

## *Laying the Foundation*

*“If decay is to give way to progress, Washington will have to organize and consolidate its strength to do the job....To share the burden, an organization of civic leaders and businessmen is needed... An organization of community leaders may well spell the difference between piecemeal improvements and urban redevelopment on a grand scale.”*

Philip L. Graham  
February 1952

On January 27, 1952, readers of *The Washington Post* opened their morning newspapers to find the first in a series of 18 articles decrying the state of affairs in the Nation’s Capital. The target of the series was not the machinations of Congress or the White House. Nor did the articles take aim at a political scandal or international crisis. At issue was the city itself.

“Shall downtown Washington—the original city laid out by Pierre L’Enfant in 1791—continue its drift into blight, its business importance decreasing, its traffic arteries ever hardening, its slums daily growing?”

The blunt words belonged to reporter Chalmers Roberts, but the moving spirit behind them was Philip L. Graham, the *Post*’s 37-year old publisher. Graham had become increasingly disturbed by the deterioration of a city whose streets had once been strolled by such giants as Thomas Jefferson, Abraham Lincoln and John Marshall. The series—titled “Progress or Decay? Washington Must Choose!”—was Graham’s wake-up call to his fellow Washingtonians.

The list of ills was long. So-called ‘tempo,’ built during World Wars I and II to provide temporary office space for war workers, lined the Mall, creating an eyesore from any angle. The Potomac and Anacostia Rivers and their waterfronts were little more than a disgrace. Pennsylvania Avenue, the City’s grand boulevard connecting the White House and the U.S. Capitol, had devolved into a stretch of shabby storefronts housing businesses of dubious character.

The problems weren’t merely aesthetic. Race relations were strained. The City’s poorest residents were herded into substandard housing, mainly in the Southwest and the Second Precinct.

In some parts of the City, 45 percent of dwelling units did not have indoor plumbing. The community reported alarmingly high rates of tuberculosis and syphilis.

The economy was also suffering. Downtown was a “complex of choked traffic, inadequate parking, [and] poor public transit.” Department store sales were declining, thanks in part to the “big new suburban rivals” that had opened the previous year. Between 1940 and 1950 the Washington suburbs had grown almost six times faster than the city proper. In 1940, 68.5 percent of Metropolitan Washington’s population lived inside the District; by 1950, that number had dropped to 54.8 percent.

Cars and trucks on District streets numbered approximately 361,000 in May 1941, before the U.S. entered WWII. A decade later, the number had grown by 78 percent to 646,000, just over half bearing license plates from out of state, mostly Maryland and Virginia. In the downtown core alone, a quarter million cars attempted to navigate the crowded streets on an average day. The District’s Motor Vehicle Parking Agency estimated a shortage of 38,000 parking spaces.

Complicating the picture were Byzantine politics. The District’s citizens could not vote. Municipal power was hoarded by Congressional committees whose attitude toward their second home seemed to range from indifference to outright hostility. Any serious construction or maintenance required approval by what one critic called a “political structure straight out of Alice in Wonderland...an all-but-incomprehensible maze of agencies and commissions, each with a small, sharply limited, jealously-guarded bit of authority—each with the power to say ‘no,’ none with the power to say ‘yes.’”

*A series of articles in 1952 by Post reporter Chalmers Roberts highlighted many of the problems facing the Nation’s Capital.*



## *The First Federal City Council*

Frank G. Addison, Jr.  
*President*  
Security Bank

Alvin L. Aubinoe  
*President*  
Aubinoe Construction Co.

Daniel W. Bell  
*President*  
American Security and Trust Co.

Herbert C. Blunck  
*General Manager*  
Statler Hotel

Everett J. Boothby  
*President*  
Washington Gas Light Co.

George B. Burrus  
*President*  
Peoples Drug Stores

Morris Cafritz  
*President*  
Cafritz Construction Co.

Harry M. Davidow  
*Executive Vice President*  
The Hecht Co.

Clark Diamond  
*Vice President*  
Chestnut Farms Dairy

Hugh Duffield  
*Washington Area General Manager*  
Sears, Roebuck & Co.

Richard P. Dunn  
*President*  
Julius Garfinkel & Co.

R. Roy Dunn  
*President*  
Potomac Electric Power Co.

In spite of the depth and breadth of the City's problems, Philip Graham was convinced that matters were far from hopeless. He was confident that "an informed public, aroused by the problem, will join in meeting this civic challenge in order to make Washington a more balanced community in the best democratic tradition."

But Graham was also savvy enough to know that it would take more than an informed, but disenfranchised, citizenry to bring about change. To his mind, the private sector had a particular responsibility...and unique strength...to bring to bear on community problems.

Graham had in mind a model for success: The Allegheny Conference on Community Development, a business organization founded in Pittsburgh in 1943. With financier Richard Mellon as its guiding force, the Conference coordinated planning for the city and region and then mobilized public support for approved projects. Its accomplishments were impressive: redevelopment of the so-called Golden Triangle; implementation of flood control; smoke abatement; improvements in highways, parking and housing. Thanks to the Allegheny Conference's efforts, more than \$1.5 billion had been invested in existing and new industrial plants in the region.

Graham wanted to see similar results in his own city. In the final article of the "Progress and Decay" series, he laid out his plan: "The three essentials for Washington's fight on downtown blight are leadership, cooperation and legislation....But Washington's civil government is hydra-headed, involving not only the three appointed city fathers (commissioners) but a myriad of Federal agencies....Some other force is needed. This force is a body of civic leaders, leaders with both a stake in the community as a city and a conscience bothered by its rotting downtown core."

Having thrown down the gauntlet, Graham took the next logical step: He invited a small group of local businessmen to gather in the boardroom of the Riggs Bank to transform his call for "another force" into reality.

“After two years of talking, cajoling, and prodding, the group came up with an organization that was special in several ways,” recalled Katharine Graham, of her husband’s efforts to organize the Council. “[Members] were enrolled as individuals, not company representatives. And they were expected to work. This was not a letterhead group. It was a lean group. Often it seemed too lean.

“The name itself, Federal City Council, was selected with care, with each word thought over carefully,” she continued. “Almost surprisingly it was the result of the work of a committee. From the start, the group sought leaders who were both committed to the city and at home in the Federal government’s affairs. Another way to put it, the Council was led by men experienced in government, but whose skills were developed in private business.”

Included on the original interim committee membership list were some of the most influential businessmen in town—many of whom had grown up in or near enough to the District of Columbia to feel a genuine bond to the city. Among the companies represented were Washington Gas Light, Potomac Electric Power, Riggs National Bank, Peoples Drug Stores, the Hecht Co., Julius Garfinkel & Co., and Woodward & Lothrop. Three of the City’s newspapers were also on board: *The Evening Star*, *Washington Daily News* and, naturally, *The Washington Post*. Each member was the key decision-maker in his organization.

To chair the new organization, Graham recruited a well-known figure in local circles, Francis G. Addison, Jr., president of Security Bank. Addison had been raised on a farm in nearby Prince George’s County, Maryland; attended law school at Georgetown University; gone into banking; and become head of Security Bank in 1930. He had also recently chaired the Citizens’ Committee on Public Works, helping to write and sell to Congress the first major large-scale public works program for the District, to the tune of \$300 million.

As important as it was to have a recognized public figure like Addison on board, Graham knew that the long-term success of the organization would rest heavily on having someone both strong and nimble behind the scenes—a creative ‘nuts and bolts’

Robert V. Fleming  
*President*  
The Riggs National Bank

Philip L. Graham  
*President and Publisher*  
The Washington Post and  
Times-Herald

Cecil D. Kaufman  
*President*  
Kay Jewelry Stores

Frank J. Luchs  
*Executive Vice President*  
Shannon & Luchs

Benjamin M. McKelway  
*Editor*  
The Evening Star

William J. McManus  
*Vice President*  
Chesapeake & Potomac  
Telephone Co.

John T. O’Rourke  
Washington Daily News

Thornton W. Owen  
*President*  
Thomas J. Owen & Son,  
real estate

John A. Reilly  
*President*  
Second National Bank

Philip M. Talbott  
*Senior Vice President*  
Woodward & Lothrop

Charles H. Tompkins  
*President*  
Charles H. Tompkins Co.,  
construction

James C. Wilkes  
*Attorney*

Source: *The Washington Post*,  
September 14, 1954



*Council member Willard Kiplinger and first Council chairman Frank Addison, Jr., circa 1954.*



*Post publisher Philip L. Graham*



*The Council's first president, George Garrett, with President Dwight D. Eisenhower.*

executive. Graham did not have to look far a field. After attending a speech given by G. Yates Cook, a blunt-spoken consultant to the National Association of Home Builders, the publisher knew he had found his man. Graham pulled Cook aside and asked him if he would like a “part-time job” helping the new Council get off the ground.

“Phil did warn him that the job could be frustrating,” recalled Katharine Graham. “If you do something right,’ he said, ‘we’ll take the credit, and if you make two mistakes in a row, you’ll be out.”

Cook was undaunted. While serving as Baltimore’s first housing inspector a few years earlier, he had taken on that city’s slumlords, winning national attention for his plainspoken and passionate manner. Cook also enjoyed a challenge: “Yates was always an inventive guy, trying to figure out how to get an angle, how to get some leverage,” says Ken Sparks, Cook’s successor as Council executive director.

Cook accepted Graham’s offer and after a few months of making do in a spare office in the *Post* complex, he set up an official headquarters for the new Federal City Council in Room 620 of the Bond Building. The new Council had received a two-year \$50,000 grant from the Meyer Foundation to defray costs. In keeping with the Council’s determination to avoid creating a bloated bureaucracy, the staff consisted only of Cook and clerical assistants.

Lack of staff did not hamper Cook or the Council. By November of 1954, membership had grown to 47 members and included at least one additional publisher—W. M. Kiplinger of The Kiplinger Washington Editors, Inc., as well as the Council’s first two female members.

Recruiting new members wasn't the only thing on Graham's and Cook's minds. The two agreed that in addition to Frank Addison, the Council needed another heavyweight at the helm, someone with national-level credentials and White House connections. Philip Graham knew just the man: George A. Garrett.

An investment banker by profession, the 66-year old Garrett was resident partner with Merrill, Lynch, Pierce, Fenner and Beane and well-known in the City's social and charitable circles for his work on behalf of the American Red Cross Drive and National Symphony Orchestra. Garrett had recently served as U.S. Ambassador to Ireland, a job that called for precisely the kind of high-profile diplomatic skills the Federal City Council could use in dealing with Congress, the White House and federal agencies. Unlike Addison, Garrett wasn't born in the Washington area. He hailed originally from LaCrosse, Wisconsin, but had moved to the Nation's Capital in his early 20s and remained ever since.

Graham laid the groundwork and Cook made the pitch. Garrett agreed to become the Council's first president. By December 1954, everything was in place. The new Federal City Council was ready to get to work.

Philip Graham's instructions to Cook were clear and concise: "Your job is to keep an ear to the ground, let us know what's going on, and how our good offices can be used to advance major projects in the City."

Graham summed up: "You find the roadblocks to progress and we'll remove them."

