# Q119 – What is the capital of the United States?

**DOUGLAS GINSBURG, Federal Judge, U.S. Court of Appeals, D.C. Circuit:**
The capital of the United States is Washington, D.C. – though it wasn't always. The young nation had other capitals, including New York and Philadelphia.

Some people wonder why Washington, D.C. isn't a state. The Constitution provides the answer. Article I gave Congress sole power over a new capital district, to be formed from land ceded by the states.
James Madison urged in Federalist Paper 43 "the indispensable necessity of complete authority at the seat of government." Without such authority, the Congress in 1783 found itself powerless against Pennsylvania soldiers seeking back pay. The soldiers prevented the Congress from meeting, and Pennsylvania refused to provide militia to disband the soldiers, so the Congress retreated to New Jersey.
In 1790 Congress gave President Washington the power to choose the site of the new capital, and he chose one hundred square miles of land to be ceded by Maryland and Virginia – though Virginia's portion was ceded back in 1846. Washington, D.C. – the District of Columbia – honors both our first president, George Washington, and the man credited with discovering America, Christopher Columbus.
Advocates of D.C. statehood propose shrinking the capital to the federal core, then turning the rest of the city into the 51st state.
Opponents argue that all the land ceded under Article I must be in the federal district – and it would take a Constitutional amendment to change that.
Until then, Washington, D.C. remains the capital of the United States.