



# Defining the National Mall to Protect the Historic Legacy and Ensure Its Future

# WHERE IS THE NATIONAL MALL? WHY DOES IT MATTER?

What are its physical boundaries? Which public buildings, monuments and memorials, and open spaces are part of the Mall? Who are the Mall constituencies besides, of course, the American people? Bizarrely, no one agrees.

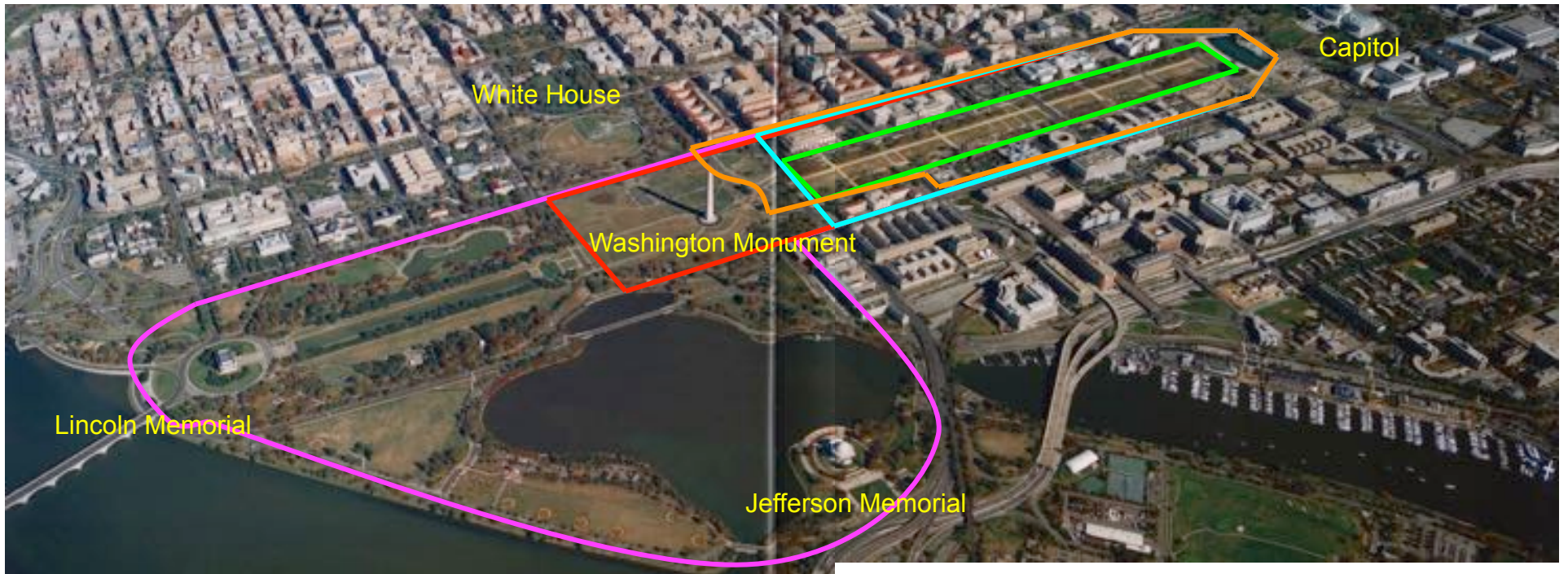


Photo from Peter Penczer, *The Washington National Mall*, 2007



**THE PROBLEM:** A 2003 Congressional Research Service report produced at the request of the U.S. Senate Energy Committee (which has jurisdiction over Mall matters) states that “existing federal statutes and regulations do not provide a definition or description of the term ‘the Mall’.”

In fact, Federal and District of Columbia Mall-related agencies define the boundaries of the Mall in at least five different ways, diagrammed below. Some definitions include the Washington Monument, the Lincoln Memorial, and the Smithsonian museums, others do not. None includes the Capitol or White House.



# THE PROBLEM (cont.):

Even more damaging, none of these existing definitions is consistent with the historic plans – the 1791 L'Enfant Plan and the 1901-1902 McMillan Commission Plan -- that are the historical basis for the Mall design and symbolism.

Why are there so many different, contradictory definitions?  
Why does it matter? What's the remedy?

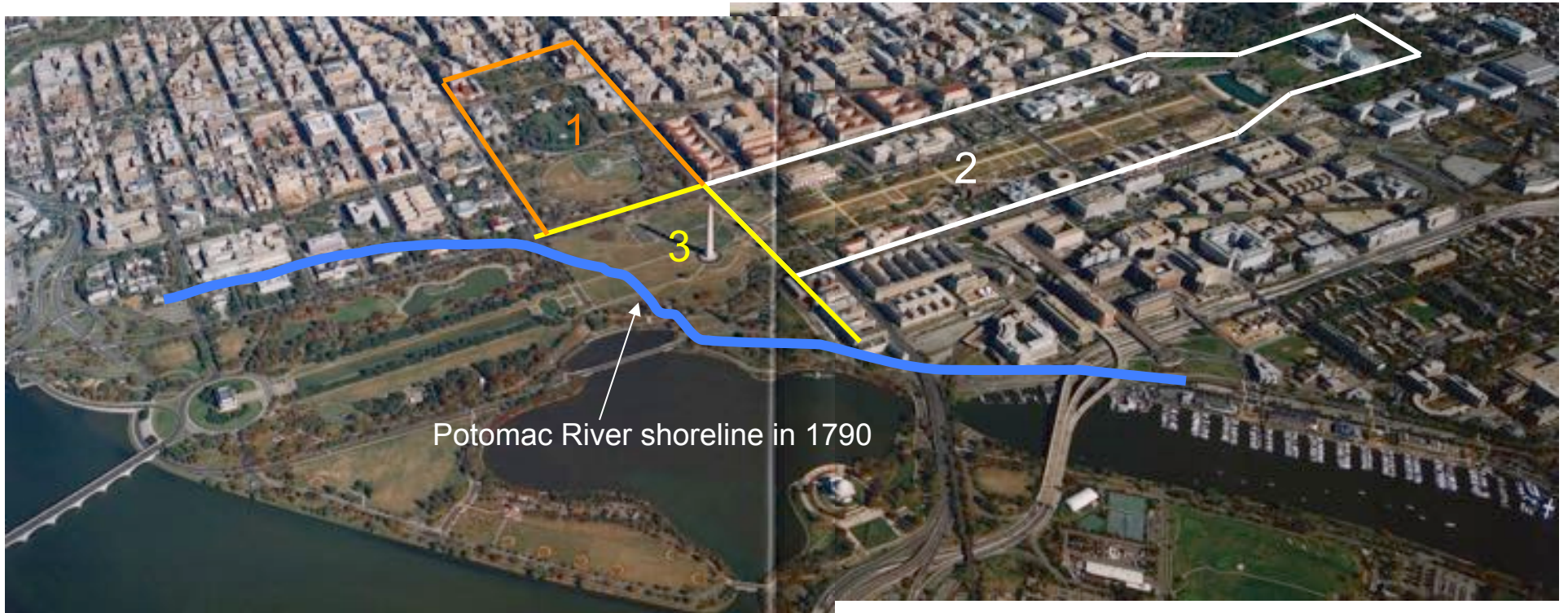


Why are there so many  
different definitions?

The Mall evolved over time ...



**1790:** In surveying the land for the new nation's capital in 1790, President George Washington set aside three public "Reservations" for what was to become the Mall.



Reservation 1 (orange) included the area for the **White House, Lafayette Park, and the Ellipse.**

Reservation 2 (white) started at 1<sup>st</sup> Street east of the Capitol and ran west to 15<sup>th</sup> Street west, an area that today incorporates the **Capitol, the Capitol grounds, and the Mall to 15<sup>th</sup> Street.**

Reservation 3 (yellow) became the site for **the Washington Monument,** bounded at the west by the Potomac River shoreline.

The 1791 L'Enfant Plan laid out the original boundaries of the Mall



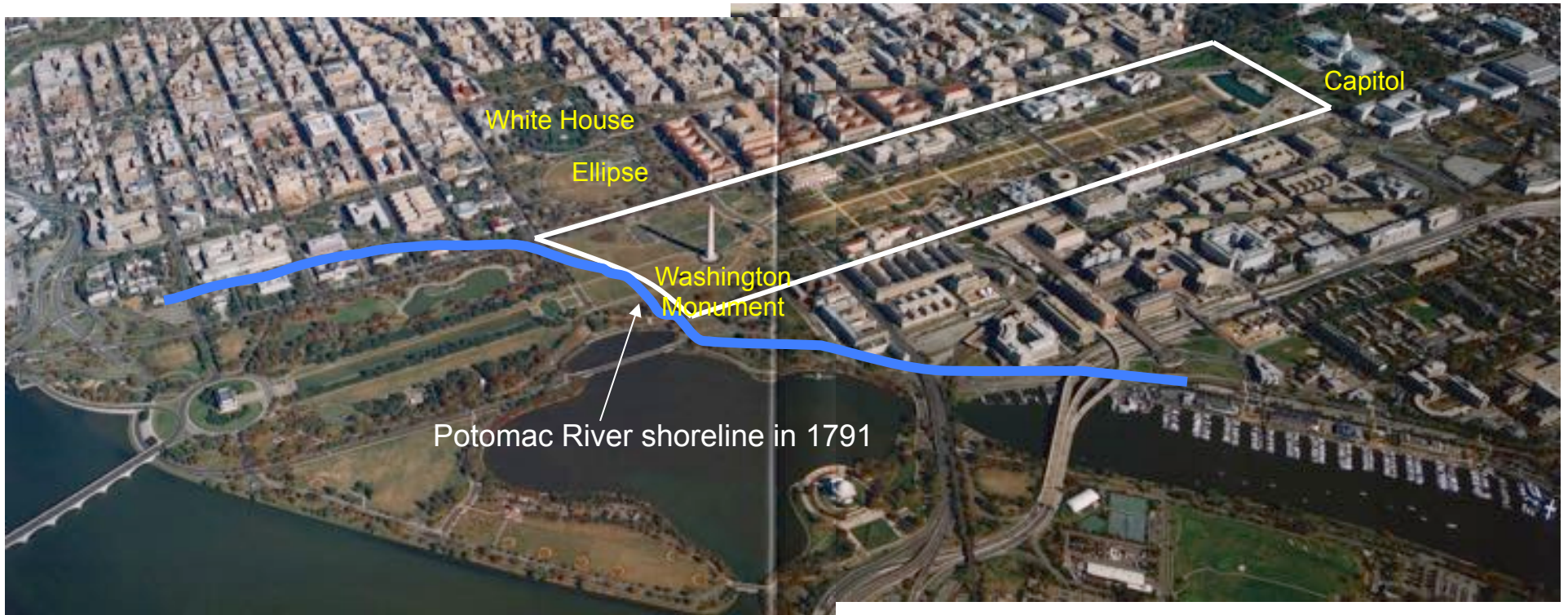
**1791:** George Washington's three "Reservations" were the centerpiece of the L'Enfant Plan for the new capital. They formed the symbolic cross axis (green arrows) – where the axis of the Capitol ("Congress house" in L'Enfant's Plan below) intersected the axis of the White House ("President's House") at the Washington Monument (marked "A").



1791 L'Enfant Plan for the City of Washington (left) and detail of the symbolic cross-axis area



L'Enfant conceived the Mall as a “Grand Avenue” -- an area generally encompassing that outlined in white below -- leading to the Washington Monument, and connecting the Capitol garden to the President’s park (the Ellipse).



Peter Charles L'Enfant\* annotated his 1791 Plan with a description of the Mall: a “Grand Avenue, 400 feet in breadth, and about a mile in length, bordered with gardens, ending in a slope from the houses on each side. This Avenue leads to Monument A [to George Washington], and connects the Congress garden with the President’s park, and the well improved field, being a part of the walk from the President’s house, of about 1800 feet in breadth, and  $\frac{3}{4}$  of a mile in length...”

*\*We follow recent historical scholarship in calling L'Enfant by the name he called himself – Peter -- and not Pierre as adopted by early 20<sup>th</sup> century historians.*

The 1901 McMillan Plan  
expanded the Mall boundaries



**1901:** The 1901-1902 Senate Park Commission Plan, also known as the McMillan Commission Plan, expanded the Mall onto landfill dredged from the Potomac River by the Army Corps of Engineers in the 1880s, to create a site for the Lincoln Memorial. The McMillan Plan is the basis for the Mall we know today.



The McMillan Plan more than doubled the size of the Mall and created hundreds of acres of public parkland west and south of the Washington Monument (today's West Potomac Park).



The McMillan Plan reinforced and extended L'Enfant's original symbolic cross-axis. The Capitol axis was continued one mile west of the Washington Monument to a monument to Lincoln, the "Preserver of the Union." The White House axis was continued southward to the Tidal Basin and the Jefferson Memorial.



The Washington Monument, originally situated along the shoreline of the Potomac River, became the centerpiece of the extended McMillan Plan Mall cross-axis.



The kite-shaped McMillan Plan envisioned the Mall not as a “Grand Avenue” but instead as an embodiment, in public buildings and vast public open spaces, of American Government and Democracy. To accommodate the growing nation and government, the Plan incorporated complexes of federal buildings at the Capitol (future Senate and House Offices Buildings) and the White House (Executive Office Buildings).

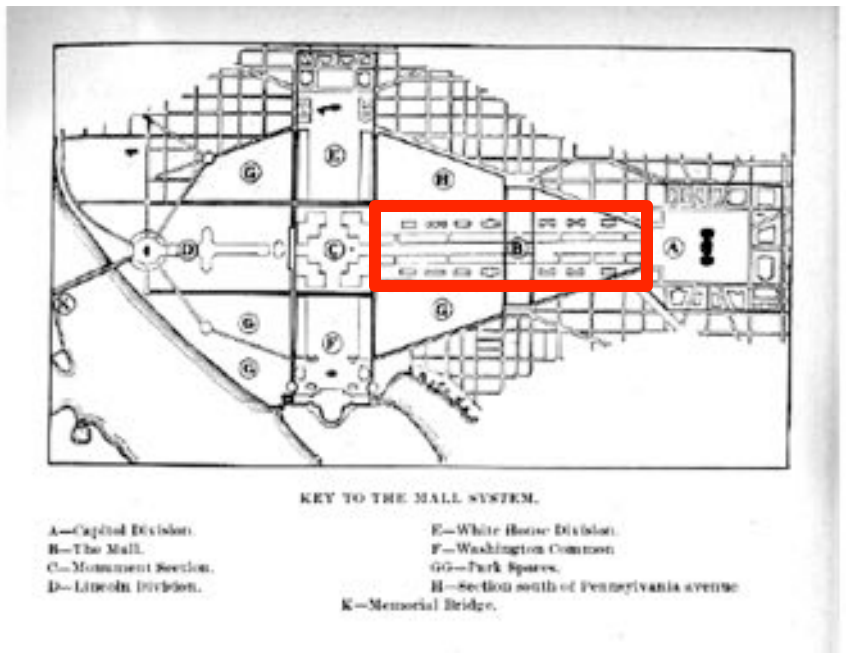


Pennsylvania Avenue and Maryland Avenue formed the new Mall boundaries. The triangular area between the original L'Enfant Mall and Pennsylvania Avenue (outlined in red at right) was set aside for another complex of federal buildings, today's Federal Triangle. The areas south and west of L'Enfant's Mall were set aside as public parkland.





The McMillan Plan designers, while emphasizing the unity of their Mall Plan, described the various complexes of public buildings and open spaces as part of “The Mall System.” Within this system, they defined “The Mall” section (outlined in red) to include the area between 1<sup>st</sup> Street and 15<sup>th</sup> Street – essentially today’s museum lined Mall area.



The McMillan Commission’s diagram of “The Mall System,” at right, shows “The Mall” section (B) to lie between the “Capitol Division” (A) and the “Monument Section” (C). To the north of the Mall was the “Section south of Pennsylvania avenue” (H) -- the Federal Triangle. South and west of the Mall were intended to be “Park Spaces” (G).

**Today:** The inspiring Mall we know today, centered around the symbolic cross-axis, embodies the brilliant design vision of the L'Enfant and McMillan Plans for the Nation's Capital. But that visionary legacy is not being adequately protected.

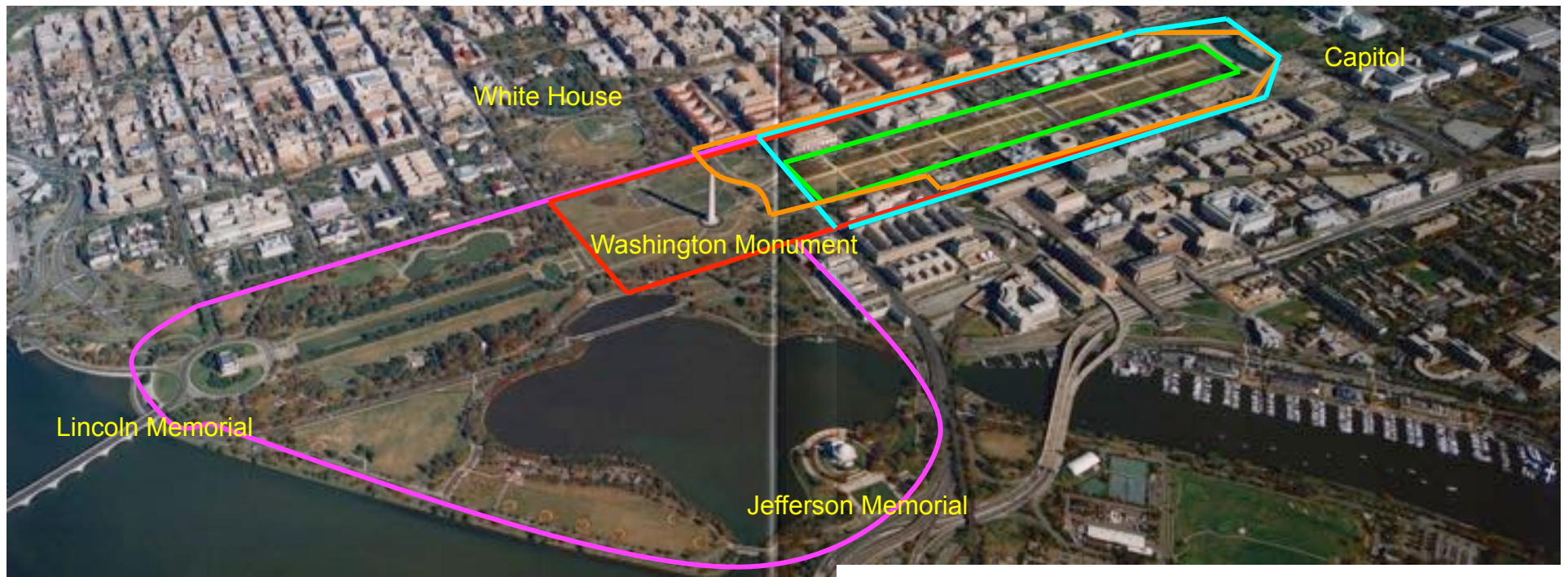
Why not? Government agencies charged with protecting the Mall cannot agree on what the Mall is, what its boundaries are, or what its significance to the nation is. Existing Mall definitions do not recognize – or support -- the L'Enfant and McMillan Plans and the crucial importance of the symbolic cross-axis for the Mall's beauty and its national significance.



Existing definitions do not recognize the  
L'Enfant and McMillan Plans



The National Park Service is the primary federal agency with administrative authority for the Mall and, as keeper of the National Register of Historic Places and the chief historic preservation authority for the United States, the agency to which others defer in defining the Mall. The Park Service defines the Mall in at least four different ways. None is fully consistent with the L'Enfant and McMillan Plans.



The National Park Service definitions for the boundaries of the “Mall” and the “National Mall” are here outlined in aqua, red, green, and pink. DC Government has yet another definition (orange).

For example, the National Register of Historic Places report on the “National Mall” defines the Mall as the parcel between 1<sup>st</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> Street and Constitution and Independence Avenues.\* (The McMillan Plan’s “Mall” section included 15<sup>th</sup> Street.)



*“The National Mall is located in the area encompassed by Constitution and Pennsylvania Avenues, on the north, 1<sup>st</sup> Street, NW, on the east, Independence and Maryland Avenues on the south, and 14<sup>th</sup> Street, NW, on the west.”* Curiously, the description goes on to modify the exact boundaries: *“No longer part of the official Mall grounds is the section of land bordered by Jefferson Drive on the north, Independence Avenue on the south, and by 12<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> Streets respectively on the east and west. This property is now **administered** by the U.S. Dept. of Agriculture.”*

**Source:** National Park Service, *National Mall*, National Register of Historic Places Nomination (Feb. 11, 1981)



Another National Register of Historic Places study, for the western Mall areas, also defines the Mall as the parcel between 1<sup>st</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> Street and Constitution and Independence Avenues.\* (The McMillan Plan's "Mall" section included 15<sup>th</sup> Street.)



*\*“While the term ‘The Mall’ is sometimes used informally to describe the axial landscape between the Lincoln Memorial and the Capitol, the Mall is officially defined by the National Capital Planning Commission [sic] as the land bounded by Constitution Avenue on the north, Independence Avenue on the south, the Capitol on the east, and 14th Street, N.W. on the west. The Washington Monument grounds lie immediately west of the Mall, between Constitution and Independence avenues, and from 17th Street, NW, to 14th Street, NW.” (The NCPC disputes that this is their Mall definition.)*

**Source:** National Park Service, *East and West Potomac Park, Revised National Register of Historic Places Nomination* (July 19, 1999), section 7, p.2.



A report prepared by the National Park Service during development of its National Mall Plan, which was completed in 2010, limited the Mall to the grass and tree panels between 1st and 14<sup>th</sup> Street. Unlike the previous description, this definition omits the Smithsonian and other museums.\*



\* *“Mall — The area west of the United States Capitol between Madison and Jefferson Drives from 1st to 14th streets NW/SW.”*

**Source:** <http://www.nps.gov/nationalmallplan/Why%20Plan.html> “Why plan?”  
“glossary” (This is the also the limited area studied in the National Park Service’s 2006 *Mall Cultural Landscape Inventory*)



In contrast to the previous two descriptions, which put the westernmost boundary at 14<sup>th</sup> Street, the 1966 National Register nomination for the Washington Monument states that the Monument is on “the Mall.”\*



\* The Washington Monument location is “*The Mall, between 14th and 17th Sts., N.W.*”

**Source:** *National Register of Historic Places*, at <http://nrhp.focus.nps.gov/natregsearchresult.do?fullresult=true&recordid=0>

Documents prepared to support development of the National Park Service's National Mall Plan differentiated between "the Mall" and the "National Mall." The latter is a much larger area that includes the Lincoln Memorial. The Washington Monument according to this document is on the National Mall but not on "the Mall."\* Significantly, even this more expansive definition does not include the Capitol, the White House, or the full cross axis.



\* “Today the term **National Mall** includes the area historically referred to as the **Mall** (which extends from the grounds of the U.S. Capitol to the Washington Monument), **the Washington Monument, and West Potomac Park** (including the Lincoln, Jefferson, Vietnam Veterans, Korean War Veterans, World War II, and Franklin Delano Roosevelt memorials)... **The White House and President’s Park**, a unit of the national park system... **is not within the National Mall.**” [emphasis added]

**Source:** <http://www.nps.gov/nationalmallplan/History.html>, 2006



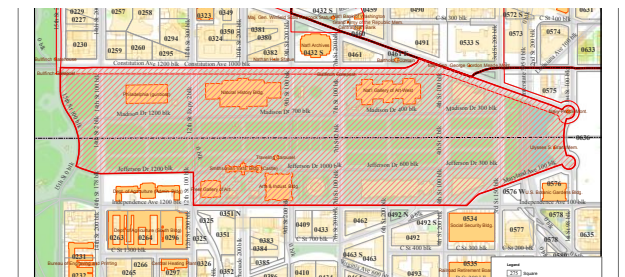
The District of Columbia adds to  
the bewildering confusion of  
definitions for the Mall.

According to the DC Office of Planning, Historic Preservation Office, the Mall Historic District extends to 15th Street. Of all existing definitions, this one is the closest to the McMillan Mall System's smaller "Mall" between 1st and 15th Streets. Following the National Register for the National Mall, it excludes the Department of Agriculture and adjoining land on the Mall's south side. (In 2010, DC changed the 15th Street boundary to 14th Street – see the NOTE in red below.)



**Source:** DC Office of Planning, District of Columbia Historic Districts  
<http://planning.dc.gov/planning/cwp/view,A,1284,Q,643219.asp>

**NOTE:** as of summer 2010, when the lack of agreement with the National Register was pointed out, the DCHPO changed its online maps to put the boundary at 14th Street instead of 15th Street.





What is the basis for these  
different definitions?

What is the criteria for creating these definitions? It's difficult to say, and the National Register documents do not explain fully the relationship of the various definitions to the L'Enfant and McMillan Plans, or to any other historical factors. The conflicting boundaries show confusion about which buildings and open space areas should be included. One National Register definition includes the Smithsonian museums . . .





Another includes only the grass and trees but not the Smithsonian, National Gallery of Art, and Department of Agriculture ...



Another incorporates the Washington Monument ...





The recent (2006) “National Mall” definition includes the Lincoln and Jefferson Memorials, and West Potomac Park, but not the Capitol and White House ...



Yet none of these definitions recognizes the boundaries established by the L'Enfant and McMillan Plans or the importance of the symbolic cross-axis as the centerpiece of the Mall and the capital.\*



\* In 2011 the National Mall Coalition, having documented the inconsistencies in the National Register documents for the Mall for almost a decade, asked the National Park Service and the DC Historic Preservation Office to revise those studies to conform with the L'Enfant and McMillan Plans. Federal and DC planning entities too have requested revised historical studies from the Park Service as “mitigation” for recent projects that have had an adverse effect on the Mall – including the National Museum of African American History and Culture and the Martin Luther King Memorial. As of June 2015, the National Park Service says they are still in the process of revising those studies.



Congress in 2003 clarified  
the Mall definition

After the 2003 Congressional Research Service study concluded that there was “no statutory or regulatory definition” of the Mall, Congress inserted language into the Commemorative Works Act to define the Mall in order to protect the L’Enfant and McMillan planning legacy and the Mall public open space from overbuilding of memorials and museums. The 2003 Act defined the protected historical “Reserve” portion of the Mall, in a way consistent with the historic plans, as the “*great cross-axis...which generally extends from the Capitol to the Lincoln Memorial, and from the White House to the Jefferson Memorial*” (Commemorative Works Act, PL 108-126, Title II).



The Reserve area, shown in this National Park Service map, incorporated the core of the McMillan Mall but not the museums and Federal Triangle area.



Mall-related Government  
Agencies Agreed with Congress

Attempting to set the record straight, and to ensure orderly “Future Development” of the Mall, Congress asked federal Mall-related agencies to define the Mall during the 2005 oversight hearing of the Senate Energy Subcommittee on National Parks.

The agency representatives agreed with the Congressional definition based on the L’Enfant and McMillan Plans.



1. Chairman Craig Thomas (R-WY): *“The 2003 Amendments [to the Commemorative Works Act] also provided for the first time a formal legislative definition of the Mall, finding it as **an area extending from the United States Capitol to the Lincoln Memorial and White House to the Jefferson Memorial.**”*
2. Chairman John V. Cogbill, National Capital Planning Commission: *“the Congress has already defined the Mall, I mean that’s something that we did in the Commemorative Works Act amendment in 2003.”*
3. John Parsons, National Park Service: *“It’s pretty simple. **The Mall extends from the Capitol to the Lincoln Memorial and the White House to the Jefferson Memorial.**”*



In Reality, Agencies Revert  
to Jurisdictional Definitions  
Not the Historic Plans

During development of its National Mall Plan, between 2006 and 2010, the National Park Service reverted to its own historical sources (diagrammed below) and made planning decisions based on these confusing and contradictory Mall definitions – not the L’Enfant and McMillan Plans or the Congressional language.

Significantly, a determining factor in each of these Mall definitions is National Park Service jurisdiction. Only the “National Mall” National Register study (aqua) includes the Smithsonian and National Gallery of Art.





The National Mall Plan defined the “National Mall” solely to include only portions of the Mall under its jurisdiction. It is a jurisdiction plan concerned primarily with Park Service maintenance needs and priorities. Why are the Capitol and the White House excluded? The Capitol is administered by the Architect of the Capitol. The White House is administered by a different unit of the Park Service from that which manages the other Mall areas. And while this pink-outlined area suggests otherwise, the National Mall Plan did not include the Smithsonian museums.



Why Does It Matter?



The National Park Service is just one of many Mall management entities planning for areas of the Mall. There is no one single authority. There is no one plan. Jurisdiction-based planning by the Park Service, the Smithsonian, the Architect of the Capitol, and other entities leads to fragmented planning and development that threatens the integrity of the Mall and the legacy of L'Enfant and the McMillan Plans – and of George Washington at the founding of the nation and the capital..



Who's in charge of the Mall? Numerous entities but no single authority.

The Solution?





## The Solution –

- Congress should, in the short term, instruct the federal and DC agencies to base all Mall definitions and planning decisions on protecting the legacy of the visionary L'Enfant and McMillan Plans, including the design unity they embody and the cross axis that is the symbolic heart of the Mall, the capital, and the nation.\*
- To meet the long term needs of the Mall so it can continue to evolve with our country's history, Congress should create a statutory definition of the Mall that recognizes its ever evolving quality as a nationally significant symbolic landscape and stage for American democracy. Such a statutory definition should recognize that the Mall will continue to evolve and grow in its 3<sup>rd</sup> century as an embodiment of our founding ideals and a place to experience what it means to be an American.

\* A starting point can be the Commemorative Works Act which Congress first enacted in 1986 for the following purposes: (a) to preserve the integrity of the comprehensive design of the L'Enfant and McMillan plans for the Nation's Capital;(b) to ensure the continued public use and enjoyment of open space in the District of Columbia.

# A Proposal from the National Mall Coalition: Defining the National Mall to Ensure Its Continuing Vitality in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

**I. Description and Purpose of the National Mall** -- The National Mall, located at the heart of the nation's capital, is the symbolic center of American public life. The Mall is an integrated space sweeping from Capitol to Lincoln Memorial and the Potomac. Even more intrinsic to the meaning of the Mall as the heart of the nation is the meeting with the cross axis from the White House to the Jefferson Memorial, a spot historically marked with a monument to George Washington. The National Mall is universally recognized as the stage for American democracy. Its monuments, museums, open spaces, and continuing expansion tell the ongoing American story and provide a setting for a wide variety of activities such as celebrating our living government, educational and cultural enrichment, civic participation, and recreation. The Mall's design unity and symbolic character is the legacy of two visionary plans, the 1791 L'Enfant Plan and the 1901-1902 McMillan Plan. A new vision for the Mall in its 3<sup>rd</sup> century must recognize and conserve the symbolic character of the historic land while providing for expansion of its boundaries, symbolic quality, and public usage in the future.

**II. Physical Boundaries of the National Mall** -- The National Mall, created in the 1791 L'Enfant Plan and expanded by the 1902 McMillan Commission Plan, is defined as the great cross-axis from the U.S. Capitol to the Lincoln Memorial bounded by Constitution and Independence Avenues, and the White House to the Jefferson Memorial bounded by 15<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> Streets, and all public lands and buildings encompassed in the kite-shaped configuration bounded on the north by Pennsylvania Avenue and New York Avenue and on the south by Maryland Avenue and the Potomac River. The Mall area includes the Federal Triangle, the Northwest Rectangle, the Southeast Rectangle, and West Potomac Park. It does not include lands that have reverted to private ownership since 1902 (for example, the Corcoran Gallery of Art and the Newseum).



**III. The 3<sup>rd</sup> Century Mall** -- In its third century, the Mall boundaries can be expanded once again – following a new vision comparable to the McMillan Plan – to include the following contiguous federal lands: East Potomac Park, L'Enfant Promenade/10<sup>th</sup> Street/Banneker Overlook, the South Capitol Street corridor, the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, Theodore Roosevelt Island, public parkland on the DC and Virginia sides of the Potomac, as well as federal lands along both sides of the Anacostia River, and public roads connecting these areas with the Mall.



end

For more information, contact:  
Judy Scott Feldman, PhD  
Chair and President  
National Mall Coalition  
[jfeldman@nationalmallcoalitionl.org](mailto:jfeldman@nationalmallcoalitionl.org)  
301-340-3938