each chapter is divided into smaller sections covering a variety of things in easily digestible sections that are largely self contained. While chronological, the book is not ponderous or overbearing. It gives a good overview with colorful stories to flesh out parts. You can put down and pick up this book and not feel like you have to go back and start over.

Overall, an excellent read.

A definite recommend

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### **Rob Charpentier says**

For me, this book was sooooo disappointing! It had all the makings of such a great historical read that I had nothing but extremely high expectations as to how much I would like it. Having failed to meet these, I admit that I might be more upset than is reasonable and my review of this could unfairly reflect this attitude but you can be the judge of that. I received this book in a Goodreads giveaway in exchange for an honest review.

Overall, the tale of our nation's capital slow and painfully chaotic rise from a backwater swampland is one of the strangest and fascinating tales one could discover about American history. Although, it's hardly a "secret history," as the title of this book suggests, it's just been purposefully overlooked over the years in favor of more flattering and patriotic angles. Nevertheless, this rediscovery of Washington D.C.'s history should have been completely riveting. Not to mention, the cast of colorful characters involved in this tale that ranges from the mighty George Washington to every shape and form of degenerate one can think of. You gotta ask yourself, how in the world can you ruin such a history? Simply, is the answer.

All in all, this is really nothing more than a loosely compiled assemblage of facts. I've read far more gripping textbooks than this one and actually would prefer to re-read any of those than to even look at the cover of this one again. That may sound harsh but I've rarely been tortured as much by reading something as I have with this one. Overall, textbooks tend to have this effect upon people, so I'm pretty sure I won't be the only one that struggles with this book. Were I not honor bound to review this book, I would have easily left this largely unread without the slightest hesitation.

This actually surprises even myself, for I normally have little trouble with so-called "dry" literature. Furthermore, the writing here is not bad at all and the information itself is well researched and explained. However, the main problem that I have with this is that each chapter itself is compartmentalized into a million subchapters. On average, none of these sections are any longer than four or five really long paragraphs. It's like the author somehow must have thought that most readers have attention spans of a gnat. Only, I think the trouble lies elsewhere (more on this later).

This particular arrangement of the book could easily have worked well for a magazine length article with no objection from me or anyone else but for a full length novel this creates a severe choppiness to the story that leaves the reader, or at least this one in particular, completely frustrated. Essentially, this book lacks a strong narrative voice connecting all of this information together. Moreover, from one subdivision to the next, one often has to work very hard to find the relevance between them. It's there, but rather than provide some elementary connections to guide you, the author must have thought that by creating these separate titles for each subject this would take care of it. It doesn't. It's just lazy writing and nothing more.

Reading this book for long stretches actually made my eyes glaze over and I eventually gave up trying to make any connections between one section to the next. It was almost like having some form of anterograde amnesia like in that movie "Memento," where I was unable to make new memories from minute to minute. Naturally, this is not the best way to learn anything, let alone enjoy a book.

The author, J.D. Dickey is an amateur historian whose previous books were all guidebooks of big cities. In a way, this actually qualified him to know a few things about Washington D.C., especially as he had written one on this subject before but this in no way means he knows how to write books, especially history books. This also fully explains the format and arrangement here. He appears to be stuck in the guidebook mode of offering brief tidbits of information that are strung together only by the fact that it concerns a particular subject.

This also happens to be an uncorrected ARC of the scheduled hardbound edition. So, I would normally be more forgiving of its faults but in this case any last minute adjusting of a few commas and misspellings would do nothing to change my overall opinion. Sadly, nothing less than a complete overhaul could save this book in my opinion. It's a shame and it pains me to say so with respect to all of those involved in making this book.

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### **Nicholas Whyte says**

<http://nwhyte.livejournal.com/2695615.html>

I love going to Washington, and indeed spent three days there two weeks ago, in the course of which I bought this book at Busboys and Poets meeting a friend for dinner, and then read it on my flight westwards. It's a nice little micro-history of Washington City during its lifetime as an independent governmental entity

from 1802 to 1871, with appropriate consideration of what happened before, after, and in the neighbourhood - considering also how the city's peculiar relationship with the nation, ruling and ruled by the United States but not part of any of them, constrained its development.

One of my favourite songs in Hamilton deals with the choice of site for the new nation's capital:

[BURR] Congress is fighting over where to put the capital—

[Company screams in chaos]

[BURR] It isn't pretty

Then Jefferson approaches with a dinner and invite

And Madison responds with Virginian insight:

[MADISON] Maybe we can solve one problem with another and win a victory for the Southerners, in other words—

[JEFFERSON] Oh-ho!

[MADISON] A quid pro quo

[JEFFERSON] I suppose

[MADISON] Wouldn't you like to work a little closer to home?

[JEFFERSON] Actually, I would

[MADISON] Well, I propose the Potomac

[JEFFERSON] And you'll provide him his votes?

[MADISON] Well, we'll see how it goes

Dickey goes into this in some detail, and there is more back-story than is in the musical. From Alexander Hamilton's side, he was concerned at the vulnerability of a government located in Philadelphia, or any pre-existing city, to mob pressure. George Washington, who was empowered by Congress to choose the site for the new government, chose partly due to military defensibility (from naval attack - he did not anticipate that the British would land elsewhere and march in from the northeast) but also with an eye to his own personal interests - his own home, Mount Vernon, was a couple of dozen miles away, and he also had investments in local infrastructure, particularly a failed attempt to build a canal linking the capital to the North East. But by 1802, when the city government was established, Washington was dead, Hamilton's career was over, and there was nobody to champion the interests of Washington City; until the Civil War successive administrations and Congresses were suspicious of a powerful central government and therefore unwilling to invest much in its seat. So the Capitol, the White House and a few other buildings existed as islands of decent architecture in a grubby network of streets which still honoured L'Enfant's original design, but the city as a whole was dilapidated and geographically isolated until the railways came. (One little detail - I was fascinated to learn that before the Pentagon there was the Octagon, a six-sided building which still stands near the White House, where slaves worked in the cellars for the Tayloe family and where President Monroe ran the country for a few months in 1814 while the White House was being repaired.)

Dickey goes into the physical and human geography of Washington City - not just the elites, but the slaves, the prostitutes, the small traders, the elites. There are many fascinating snippets: The Supreme Court judges all rented rooms in the same house up to the 1840s. The area between the White House and the Capitol, now the glistening Federal Triangle, was previously known as Murder Bay and was a haven of liminal activity. Mary Ann Hall ran a successful brothel for decades on the site of what is now the National Museum of the American Indian, and rests under an impressive monument in the Congressional cemetery, no doubt close to many of her clients. The Washington Monument remained an embarrassing half-built stump for twenty-five years, due to wrangling over costs and control.

The story shifts gear dramatically with the Civil War, which made Washington City a key defensive asset

and also a target for attack. Montgomery Meigs, the army engineer who had already brought in fresh water and renovated the Capitol, tends to be remembered for his role in establishing Arlington Cemetery during the war, but actually put a lot more effort into making the city fit for purpose as a military base. By the time the war was over, the District of Columbia's population had soared and its political image had changed completely; Meigs' efforts led directly to the abolition of the independence of Georgetown and Washington City and the institution of congressional rule over the District of Columbia in 1871. That's pretty much where his story ends, and he gets a little too caught up in the detail of what was going on with Boss Shepherd, who carried out further city development to personal profit and huge cost in the early 1870s.

The book is lavishly illustrated with maps, photographs, and occasional portraits, and is also reasonably digestible at 245 pages of the main text. I think even readers who don't share my fascination with its subject would enjoy it.

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### **Alex Orr says**

It's hard to say exactly why this was such an underwhelming slog of a book for me, but to say otherwise would be a lie. I suppose my biggest issues involved the level of detail and the organization. The book is vaguely chronological, but tends to focus more on subjects, such as the everyday lives of the upper class, or a chapter on prostitution in Washington City. As such, a whole chapter can cover decades, at which point the next chapter might go back and cover much of the same time period from another perspective. As such, it's hard to get a feel for the city's development, and certain things become repetitive. I think I would have found a history that traces the progress of the city over the 1800's in a strictly chronological way a lot more compelling, but I also see, in some cases, why the author chose the style he did since it allows him to focus in on the lives of individual characters. The other issue I had with the book is perhaps a more narrow criticism. As someone who lived in DC for nearly four years, and has lived within the Beltway for 17 years, I would have liked a little more reference to the modern geography of the city, and specifically to how the city expanded beyond Georgetown and the area around the Capitol. I frequently finished a topic in this book only to go to Ghosts of DC (a great blog on the history of the old "forgotten DC") and find far more interesting and detailed histories and stories, not to mention photos and maps. Inasmuch as there aren't a lot of contemporary histories of DC in the 1800's, this is probably your best bet if you really want to do a short but focused exploration of the topic. That said, I found it to be a fairly dull read.

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### **Donna says**

I received a copy of this book from the Goodreads Giveaway program.

While the author clearly put time into research, this is more a collection of chronologically arranged anecdotes than a coherent history. The focus seems to be more on throwing out sets of sensational details than in giving them any larger context.

Dickey's previous works are all guidebooks, which shows just from flipping through the ARC's format. Each chapter is broken down into headings that are usually followed by three or four paragraphs, as if he doesn't trust his readers to go too long without needing a break. And of course each subsection needs a fluffy transitional sentence to segue from the previous topic. The perplexing decision to throw in so many interruptions kept me from building up any momentum with the book.

It has a deathly dry tone despite occasional awkward attempts to punch up the style. An early example that I marked reads, "Another business thrived there, too: whoring." Um, okay? To be fair, that particular subchapter was nearly three pages long, so maybe the "whoring" reference was to make sure we weren't buckling under the strain of continuous prose.

I couldn't push myself through more than half of this choppy mess despite my interest in the subject. I might have skipped around more to try and get more information on the neighborhoods I'm most familiar with, but the ARC copy does not include the index.

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### **Mason says**

Empire of Mud checks some big boxes on my interests list. History, urban planning/development, architecture and learning how misbehaved and quite frankly awful a lot of historical figures can be. I didn't find it so dry and boring that I couldn't finish it, like some other reviews have stated, but it definitely had its slow parts and the formatting didn't help. Every chapter is broken down into many more sub-chapters and I'm not sure why. Maybe the author just liked coming up with summarizing little titles? Whatever the case, it doesn't work. It chopped up my attention and often led me to close the book and do something else rather than be drawn into the story.

The myriad topics covered in Empire of Mud were overall very enlightening to the historical conditions of our capitol and the reasons for the its decisions regarding slavery, race, social class, suffrage, development, location and even the changing name of the capitol itself. As is often the case in books like this I found that some of the topics were lacking the depth of information that I desired. That's usually fine with me, but the author would sometimes take a firm stance without really providing the information needed to get on board with him. If you're going to choose a side on a historical subject, you've got to give the back story and reason why you feel strongly enough to be calling the people involved names.

(Disclaimer: I received a free, advance copy of this book for review.)

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### **Charles Stephen says**

Dickey's history of Washington City is well researched but is more a forgotten history than a secret one. For a half-century after its founding our nation's capital was a national disgrace, lampooned by foreigners and citizens alike. The intensity of dislike for "Washington" was as intense in the early days of our republic as it today, and--even then--shorthand for the type of political deadlock that exemplifies government today. The city was laid out as a grand capital by Pierre L'Enfant, but Congress never appropriated the money to make it a grand city until well after the Civil War. Emblematic of this gridlock was Washington's "Stump"--the Washington Monument was begun but remained a stump for decades. Livestock grazed around it until the Civil War.

Empire of Mud refers to the poor condition of thoroughfares in Washington City, including those that went by the U. S. Capitol and the White House. Not only was there mud to contend with but grazing farm animals and their feces, thieves and prostitutes with no effective police force, swampy areas near the Potomac that were breeding grounds for mosquitoes, and a city canal project that failed but remained like an open sewer less than a mile from the executive mansion. Constitution Avenue was created during the Reconstruction years to cover over what had been the city canal.

Dickey's book has chapters on various aspects of life in Washington City. One chapter detailed the challenges for those who needed housing, and the rise of boarding houses as one of the few ways to make a living in the Capital. It was difficult to get around the city, and delegations from states typically lodged together and took their meals together in the same boarding house. Even members of the Supreme Court lodged and took meals together. Such insularity had the same effect, in my opinion, on diversity of outlook and opinion in Congress as we find today as the result of gerrymandering of Congressional districts.

Dickey's chapter on slavery and the slave trade in Washington City and in nearby Alexandria, Virginia, is probably the best that I've read on the subject. That black people could be treated as chattel in our nation's capital and lead in chains to slave markets is abhorrent. The city was both a magnet for freed blacks to begin new lives but also a place where blacks could be kidnapped and held captive within sight of the capitol's dome, before being sent to slavery further south in Louisiana or Mississippi.

Dickey has a whole chapter on prostitution, one of the few employment opportunities available to women of the day in Washington City. The priciest houses entertained their clientele in splendid surroundings, but steps away from any dwelling--no matter how fine--were alleys filled with garbage, feces, and vermin. The stench of the early capital must have been unrelenting and revolting. The chapter on policing the district makes it clear how underfunded were essential services in the federal city: Congress simply never appropriated money for hospitals, streets, and other services until the Civil War.

The value of this book for readers like me who know and love the District is that we can connect the dots to issues and conflicts that resonate today: the need for representation in Congress and the whole history of disenfranchisement in DC, lack of hegemony for quadrants outside of Northwest DC; the impact of prejudice against African Americans on the trajectory of the development of the city.

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### **John says**

Extremely insightful book on what DC was like from founding to the late 1800s. Only issues I had were that occasionally the author spent too much time on side tangents, and maybe was sometimes unsure whether to keep the book more scholarly or veer a bit into a "Gangs of New York" type. Also, as a DC resident sometimes I wished he was more precise about where discussed landmarks were. Often found myself googling to find out. Overall, a book far better and more serious than it's rather cheap sounding title. Also some great photographs.

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### **Alger says**

There are books that cannot stand alone: for example A People's History of the United States. What the book requires of the reader is a minimal level of familiarity with the topic, enough to follow where the history given subverts the better-known tale. *Empire of Mud* works best as a tour of the events and locations that do not get mentioned (for an array of reasons) in the usual general interest histories of Washington City/District of Columbia. To get the best value, you would need to know the fairy tale origin story of DC to have it subverted.

Granted, the volume is a bit choppy and breezy, but a good deal of that light touch results from there not being a lot of source material to work with. I give Dicky credit for finding as much material as he did on the slave squats and bordellos of the Division. The book is hung on a linear time narrative, while also being thematically organized. I would have preferred a volume where some specific topic was described across time, because Dicky's telling can make it appear that some issues were only of importance during a specific

time. Dicky also decided to take the opportunity to introduce some lesser known lights of DC's past and their observations. Although this approach has some charms, we did lose the opportunity to hear the opinions of senators, congressmen, and presidents on the conditions within the seat of national government. I was also a little surprised that this is a history of Washington City rather than the District as a whole. Be forewarned.

Then there is the very strange opinion of the author that Washington DC at some point matured into a beautiful and fitting seat of government that is a source of national pride. Sorry dude, I live and work in DC, and it remains an ugly and pestilential city plagued with indifferent government and a general culture of neglect. Latin America has better infrastructure.

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### **Peter McLoughlin says**

The city of Washington in the 19th century was a very violent and shady capital. Victorian and 19th century cities were all filled with conmen, cheats, cutthroats but Washington of the early republic was a particularly unsavory place. Our gleaming capital was a pretty ramshackle place in the early days. This is not the history of

Washington in school textbooks for children's consumption but a debauched city that was violent and rundown with a rogues gallery and not just the politicians.

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### **Will Kelton says**

I'm a big fan of urban history books but trying to find the right one to tuck into is a problem at times. A few good ones include stories about the Chicago fire, the 1930s world of Los Angeles a Boston history explorers guide and a pretty great bio of Richard Daley. But one of my favorites was *Low Life* by Luc Sante, which is all about the awful 19th c. neighborhood called Five Points in NY and the various characters like mobsters, whores, crooked politicians and general badfellas who ran the show. This is right in line with the earlier one, except it's about DC in the bad old days. Essentially the idea is that congress and some of the presidents totally screwed up the city, should have been paying attention to it going downhill and let it basically rot, instead of doing their jobs and funding it and providing upkeep. There are some interesting people here that the author digs up and shows off to the modern reader, including some hellraisers and abolitionists (on the plus side) and some nasty slave owners on the downside. It kept me interested at least and reminded me of a few towns I know all too well that are on the same downslope today. Except the difference is, in this case congress is to blame. But the city looks a lot better at least. The old version was a pit.

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### **Steve says**

DNF at 8%, no rating.

So disappointed with this one. This had been on my Amazon wishlist for almost a year, and when I saw the price drop to \$1.99, I jumped on it, excited to start.

Unfortunately, it sounded a lot more interesting in the blurb. In actuality, it was simply just a series of extremely dry and extremely boring disjointed anecdotes. This could have been so much more. :(

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**The Master says**

Interesting!

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**Kevin Frank says**

If you care about DC history, it's a fascinating read. I learned a lot about the early days of the Federal District that I had never known before...and I thought I knew all there was to know about local history.

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