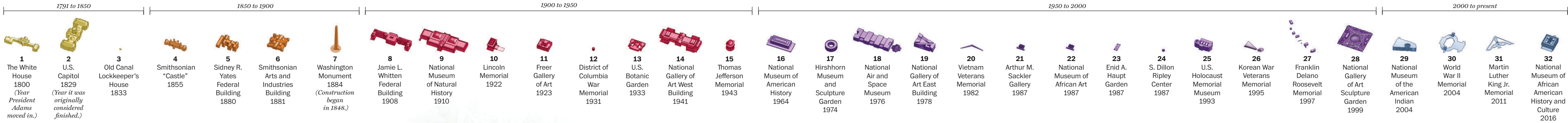


MUSEUMS



200-YEAR TRANSFORMATION FROM MARSH TO MALL

BY AARON STECKELBERG, PHILIP KENNICOTT AND BONNIE BERKOWITZ

The Mall as it is today

The original idea for the Mall — a grand, tree-lined avenue flanked by imposing buildings — goes back to the very origins of the capital city, Pierre L'Enfant's plan conceived for George Washington. But in Washington, plans rarely go as planned, so the Mall has been a work in progress for more than 200 years. At times, in the 19th century, it was a free-for-all of mixed uses, and far from a civic showplace. Later, it hosted elegant parks, a market and a train station. In the 20th century, it was cleared — though this took a long time — to make the space we know now. But today, there are fears that it has become too full, dilapidated, and needs more care, more money, better governance and perhaps a new plan for a new century.

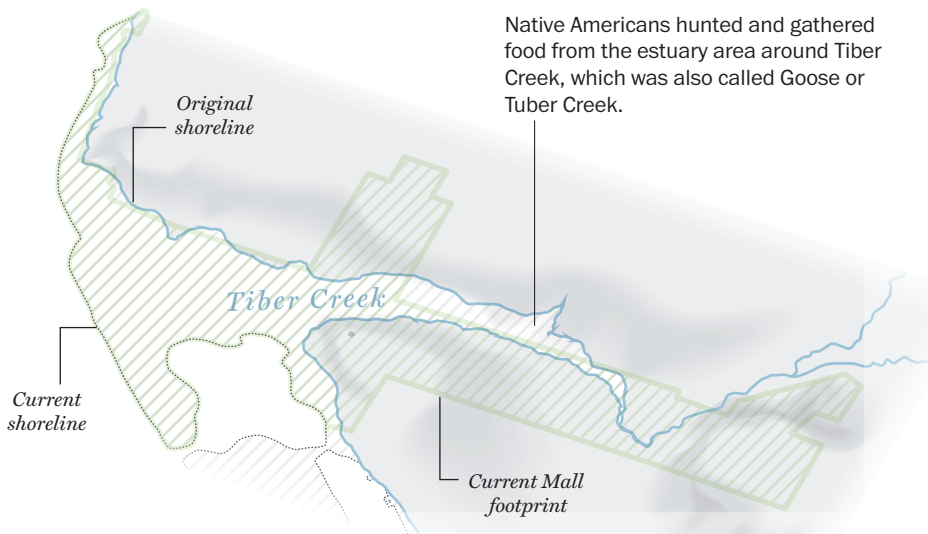
Defining the Mall

The Mall is a loose term for the public lands around and between the Lincoln Memorial and the Capitol. Here are three different ways the National Park Service defines the area.



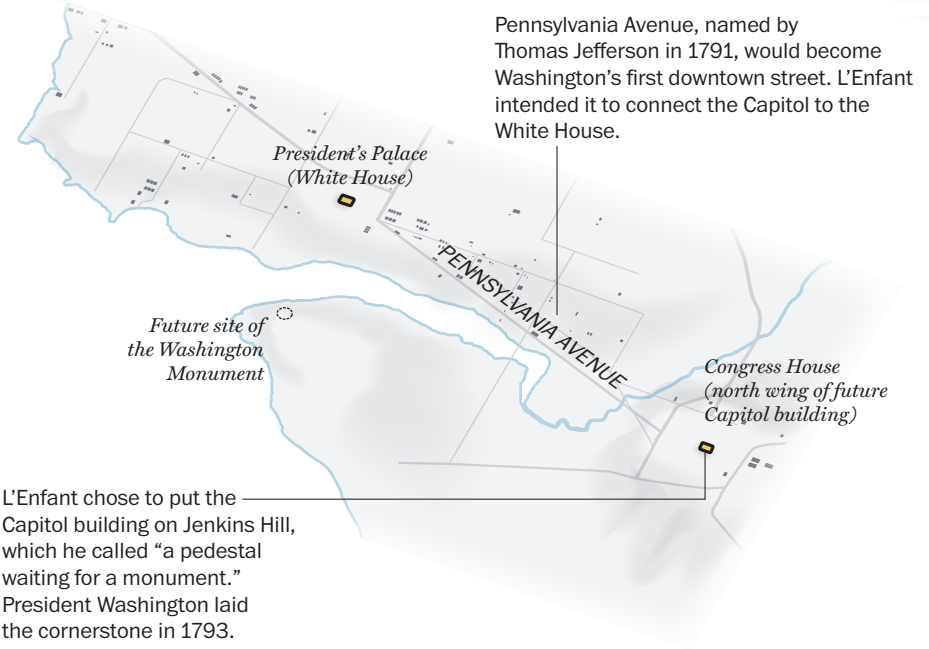
How the area evolved

How the area looked before 1800



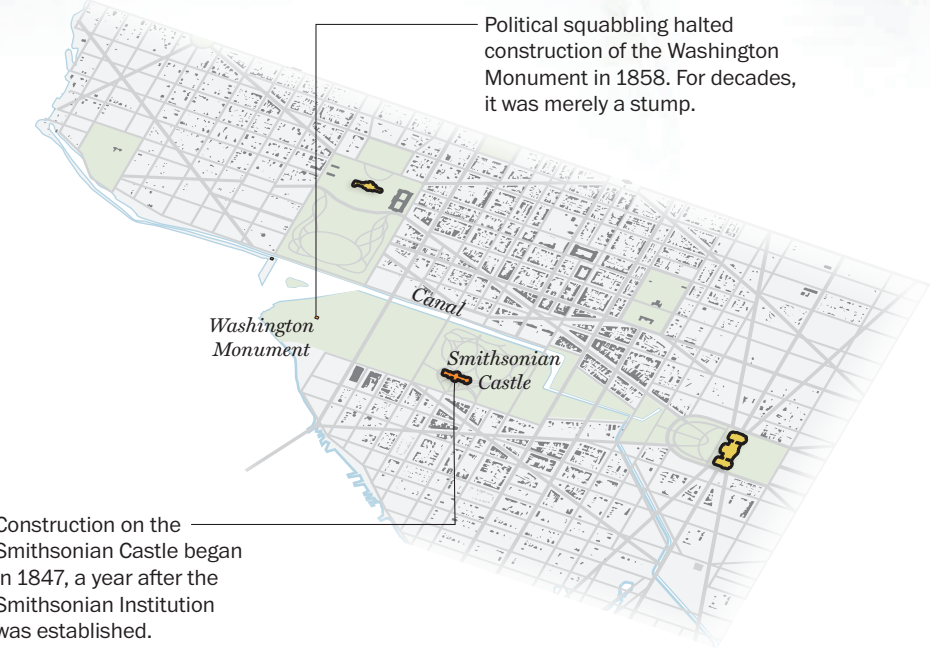
Before the capital city
In the beginning, before Washington had been designated the nation's capital, much of the Mall was an empty lowland along the Potomac, made yet marshier by the Tiber Creek, which flowed into the river not far from where the Washington Monument stands today. In the early 17th century, the most likely inhabitants of the land were members of the Nacotchtank tribe, but the incursion of European settlers into the area greatly depleted them. At the time Washington was chosen as the capital, and for long after, the whole area was prone to flooding, and was mainly used for grazing.

... in 1800



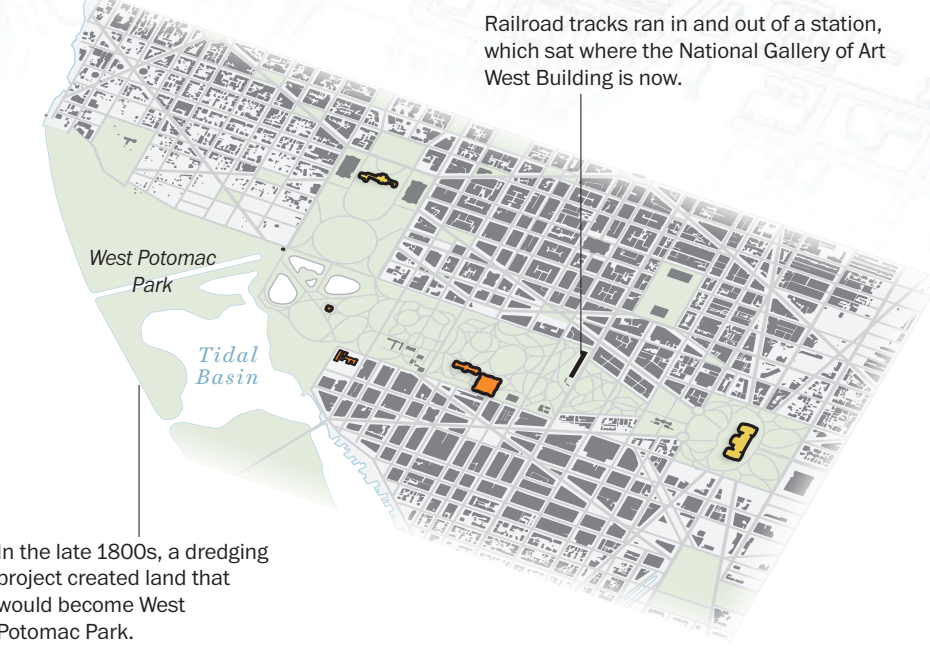
L'Enfant creates a plan (1791-1800)
The idea for the Mall came from L'Enfant, a French engineer commissioned by President Washington in 1791 to develop a plan for the country's seat of government. L'Enfant imagined something more like a grand, tree-lined avenue, flanked by embassies and gardens. He also envisioned a canal running along its north side, crossing south in front of the Capitol, connecting to the Anacostia River. Few of the details of L'Enfant's plan were realized, although the canal was finished by 1815, making much of this part of the city an island.

... in 1860



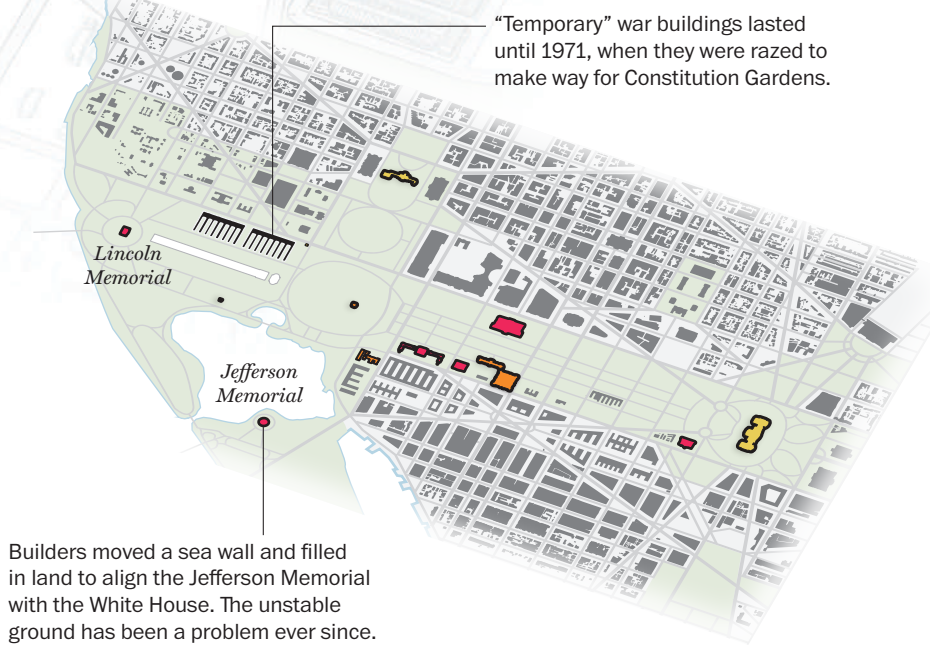
A war brings clarity (1860-1900)
Through much of the 19th century, the city's canal was effectively a sewer, and the Mall was a chaotic hodgepodge. Its first major building, the Smithsonian "Castle," was a Romanesque pastiche style design, and for a while, it seemed as if the architecture of the city and the Mall might lean toward brick, color, and Northern European styles. The Civil War transformed Washington from a muddy group of villages to a bustling national center. The Mall became a more established space, though it lacked the open, axial clarity L'Enfant had originally planned.

... in 1900



A new direction (1900-1940)
In 1902, a Senate commission issued the McMillan Plan, which reimaged the Mall as the centerpiece of a larger, grander federal district. The Mall was conceived as a symbolic memorial to the Civil War and reconciliation, with the Lincoln Memorial at one end, a memorial to Grant at the Capitol and Arlington Memorial Bridge linking the North to the South. The plan got rid of gardens, trees, old buildings and railroad tracks and extended the vast esplanade to the west. In the following decades, the major classical-inflected federal buildings we know today were built, and the east end of the Mall emerged as a center for cultural buildings.

... in 1940



The modern Mall arises (1940-present)
Not everything in the McMillan Plan came to pass. The postwar decades became a period of increasingly contentious argument about the design, meaning and purpose of the Mall. Maya Lin's evocative-but-radical design for the Vietnam Veterans Memorial sparked furious debate and eventually changed the meaning of the Mall and memorialization. The grand, celebratory and mainly classical style was no longer the reflexive architectural response, though it would recur in the design of the National World War II Memorial in the new century.