

WASHINGTON FOR WORD WATCHERS

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America's capital city is famous for many features, including its architecture and monuments, historical associations, and ongoing political intrigues. Washington D.C. has been described as "the only place where sound travels faster than light." Unknown to the general public, however, Washington has several claims to the logological hall of fame. The following paragraphs attempt to dispel this ignorance and reveal the true basis of Washington's unique spot in the word lovers' pantheon.

To make sense of the following remarks, a little background history is necessary. Washington is one of the earliest planned cities. The federal city was designed from scratch in 1790 and 1791 by the French engineer Pierre L'Enfant. L'Enfant and the first City Commissioners divided the city into four quadrants, to be labelled Northeast, Northwest, Southeast and Southwest. These quadrants were delimited by three avenues and a mall, running due north, south, east and west, respectively. All emanate from the U.S. Capitol. Streets parallel to the north-south axis were given numbers: 1st Street, 2nd Street, etc. In contrast, streets perpendicular to the north-south axis were named by letters: A Street, B Street, etc. The original city did not extend past the limits of the alphabet. Superimposed on this regular grid of numbered and lettered streets were a series of thirteen avenues. The avenues ran diagonally to the other streets, and were all named for American states. L'Enfant himself described the arrangement as "a chessboard overlaid with a wagon wheel."

The most fascinating fact about Washington's streets is that L'Enfant's alphabetization was extended imaginatively. If I drive due north from the U.S. Capitol grounds, I pass U, V and W Streets, and then Adams, Bryant, Chapin, Clifton, Douglas, and Euclid Streets. Continuing further north (west of Rock Creek Park), I pass Van Ness, Veazey, Warren, Windom, and Yuma, arriving immediately at Albemarle, Brandywine, Chesapeake, and Davenport. These are not merely three alphabetical series--they are more completely differentiated. First come the single letter names, then come all the two-syllable names in alphabetical order, then all the three-syllable names, again in strictly alphabetical order.

As I continue to drive north, my curiosity builds. Will I reach Washington's boundaries before the three-syllable alphabet ends? If not, what will follow the three-syllable alphabet? Are street signs big enough to hold four-syllable names? Soon my questions are answered. As I drive north on 16th Street, I pass Underwood, Van Buren and Whittier. The next intersection is Aspen Street, followed by Butternut, Cedar and

Dahlia. We have indeed continued with a new and final alphabet, this one limited to botanical names.

Besides its logological interest, this arrangement is extremely helpful for navigating around the city. If I want to find a (fictional) address like 1497 Randolph Street, NW, I know immediately three facts: the address is in the Northwest quadrant, it lies between 14th and 15th Streets, and it lies in the two-syllable alphabet names between a Q-name and an S-name. I can home in on this address without having to search each intervening street sign. Another example: although a few letters of each alphabetical series are favored with more than one street name, each series averages about 26 streets. Since I work at Irving Street, I know I have about 26 blocks more to drive when my daily commute passes Ingraham Street.

In different parts of the city, the alphabetical representatives may differ. As already noted, the third alphabet starts with Albemarle, Brandywine, Chesapeake and Davenport Streets west of Rock Creek Park, but Allison, Buchanan, Crittenden and Decatur Streets east of the park. There are some exceptions to this fine alphabetization. There are a very few old named streets interspersed among the lettered streets downtown. These include an Elm Street, and a Church Street that falls between P and Q Streets.

Washington's lettered streets do not include a J Street, but instead proceed through G,H,I,K,L and M Streets. One persistent legend says that the city designer L'Enfant hated the first Chief Justice, John Jay, so much that he deliberately created this transparent omission as a perpetual snub. The omission of J Street has also been attributed to the fact that the letters I and J had occasionally been used interchangeably until about 1700. By the same reasoning, we should expect to see either U or V Street omitted, but both appear.

A later section of Northeast Washington follows a slightly different alphabetic logic. Separated from the rest of Northeast by the Anacostia River, this easternmost slice of Washington extends through only one alphabet. The names are mixed one- and two-syllable names. One of these streets is Jay Street, so the Chief Justice's memory is perpetuated in Washington after ail.

At least one Washington suburb also caught the alphabetizing fever. As I drive north through Chevy Chase, Maryland, I pass successively Irving, Kirke, Lenox, Melrose, then nine more alphabetically arranged streets, finally reaching Virgilia, Woodbine, Aspen and Blackthorn Streets, before reaching East-West Highway and the onset of alphabetic anarchy. Other suburbs have smaller alphabetic windows. Glen Echo Heights, Maryland, for example, has a nine-street alphabetic progression that runs from Jordan Road to Ridgefield Road.

Four other quirks of Washington's street names should be noted:

(1) Washington has one street that was deliberately spelled backwards. Tunlaw Road runs through the Georgetown section of Washington. It was originally intended to be Walnut Street, but the namers realized at the last minute that Washington already had a Walnut Avenue, NW, and a Walnut Lane, NE. There is no truth to rumors that Lee and Erie Streets are also intentional reversals.

(2) What was the only American state not included among Washington's avenue and street names? Who is the only American president who never lived in Washington? The ironic answer to both questions is: Washington. All other states have long had avenues or streets named for them. Forty-seven avenues bore states' names; California has only a Street, and Ohio has only a Drive. Even the potential state of Puerto Rico has a named avenue in Washington. Washington D.C. had no Washington Avenue for a good reason: neighboring Arlington County, Virginia, was originally part of the city and had a Washington Avenue. Incidentally, a small road section in Washington D.C. has been rechristened Washington Avenue very recently to rectify this anomaly. And yes, George Washington never lived in the White House. The seat of government moved from Philadelphia in 1800, four years after he retired.

(3) As noted above, Washington has no J Street. In fact, the Washington Post newspaper's Sunday magazine section has had a regular column entitled "J Street" subtitled "(the street the founders forgot)." Also, I Street is often written as Eye Street on business letterheads, to avoid confusion with 1st Street.

(4) Besides a J Street, Washington is also missing X,Y and Z Streets. This omission may be the legacy of a diplomatic incident! The XYZ Affair, which involved French officials' demands for a bribe, became public in 1798, and led to undeclared naval warfare between the U.S. and France. In the heated emotions of the moment, city planners are said to have omitted these named streets deliberately.

So come soon to Washington D.C., our Nation's Capital! As Mark Twain wrote, "there is something good and motherly about Washington, the grand old benevolent National Asylum for the Helpless." Whatever its faults, Washington is redeemed by its supremely logical and charmingly logological street layout.