

Understand Washington, DC

WASHINGTON, DC, TODAY 238

The struggle for autonomy from the federal government, major new development projects and an uncertain economic future.

HISTORY 240

Over the course of 200 years, Washington has been shaped by visionary statesmen and urban planners, as well as assassins, demagogues and protesters.

ARTS & MEDIA 254

An overview of DC's varied arts scene, from musical legends of the 1920s to cinematic spy thrillers of the 1980s.

ARCHITECTURE 259

A city of grand design: beaux-arts buildings, classically inspired monumentalism and architectural stunners all over town.

THIS POLITICAL CITY 262

Checks and balances, lobbyists, Mall activists and scandals are all essential buzzwords in the Washingtonian lexicon.

Washington, DC, Today

Washingtonians are feeling a new-found civic pride, fueled in part by a spate of far-reaching developments across the city. A Mall redesign (complete with an architecturally stunning new museum), an expanded Metro and more green spaces – not to mention a flurry of new restaurants and bars – are making the city more livable (if pricier) than ever before. On the downside, the battle for autonomy from the federal government continues, as Washington clamors for voting rights and the freedom to decide its own affairs.

Best on Film

All the President's Men (1976)

Dramatic portrayal of two journalists who uncover the USA's biggest political scandal: Watergate.

Mr Smith Goes to Washington

(1939) Frank Capra classic of idealist do-gooder (played by Jimmy Stewart) taking on the established power brokers of Washington.

Slam (1998) True-to-life portrait of a young man (and budding poet) growing up in a blight-stricken area of DC.

Best in Print

Katharine Graham's Washington

(edited by Katharine Graham; 2002) Illuminating essays about the Washington experience, by presidential insiders, novelists, journalists, socialites and humorists.

Lost in the City (Edward P Jones; 1992)

Critically acclaimed collection of short stories set in African American DC during the tumultuous 1960s and '70s.

Empire of Mud (JD Dickey; 2014)

Eye-opening account of Washington's early days as a city of tenements, malaria, open slave-trading and political corruption.

The 51st State?

It was a new day in Washington, DC, when Muriel Bowser was sworn in as the city's mayor in early 2015. Only the second female to be elected mayor in DC's history, she wasted no time in laying out her objectives. On her first full day in office, she went to Capitol Hill to press Republican leaders to grant the city a greater role in federal government. For years, DC residents have paid billions in taxes but have had no voting representation in either house of Congress – despite having a population larger than some states (such as Vermont and Wyoming). It's no wonder that residents are proud of their license plates that brandish the slogan 'Taxation Without Representation' – and take joy in the fact that even the president's limo bears these plates.

The lack of voting representation is one of the gripes DC residents have with the federal government in their hometown. More insidious is the Fed's ability to swoop in and interfere with civic affairs after the voters have decided an issue.

Such was the case in late 2014 after voters overwhelmingly approved new legislation legalizing recreational marijuana use in the District. Congress, however, attempted to crush the measure by a spending bill. US representatives claim it is within their rights to do so, since under the Home Rule Charter of 1973, Congress must review and approve any law passed by the local government – and lawmakers can foil laws through the budgeting process. Needless to say, DC officials and democracy activists seek more autonomy for the city. The mayor laid it out quite clearly in a televised interview shortly after taking office in 2015. 'The residents of Washington, DC, deserve full democracy and statehood,' Bowser said.