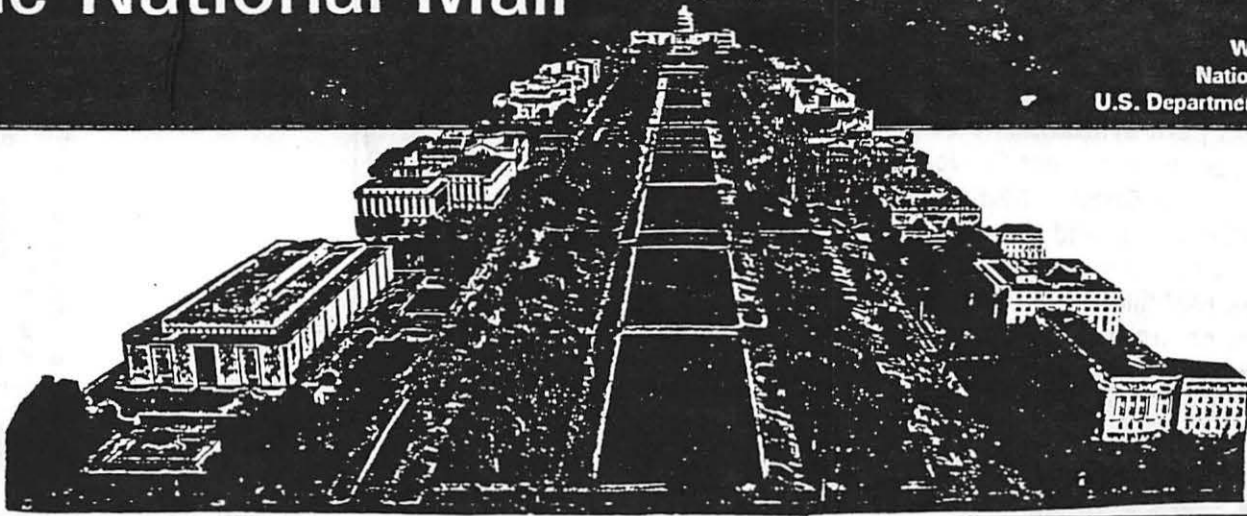


The National Mall

Washington, D.C.
National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior



From Meadow to Mall

Since its inception as a formal park, the National Mall has evolved and expanded along with the nation that created it. The story of the Mall is the story of the building of a new Federal City to serve as capital of the United States. From marshes and meadows to one of the most famous and historic landscapes in the world, the National Mall serves as this nation's front lawn.

Tradition has it that the plain at the foot of present-day Capitol Hill, drained by the Tiber Creek, was the hunting and fishing grounds of Native Americans. With seventeenth century British colonization, most of this land eventually came into the ownership of the Carroll and Burnes families.

The Residence Act of 1790 authorized the president to choose the location for the new city. President George Washington chose as the city's site the land in Maryland and Virginia where the Eastern Branch (Anacostia River), Rock Creek, and Tiber Creek fed into the Potomac River. The Act also designated three commissioners to have immediate authority over purchasing and accepting "...such quantity of land for use of the United States." Most of the land acquired by the commissioners, including the Carroll and Burnes properties, became this nation's first federal public parks. President Washington hired the military engineer Major Pierre Charles L'Enfant to design the Federal City. It was L'Enfant's intention "...to turn a savage wilderness into a Garden of Eden."

The L'Enfant Plan of 1791

L'Enfant envisioned a city of parks. The Mall, or "Grand Avenue," was to be the central landscape of the city, stretching from the Capitol to a monument to George Washington, then conceived as an equestrian statue rather than the obelisk seen today. L'Enfant designed a formal park emanating from the foot of Capitol Hill where a grand cascade, fed by the Tiber Creek, would supply the water for fountains, basins, and a canal running parallel to the Mall. Surrounding the Mall would be public buildings that housed government offices, museums, theaters, and foreign embassies which L'Enfant felt would provide "...all such sort of places as may be attractive to the learned and afford diversion to the idle."

Personality clashes with the three commissioners led to L'Enfant's dismissal in 1792. President Washington and Congress both approved a minor revision of L'Enfant's plan that was prepared by his successor, the surveyor Andrew Ellicott.

The revised plan was never fully implemented. In the following decades, unregulated development including the conservatory of the U.S. Botanic Gardens at the foot of Capitol Hill, the newly created Smithsonian Institution's "Castle" headquarters further west, and the Baltimore & Ohio Railroad tracks which crossed the Mall near the Botanic Gardens interrupted the Mall's landscape.

The Downing Plan of 1851

In 1851, President Millard Fillmore appointed "rural architect" Andrew Jackson Downing to devise a landscape plan for the Mall. This plan was the first major landscaping effort for the Mall. Downing designed a naturalistic setting. The Mall was to be informal with curving carriageways and sidewalks, and plantings of trees and shrubs to simulate a natural environment. Iron benches were added--in the "European style"--to encourage people to rest and enjoy their park. The Smithsonian "Castle," rather than the vista from the Capitol, became the centerpiece of the design. This plan was never completed, partly because of Downing's death a year later, and partly due to the nation's preoccupation with the impending threat of disunion. The Civil War that followed assured the neglect of Downing's plan.

The Mall became a series of unconnected gardens that were developed and administered by different agencies, with no unifying design goals.

Developments in the late 19th century included the construction of the old Department of Agriculture building, a depot for the Baltimore & Potomac Railroad, and the completion of the Washington Monument. Most significant was the creation of 723 acres of land from a reclamation project. By dredging the Potomac River, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers was able to create West and East Potomac Parks. An Act of 1897 designated these new parks for scenic and recreational purposes.

McMillan Plan of 1902

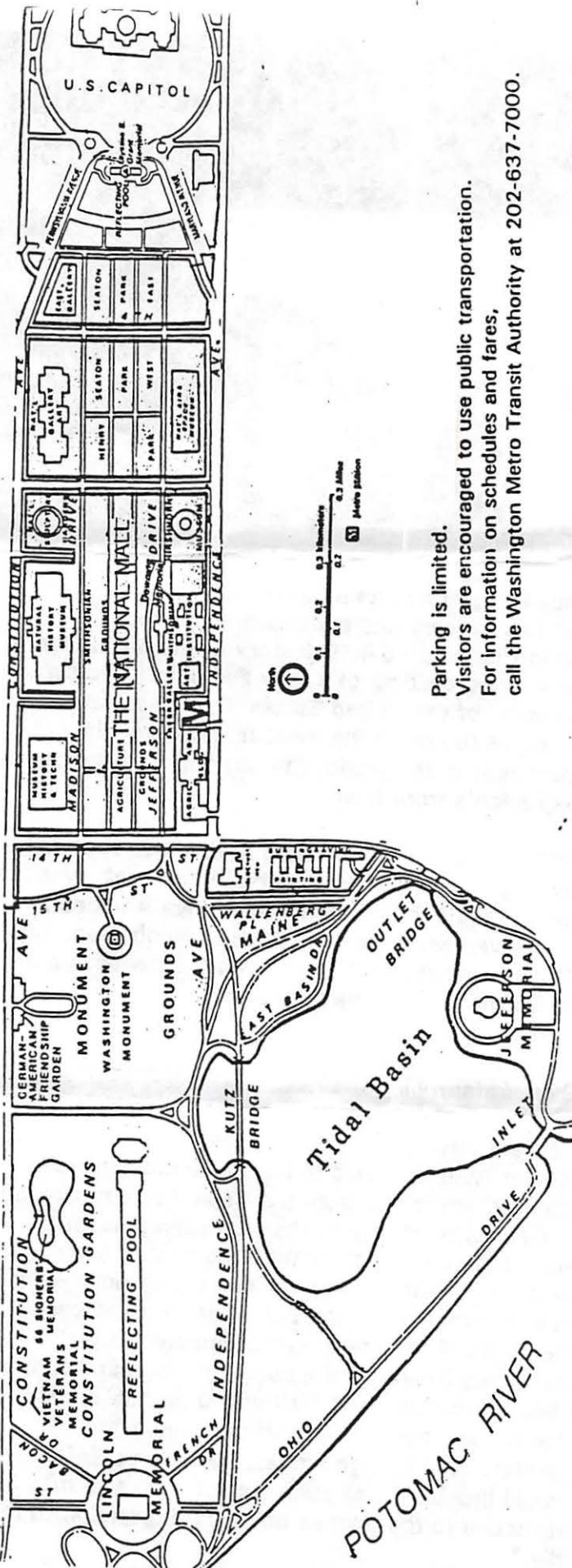
Partly in response to the haphazard development of the Mall and the addition of Potomac Park, the Senate authorized the creation of a park commission to make suggestions on how best to develop the city's park system. The commission consisted of landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr.; architect Charles McKim; sculptor Augustus Saint-Gaudens; and the commission's chairman, architect Daniel Burnham. Their 1902 report, called the McMillan Plan after Senator James McMillan, chairman of the Senate District of Columbia Committee, recommended returning to 'Enfant's original plan and extending his concept of the Mall to include Potomac Park. Further, the new plan called for a memorial to Abraham Lincoln at the west end of the extended axis from the Capitol. The vista linking the Capitol and Washington Monument was to be cleared, framed by rows of elm trees, and flanked by public buildings such as museums. Due to disagreements between the Senate and House of Representatives, and the death of the commission's chief sponsor, Senator McMillan, Congress did not authorize most of the McMillan Plan's recommendations until 1929.

The National Park Service on the Mall

In 1933, President Franklin D. Roosevelt issued Executive Order #6166 which reorganized the National Park Service. As part of this reorganization, the Park Service acquired stewardship of the Mall. The following year, in order to consolidate the Mall and complete the McMillan Plan, the Park Service gained jurisdiction of Union Square (from the Architect of Congress), Seaton Park (from the Treasury Department), and the Agriculture Grounds (from the Agriculture Department). With these acquisitions, the Park Service was able to develop the Mall as one centrally administered greensward. Using funds from the Depression-era Works Progress Administration, the Park Service cleared the Mall of structures, installed lighting and underground sprinkler systems, straightened the roads on the east-west axis, landscaped Union Square, and planted 333 American elms to flank and highlight the now opened vista between the Capitol and the Washington Monument. Also in 1934, Congress authorized the Thomas Jefferson Memorial directly south of the White House, completing the north-south alignment that complements the Mall's east-west axis.

Skidmore, Owings, & Merrill Plan of 1966

To prepare for an anticipated increase in visitation during the 1976 Bicentennial, the Park Service invited the architectural firm Skidmore, Owings, & Merrill to make new design suggestions. This 1966 plan reaffirmed the Mall as "the great park of the American people" and reemphasized that the park should continue to be a national open space, preserving its vistas and providing a setting for national memorials, buildings, and events. The main recommendations were for building a reflecting pool at Union Square to serve as a visual link with the Lincoln Memorial Reflecting Pool at the opposite end of the east-west axis and for the development of Constitution Gardens as a Downing-inspired naturalistic relief to the re-christened "National Mall's" formality.



Today

Today the National Mall is preserved for its majestic and historic vistas linking the Capitol, the Washington Monument, the Lincoln Memorial, and the Thomas Jefferson Memorial. The National Mall also provides sites for other national memorials, celebrations, demonstrations, vigils, and protests, a wide assortment of recreational opportunities, and habitat for many native and migratory wildlife. It continues to serve as a national open space, providing both classroom and playground to "the learned" and "the idle."

Administration The National Mall is administered by the National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior. Address inquiries to Superintendent, National Capital Parks-Central, 900 Ohio Drive, SW, Washington, DC, 20242.

Parking is limited. Visitors are encouraged to use public transportation. For information on schedules and fares, call the Washington Metro Transit Authority at 202-637-7000.