

A Brief History of the Washington Monument Grounds



National Ideas Competition for the Washington Monument Grounds

open to ages 12 and up
register by Oct 31, 2010
www.wamocompetition.org



The Washington Monument is the *defining feature* of the Washington, D.C. skyline and the *centerpiece* of the nation's most symbolic public open space.



But at ground level this vast expanse remains unfinished and underutilized...

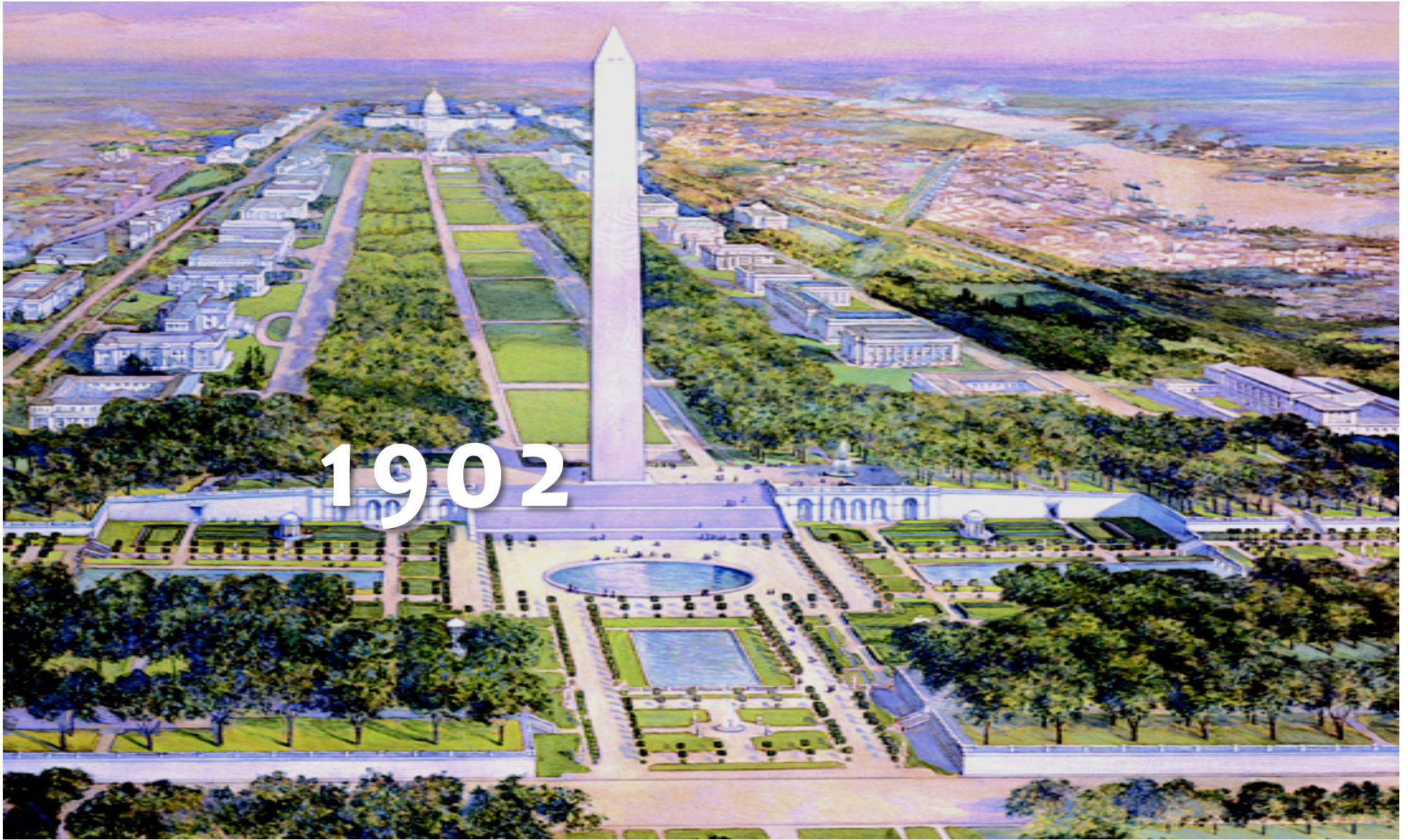


For more than 200 years citizens and design professionals have been proposing ideas



1892

for the Monument and its surrounding grounds



1902

But none...



1985

... was ever realized



In 2004, construction of security walls...



and accessible walkways added a completely new design element



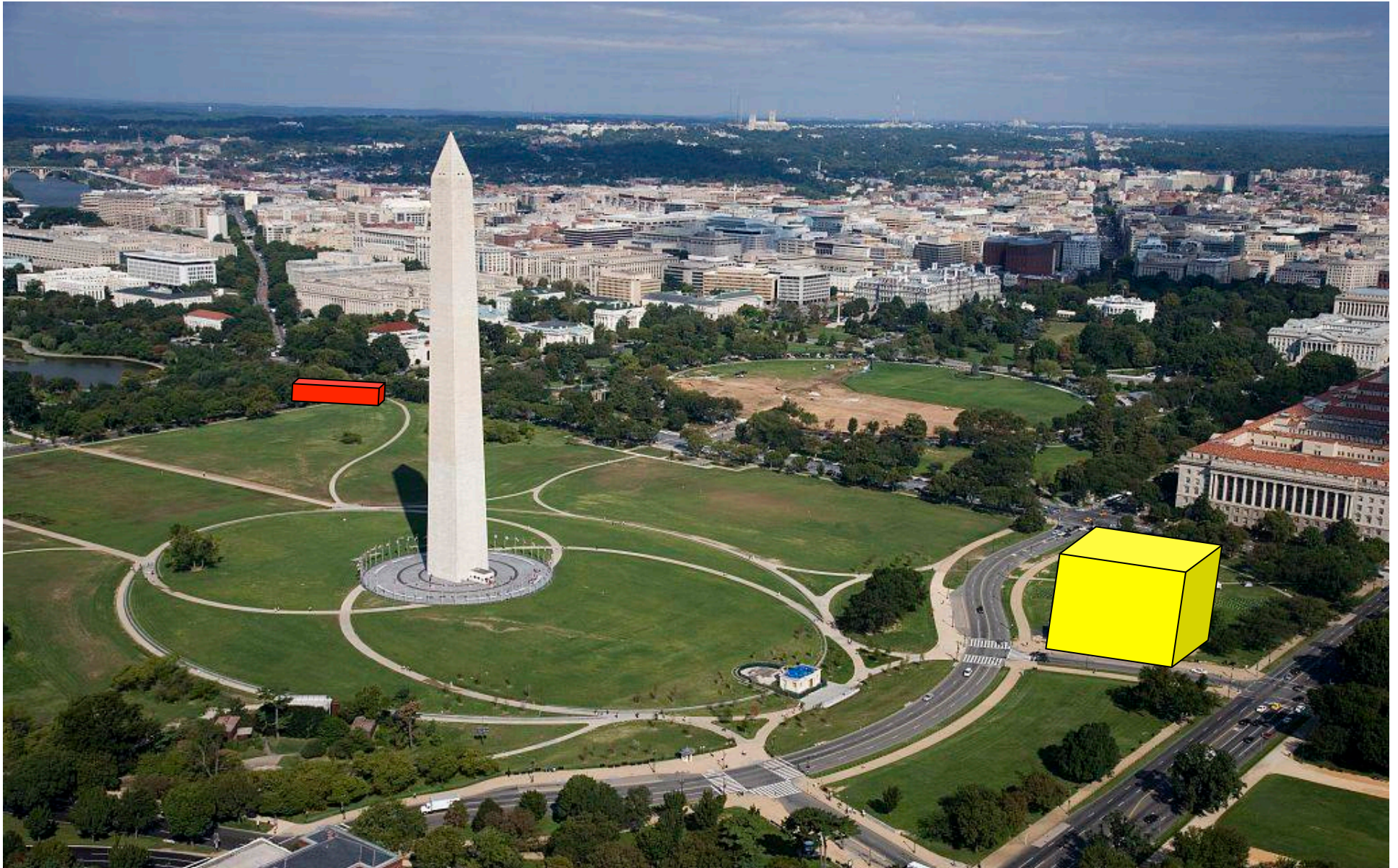
to the open grassy mound.



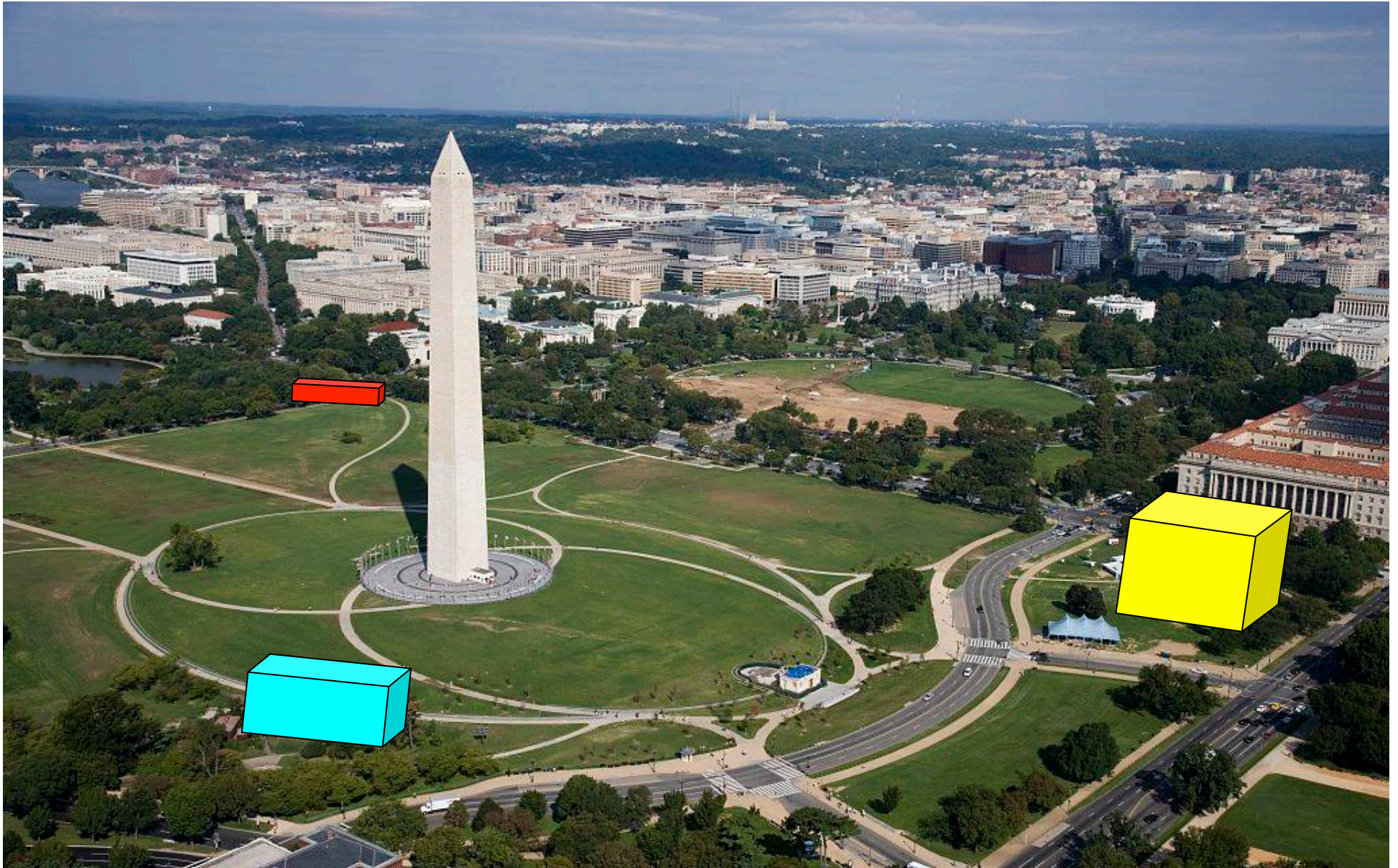
Now, three separate new projects are being planned:



The Army Corps of Engineers levee at 17th Street will protect Downtown Washington from Potomac River flooding.



The Smithsonian Museum of African American History and Culture will occupy the plot between 14th and 15th Streets along Constitution Avenue.



And the National Park Service proposes – as part of its new National Mall Plan -- to rebuild the run-down Sylvan Theater south of the Monument with new performance space and a visitor's center.



No one, though, is looking at the bigger picture of the Washington Monument grounds as a unified whole – as a fitting landscape setting for the great obelisk,



a lively stage for recreation,



First
Amendment
activities



and civic celebrations including presidential inaugurations, or its place in the uniquely American story told on the National Mall.



The purpose of the National Ideas Competition for the Washington Monument Grounds is to encourage Americans of all ages to develop innovative and creative ideas for making the Washington Monument grounds more welcoming, educational, and effectively used by the public. Currently, there is no agreement as to what role the Monument grounds could or should play in the future.



Where did the idea for the Washington Monument come from? Why was that idea, and all the other ideas proposed over the past 200 years, never carried out?



Historically, the plans for Washington DC gave pride of place to a monument to the Father of Our Country.



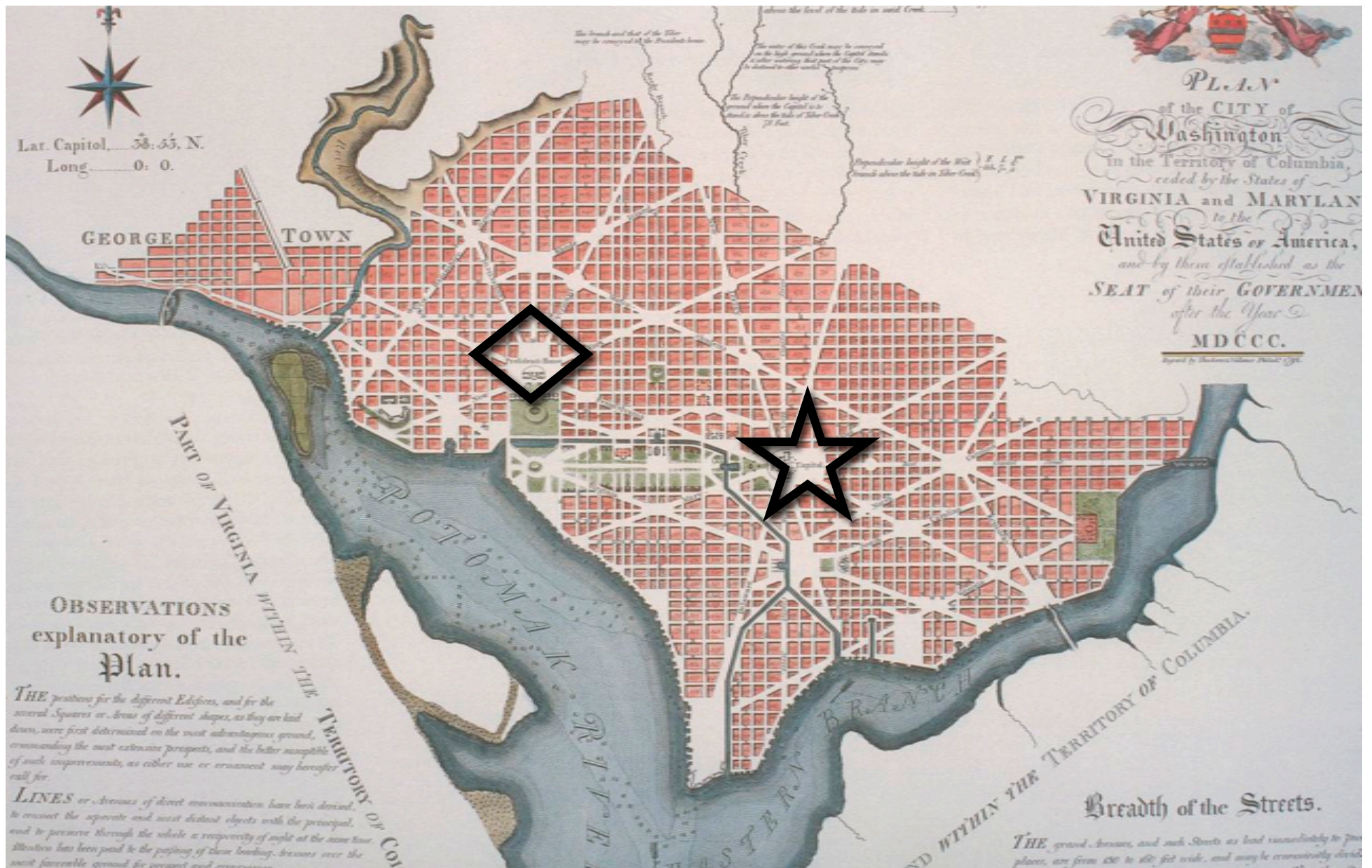
The story begins with the founding of the capital by President Washington himself who in 1791 commissioned Peter L'Enfant to create a plan for the new city -- a plan Washington proudly unfurls in this painting.



In his plan, L'Enfant located



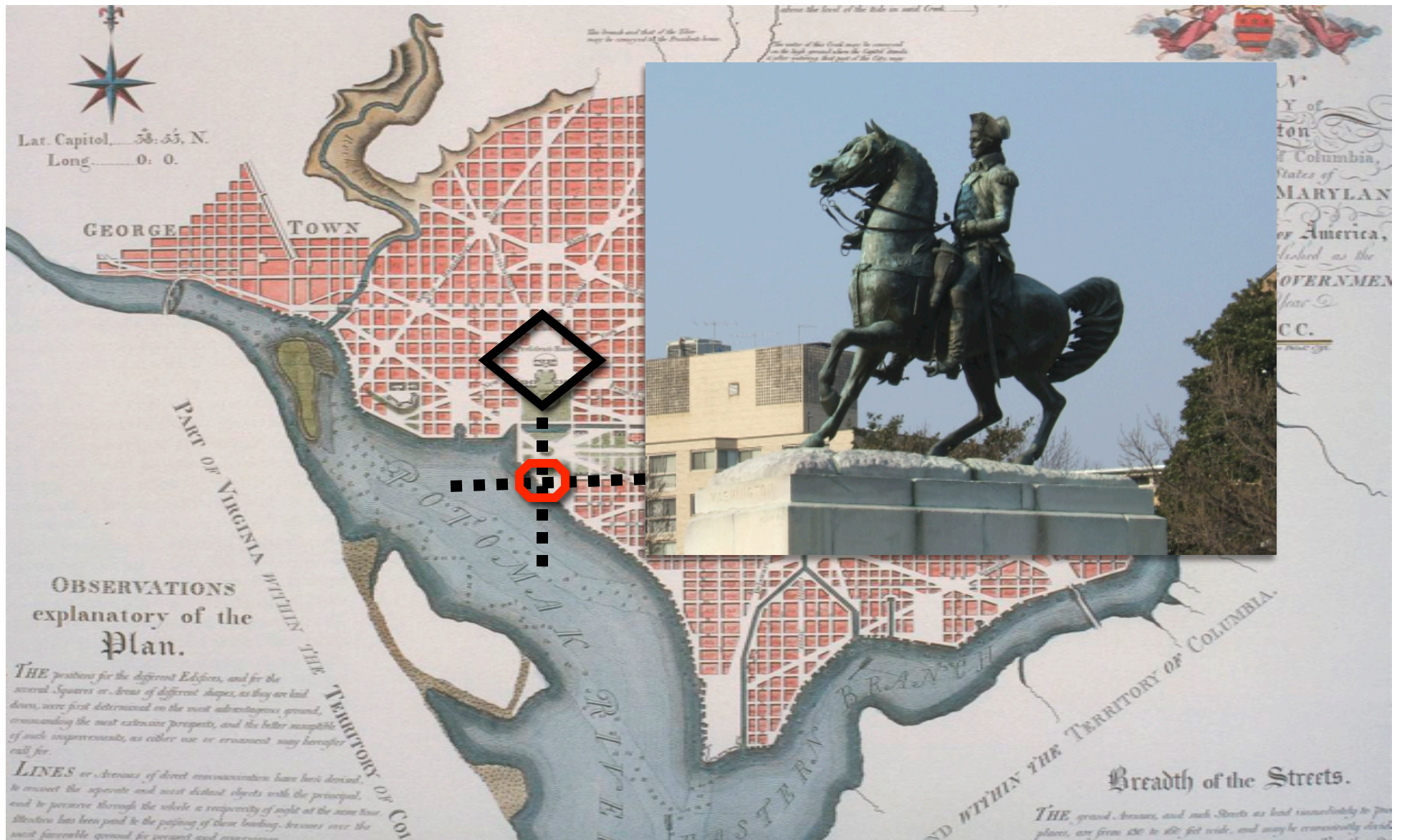
the Capitol on a prominent hill at the center of the city,



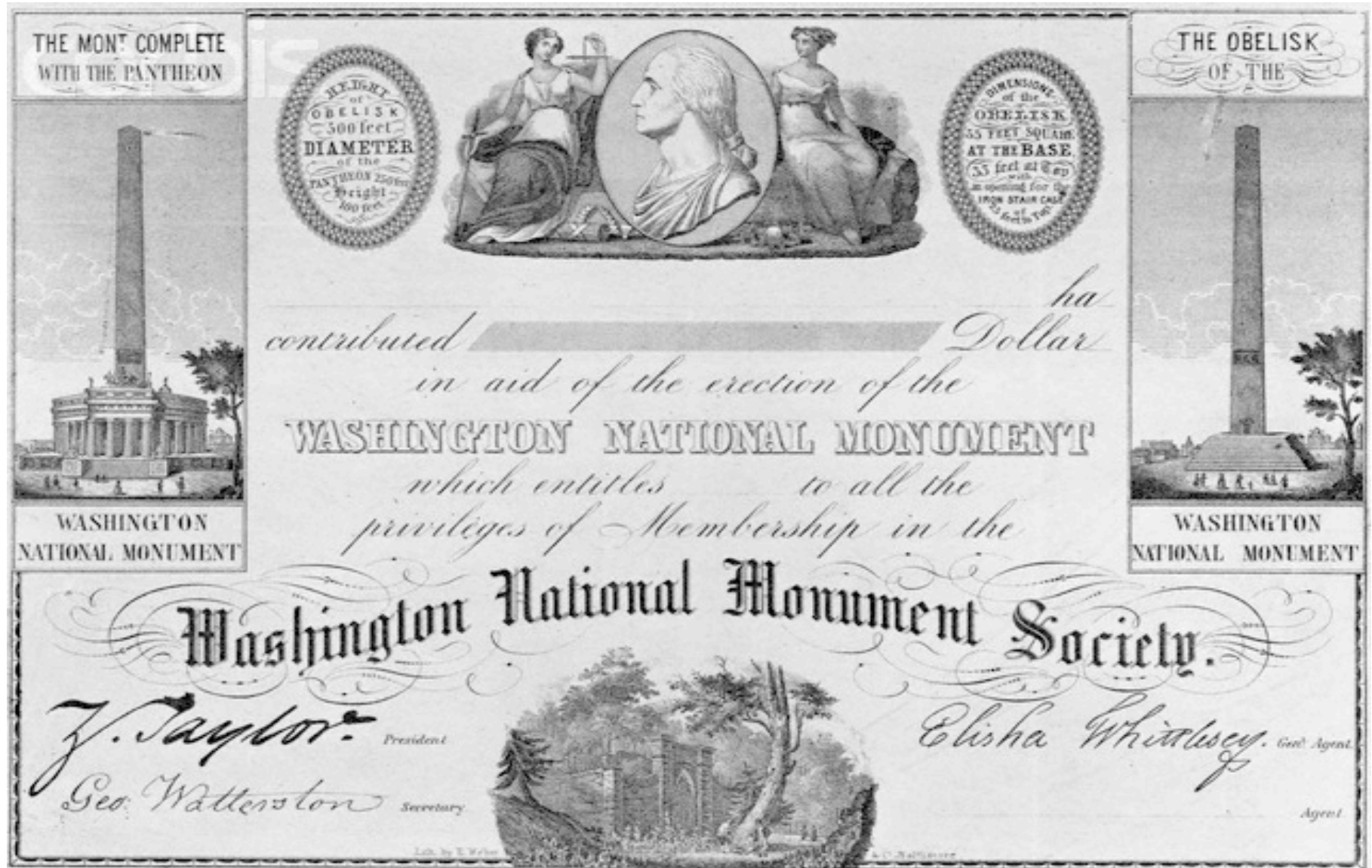
the White House on another rise a mile away,



and an equestrian monument to George Washington where a line west from the Capitol intersected a line south from the White House, along the banks of the Potomac River and at the western terminus of a broad, green public promenade we know today as the National Mall.



The idea for an equestrian statue actually originated earlier. Already in 1783, the Confederation Congress had passed a resolution calling for an equestrian statue to be located at the seat of government, to honor George Washington's military leadership during the war for American independence. But that idea languished for over 40 years.

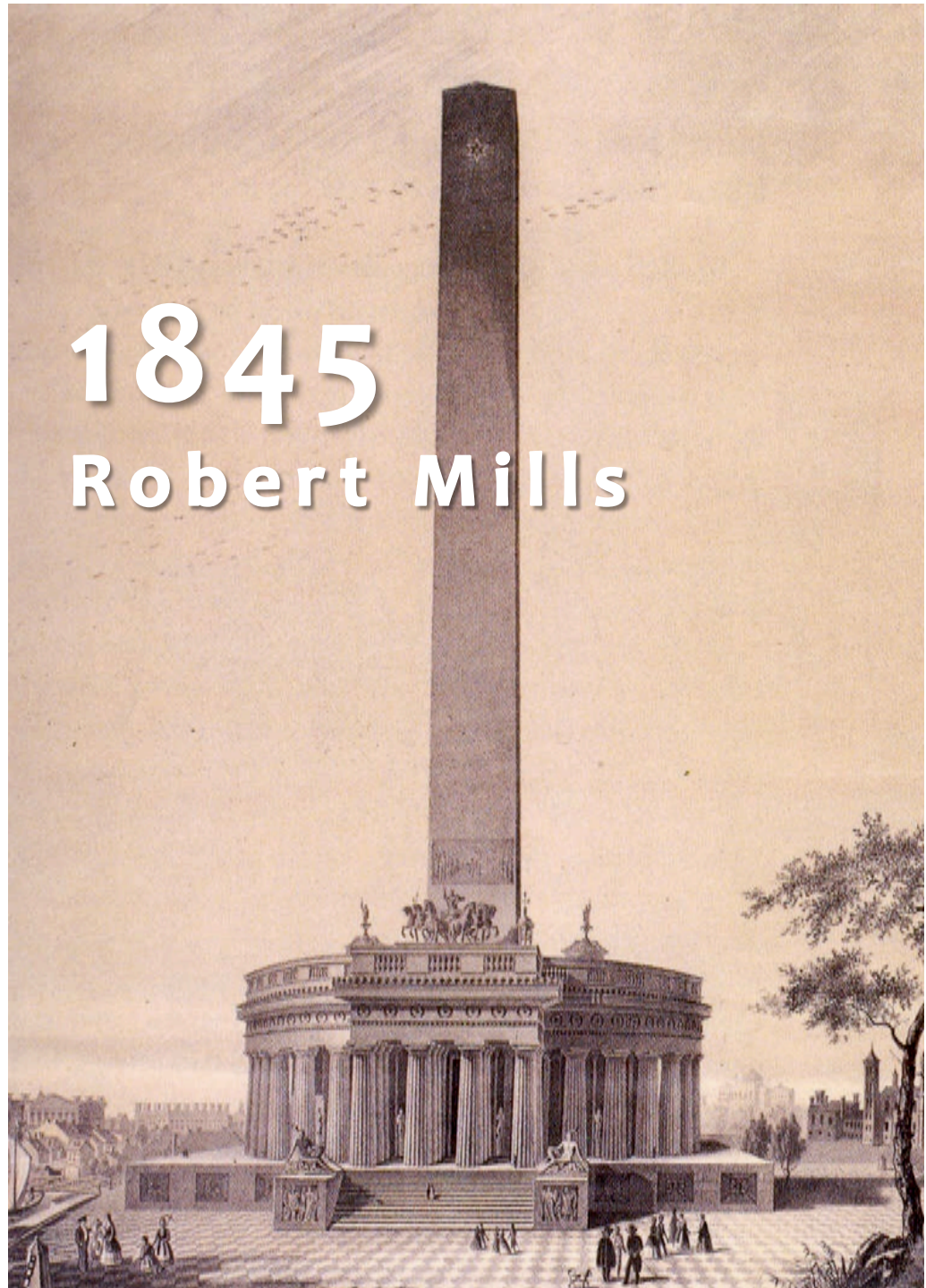


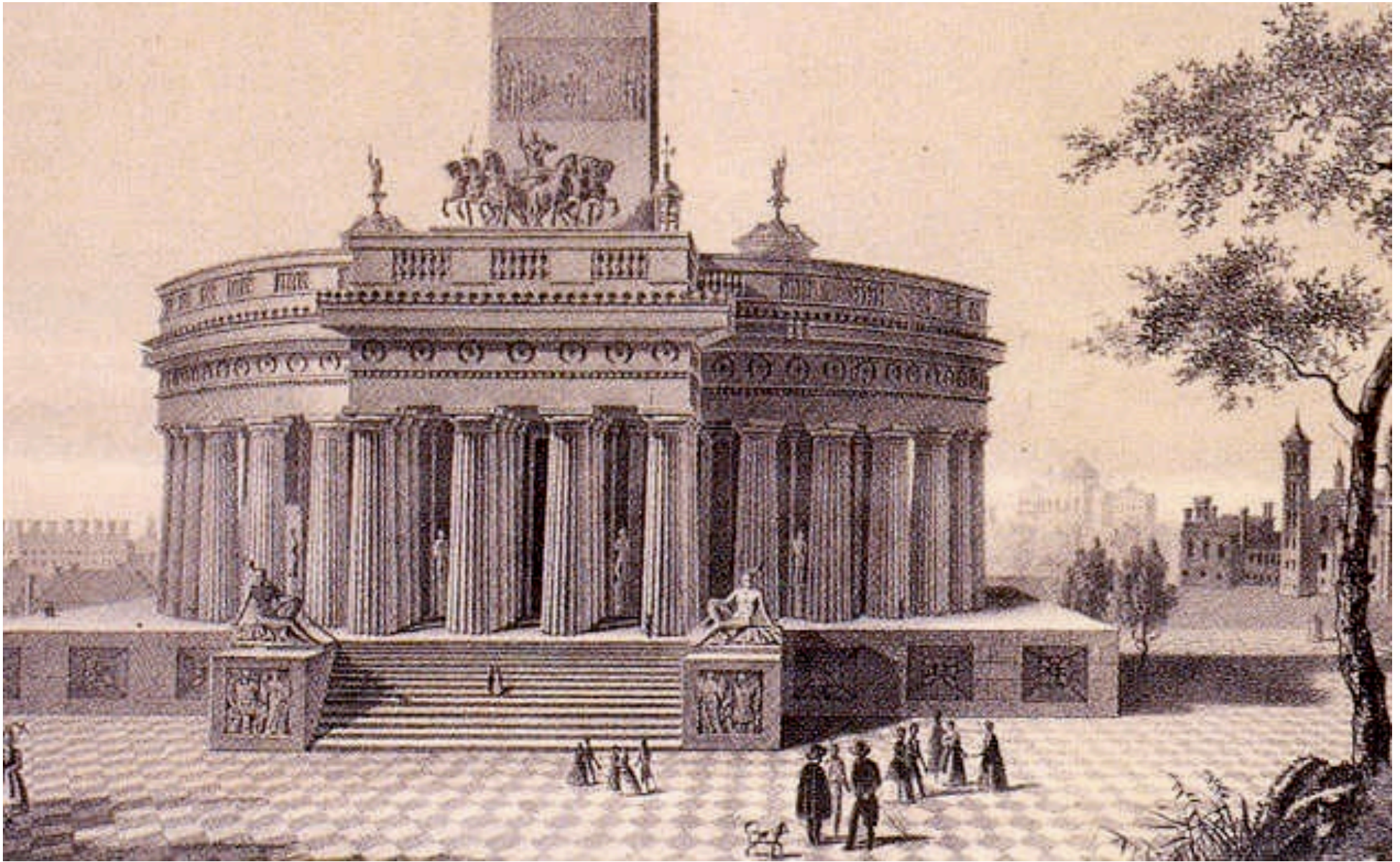
In 1833, a group of local Washingtonians, dismayed at Congress's failure to build the monument, formed the Washington National Monument Society, and offered certificates to anyone who contributed one dollar towards construction. The Society sponsored a design competition but when none of the entries was considered suitable,

1845

Robert Mills

members selected a design by one of their own, architect Robert Mills. Mills envisioned an Egyptian-style obelisk surrounded by a colonnaded pantheon 100 feet high topped

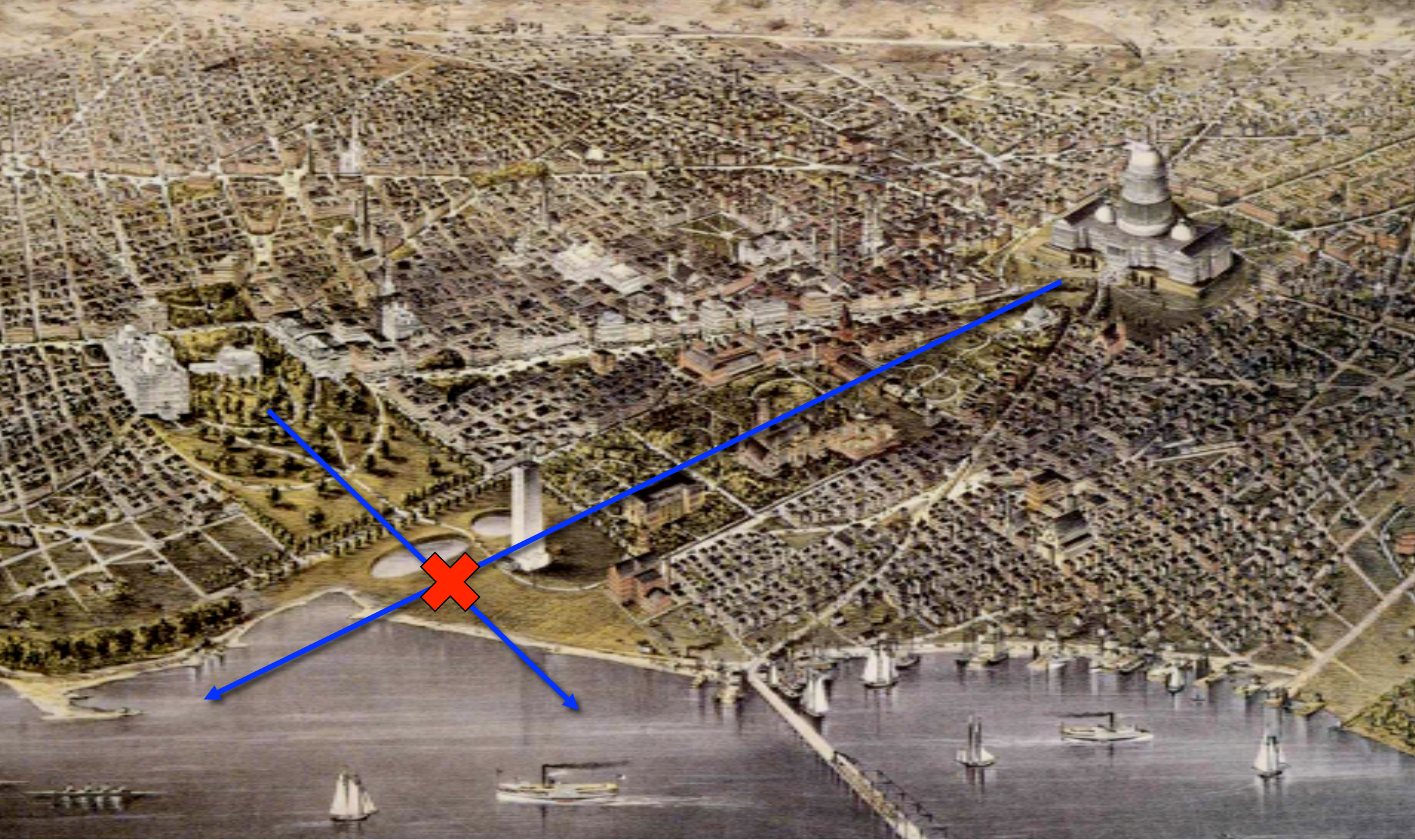




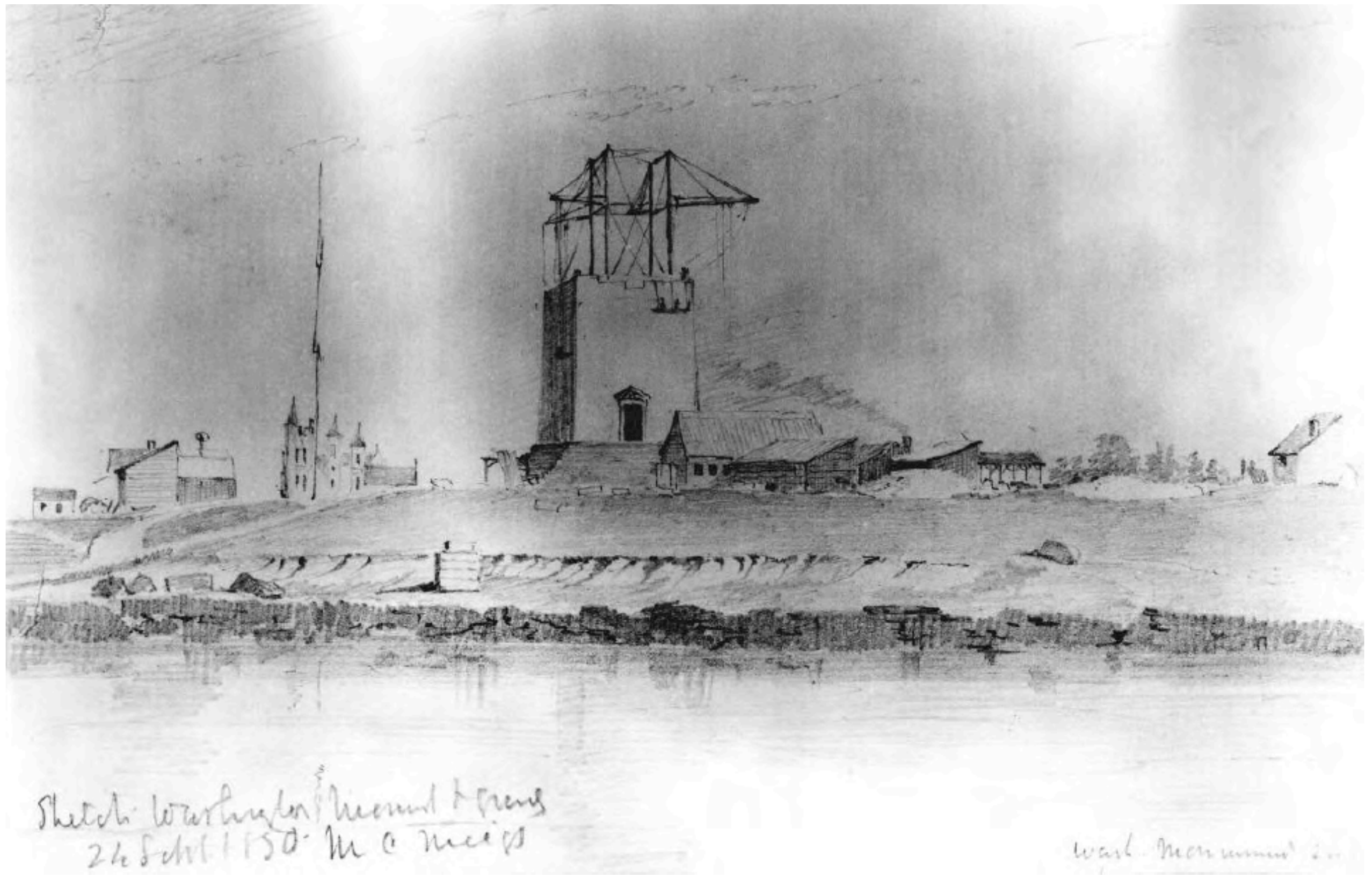
by a statue of Washington in a horse-drawn chariot. Inside the colonnade Mills envisioned statues of 30 prominent Revolutionary War heroes.



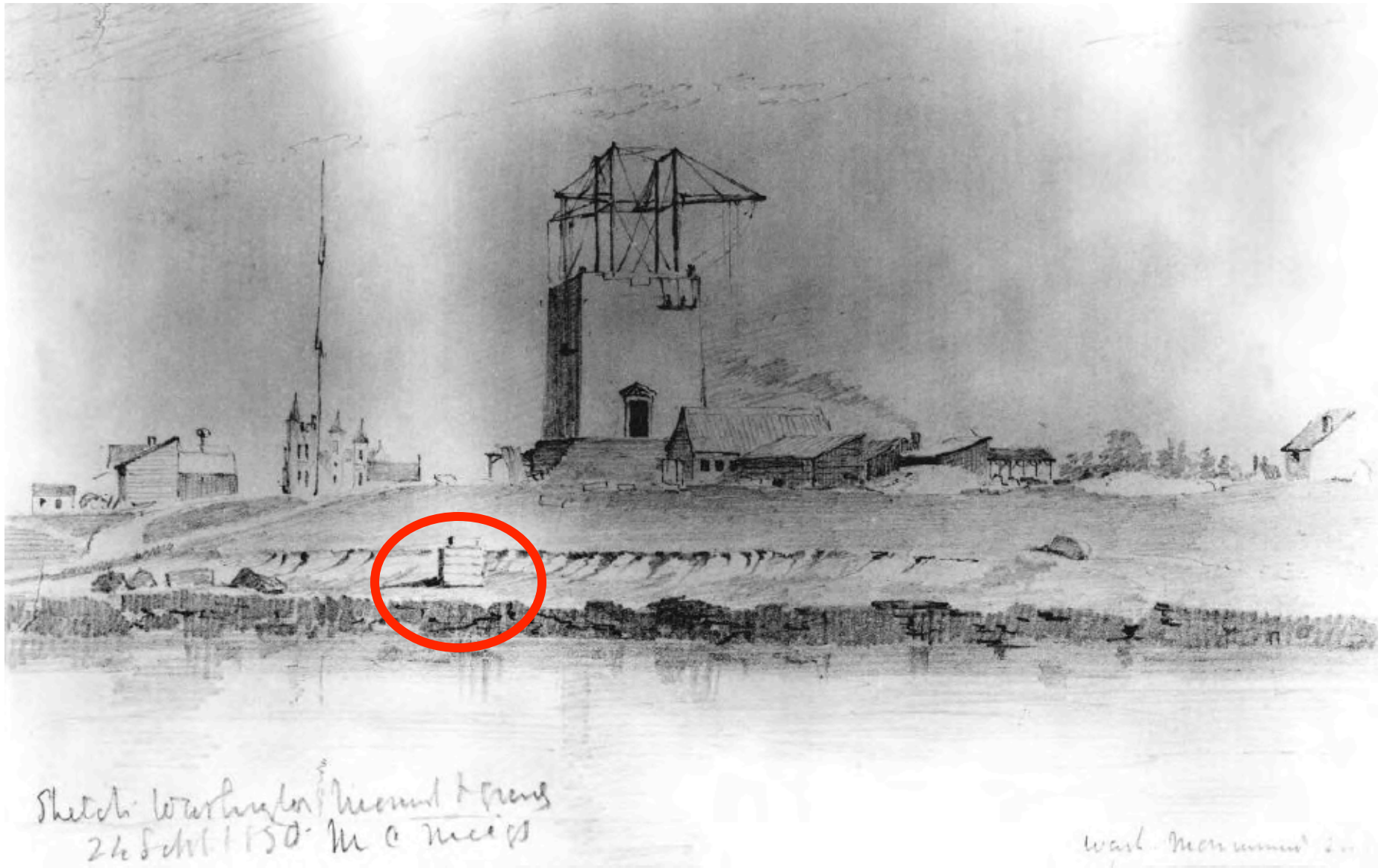
Construction was begun in 1848, halted for 25 years, and only completed in 1884.



The Monument was constructed southeast of L'Enfant's site, due to poor soil conditions so close to the Potomac River shoreline.



That intended location, shown in this 1850 sketch, was marked...



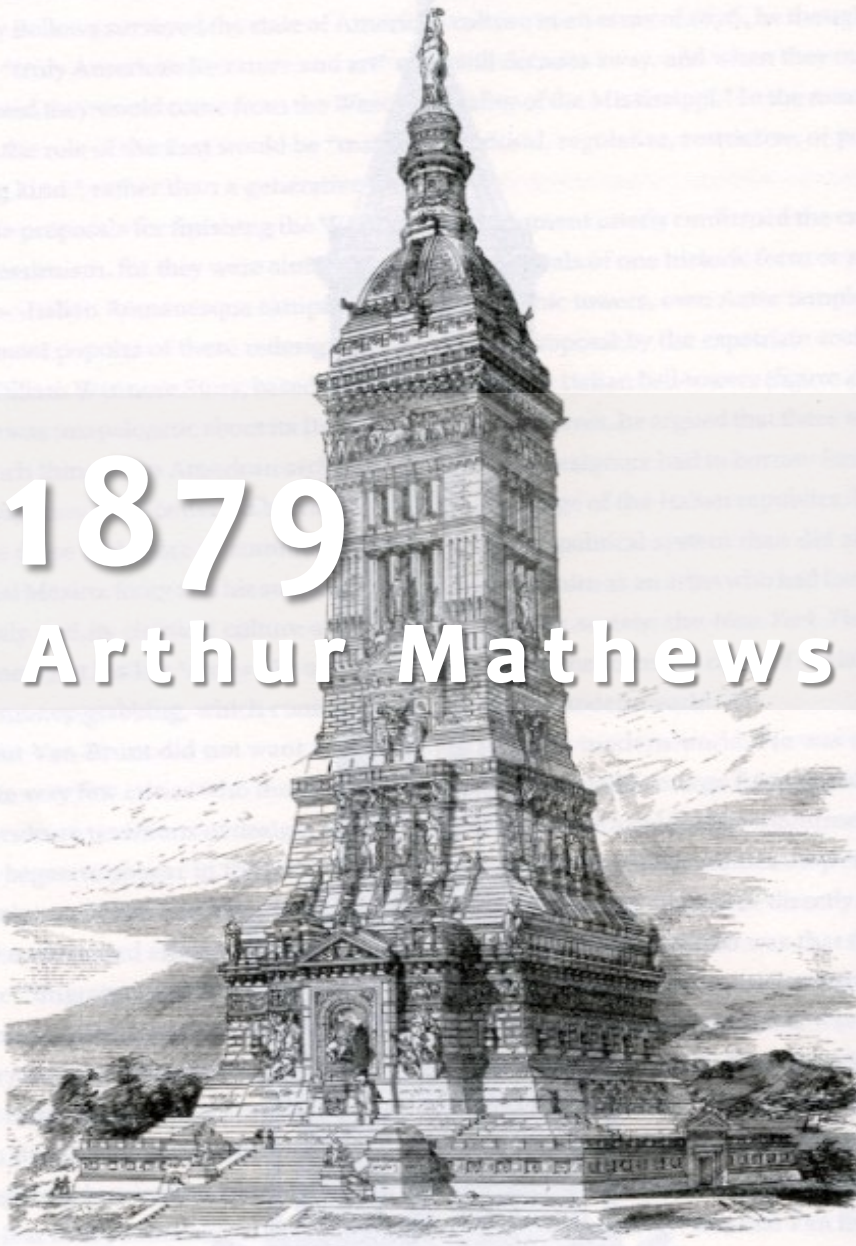
by a stone block, known as the Jefferson Stone or Jefferson Pier, so called because Thomas Jefferson had wanted this powerfully symbolic spot at the heart of the capital to mark prime meridian for the United States.

Already in the 1850s, Mills' elaborate design was undergoing change. Critics and members of Congress derided the obelisk as an unshapely mass.

Mark Twain in 1867 ridiculed the unfinished monument as “a factory chimney with the top broke off, cow sheds about its base, a stump in a stockyard.”

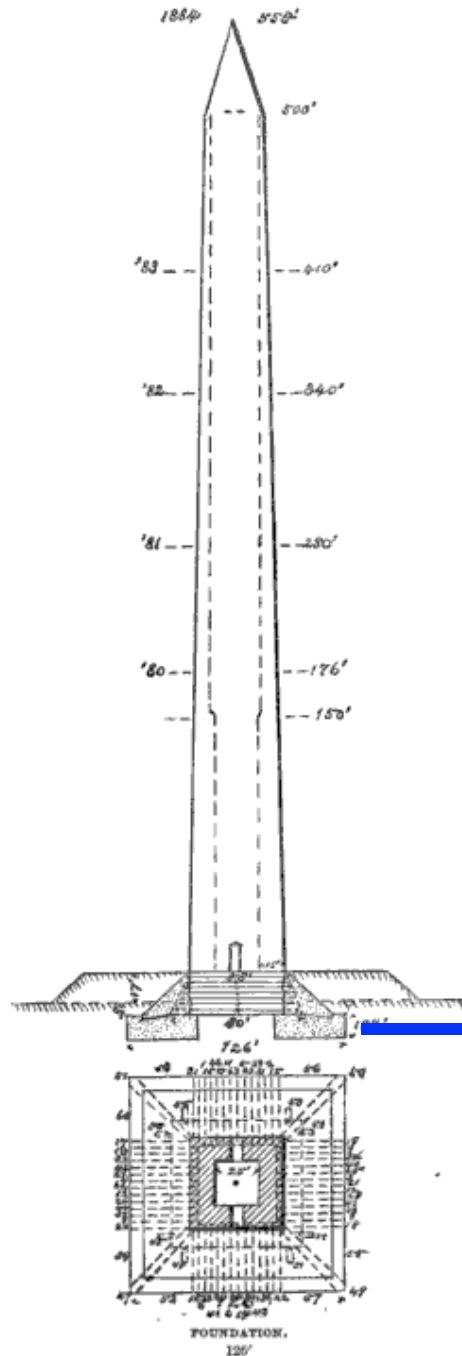
1879

Arthur Mathews



44 Arthur Mathews, attributed, design for completion of the Washington Monument, ca. 1879, in *American Art Review* 1 (1880): 64. (Frick Fine Arts Library, University of Pittsburgh.)

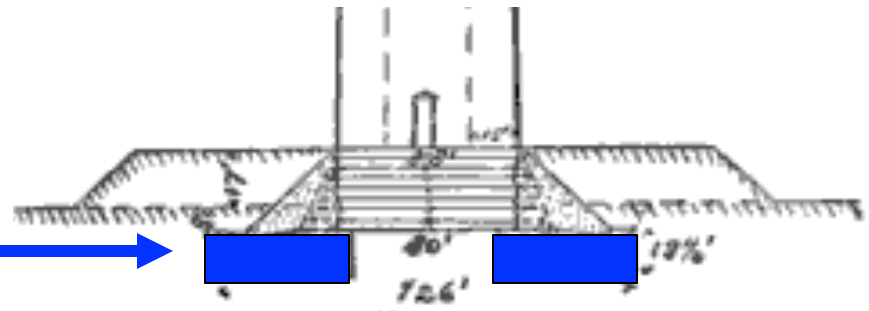
Alternative designs were proposed, almost all of them revivals of historic forms.



In addition, questions were raised about the stability of the partially completed obelisk, and whether Mill's bluestone foundation would be able to support the full weight of the finished obelisk.

In the end, construction was completed in 1884 under Col. Thomas Casey of the Army Corps of Engineers.

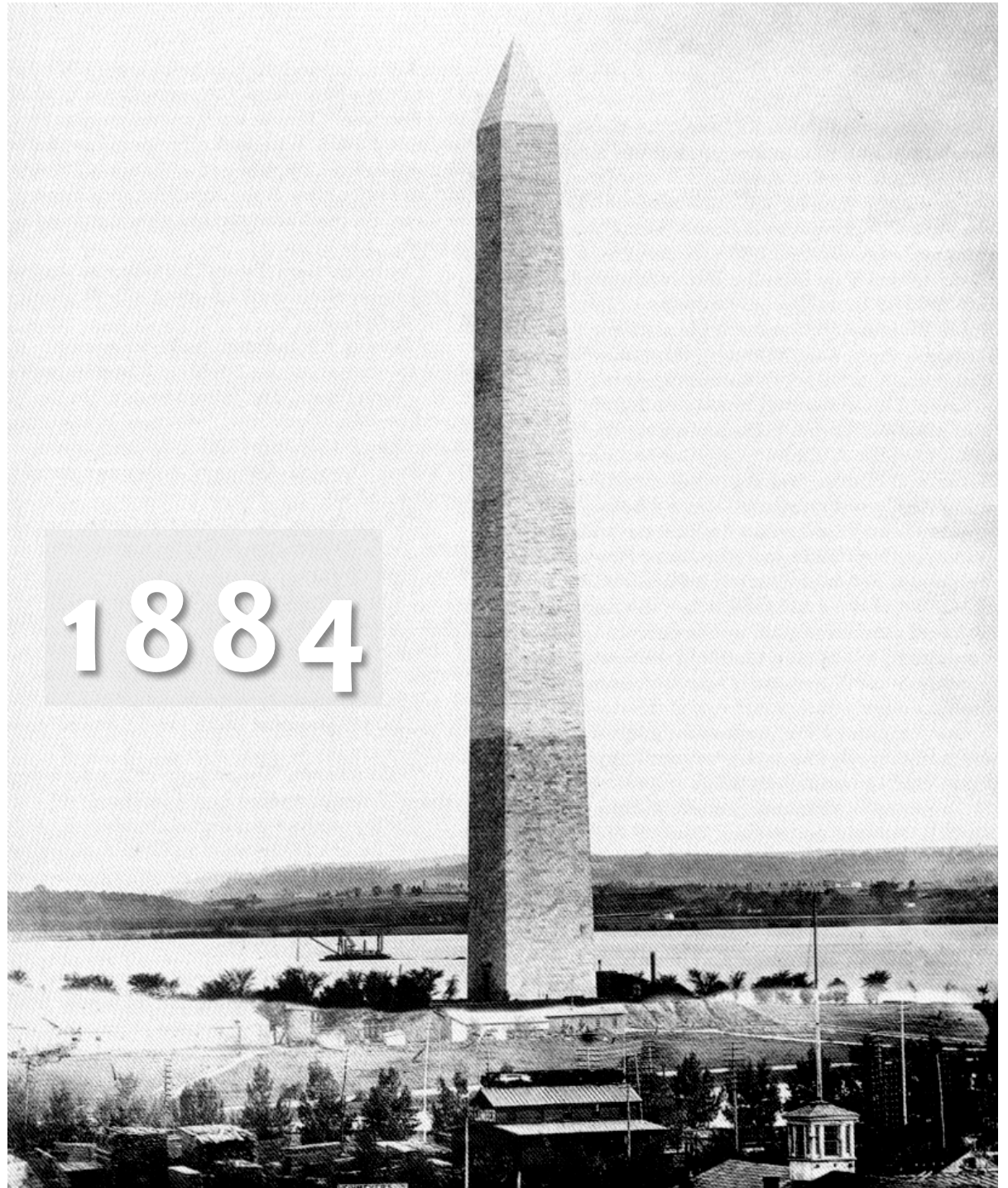
Casey underpinned the Monument's foundation with a new concrete slab and buttress.



Drastically simplifying Mill's design, and outmaneuvering those calling for a different concept, Casey envisioned the monument to be a plain obelisk and technical marvel. This was to be the world's tallest solid masonry structure with the highest passenger elevator, lit within by electric lights, a triumph of modern science.

In its simple abstract form, Casey's monument represented what critic Henry Van Brunt called for, a "modern symbol of national unity and greatness" at a time when the United States, reunified following the Civil War, was becoming an international power on the world stage.

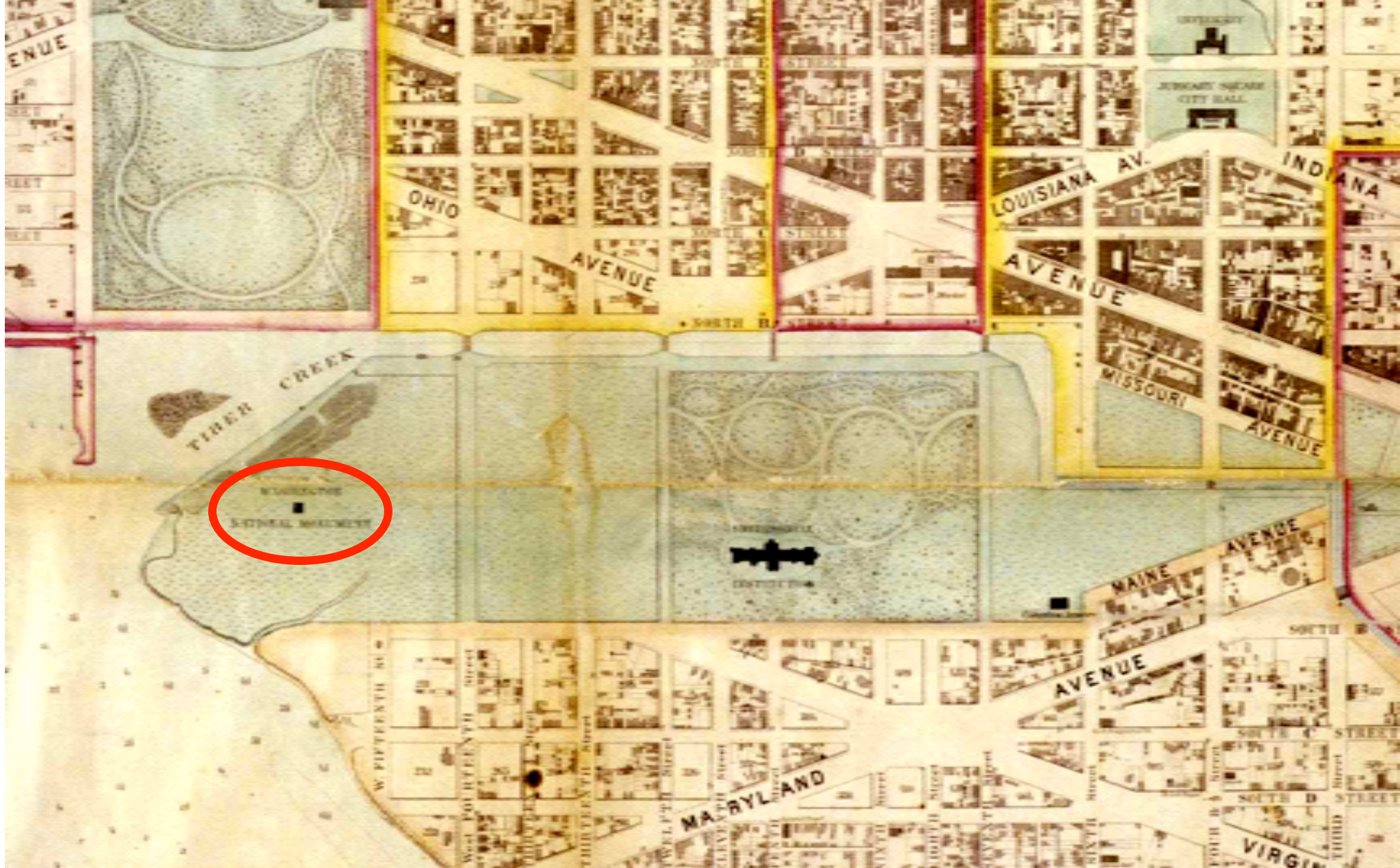
(Kirk Savage, *Monument Wars*, p. 117)





1857 Boschke Map

Many ideas also were proposed for the triangle of land surrounding the Washington Monument,



bounded to the west by the Potomac River and to the north by the mouth of Tiber Creek

1851 Andrew Jackson Downing

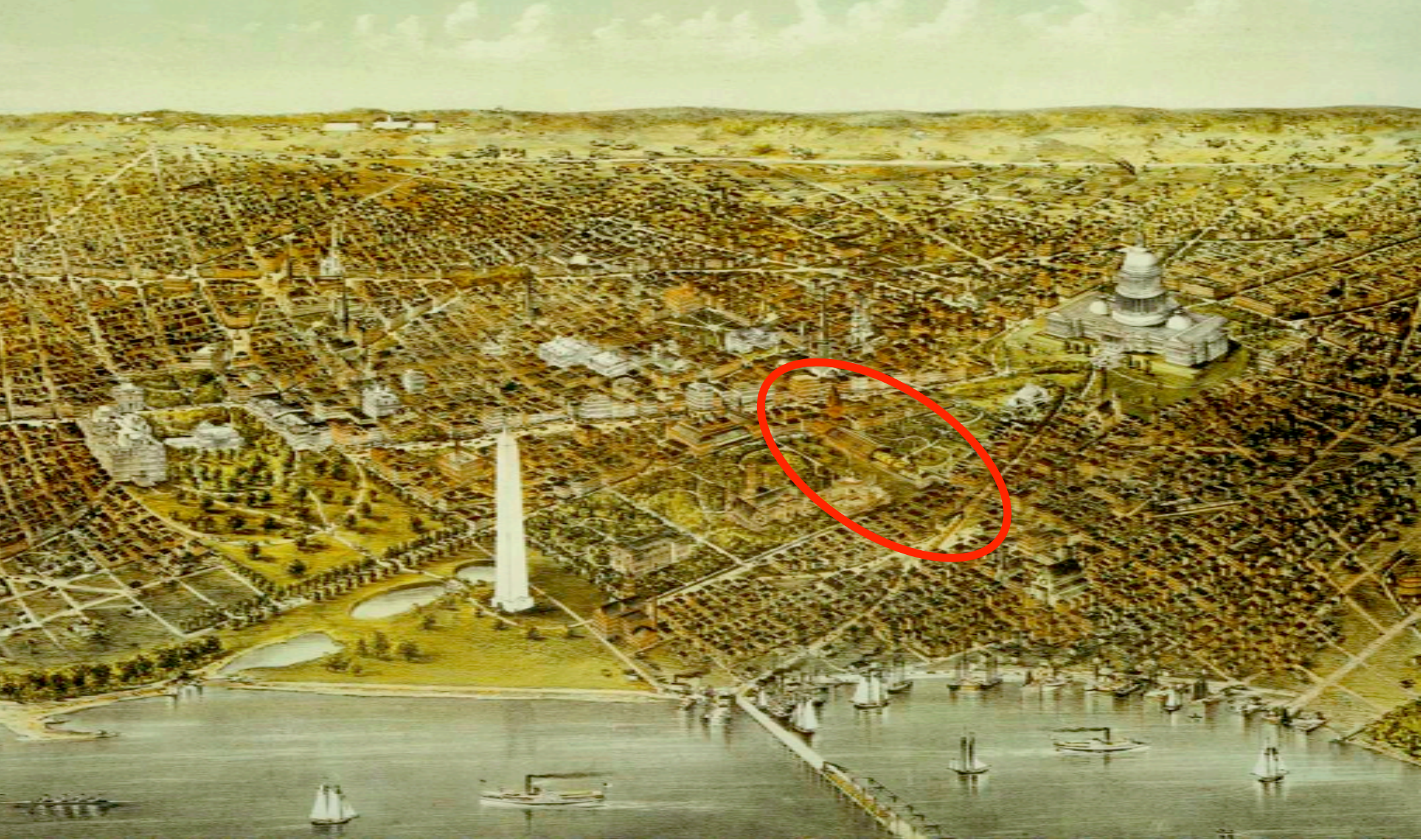


and a design by landscape architect Andrew Jackson Downing for a picturesque garden with curvilinear pathways and natural groupings of trees.

An aerial photograph of Washington, D.C. in 1892. The image shows a dense urban grid with numerous buildings, streets, and parks. The White House is visible in the lower right, and the U.S. Capitol is in the upper right. The Washington Monument stands prominently in the center-left. The city is situated along the Potomac River, with several sailing ships visible in the water. The year '1892' is overlaid in large white text on the left side of the image.

1892

By the end of the 19th century, the Mall was a far cry from any of these ideas. Instead, it was a jumble of buildings, trees, and meandering paths.



Railroad tracks crossed at the foot of the Capitol. Tiber Creek was buried under B Street, now Constitution Avenue. And the Washington Monument stood amid a sprinkling of trees and three fish ponds.

Local Washingtonians as well as architects nationwide, embarrassed by the conditions, called for a new plan.

Proposal for 1892 World's Fair

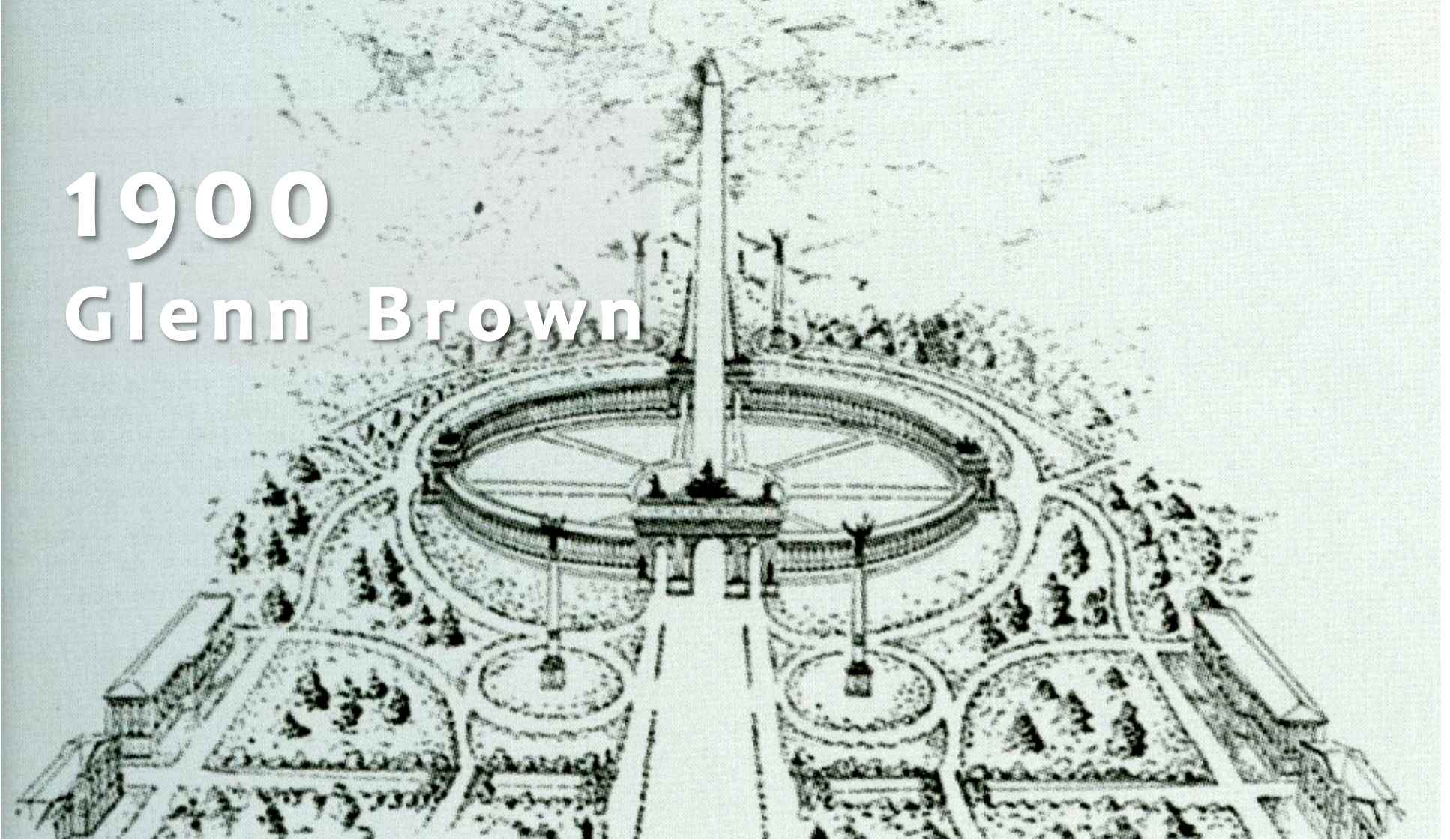


Some Washington community leaders tried – but failed -- to win the 1892 Worlds Fair for the federal city by proposing temporary and permanent exposition space around the Monument.

Glenn Brown

[illegible]

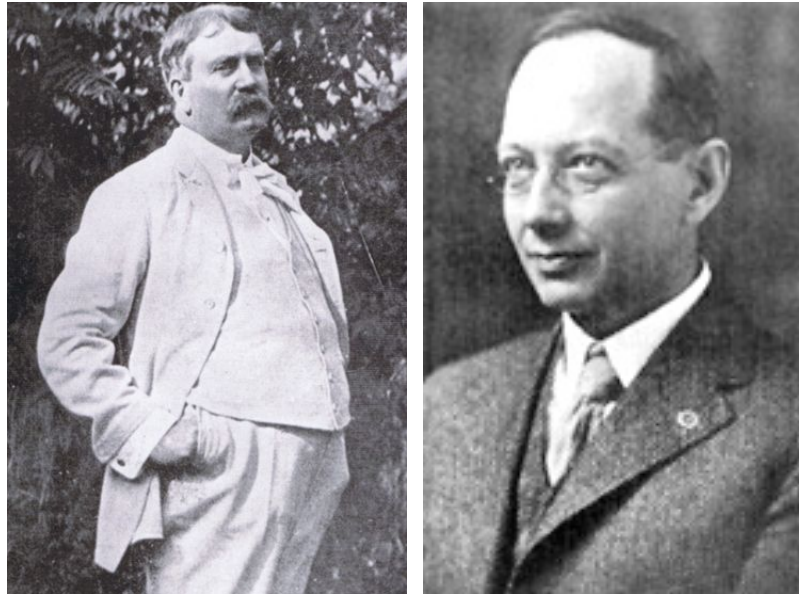
1900 Glenn Brown



with the Washington Monument at its center surrounded by a colonnade and plaza.

Brown and other members of the American Institute of Architects, who held their annual meeting in 1900 in Washington DC, influenced the next major planning effort for the Mall and Washington Monument grounds.

(Commission of Fine Arts, *Designing the Nation's Capital*, pp. 67-68)



1901-1902

Senate Park “McMillan” Commission

In 1901, Congress created the Senate Park Commission to restore L’Enfant’s vision and plan for the future.

This Commission, also known as the McMillan Commission, included architect Daniel Burnham who had worked on the 1893 Chicago World’s Columbian Exposition, and landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted Jr.



The commissioners studied the 1791 L'Enfant plan



Versailles, 1901

and visited the grand gardens of Europe such as Versailles that might have inspired L'Enfant's plan.

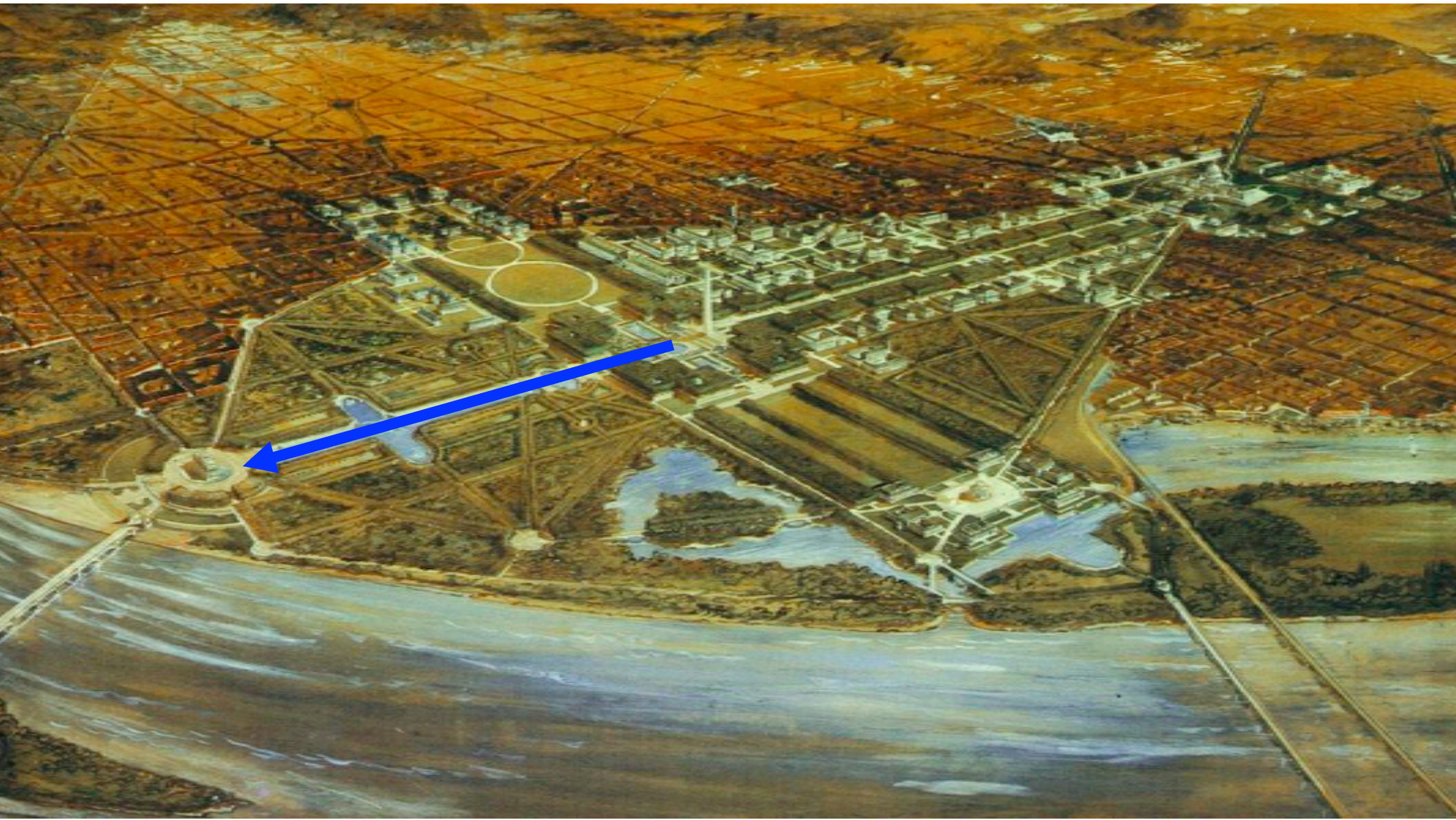
An aerial, sepia-toned illustration of a city plan, likely for the Mall in Washington D.C. The plan shows a wide river at the bottom, with a large, irregularly shaped island or peninsula in the center. The island is divided into several sections by roads and waterways. A large, circular area is marked in the upper left, and a large, rectangular area is marked in the upper right. The plan is detailed with numerous streets, buildings, and green spaces. The text "1902 McMullan Commission Plan" is overlaid in large, white, serif font across the lower half of the image.

1902 McMullan Commission Plan

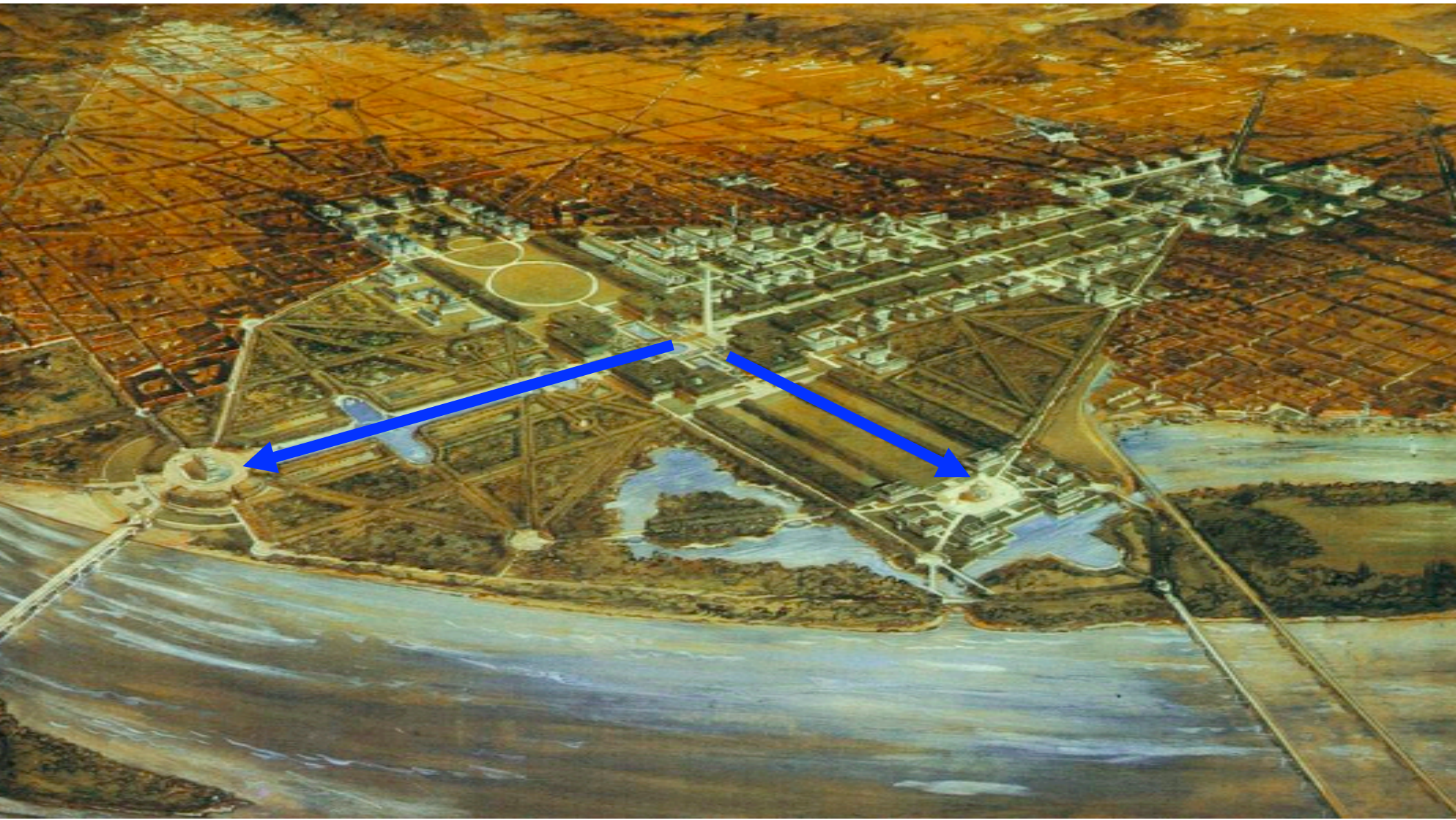
They created a grand new vision for the Mall



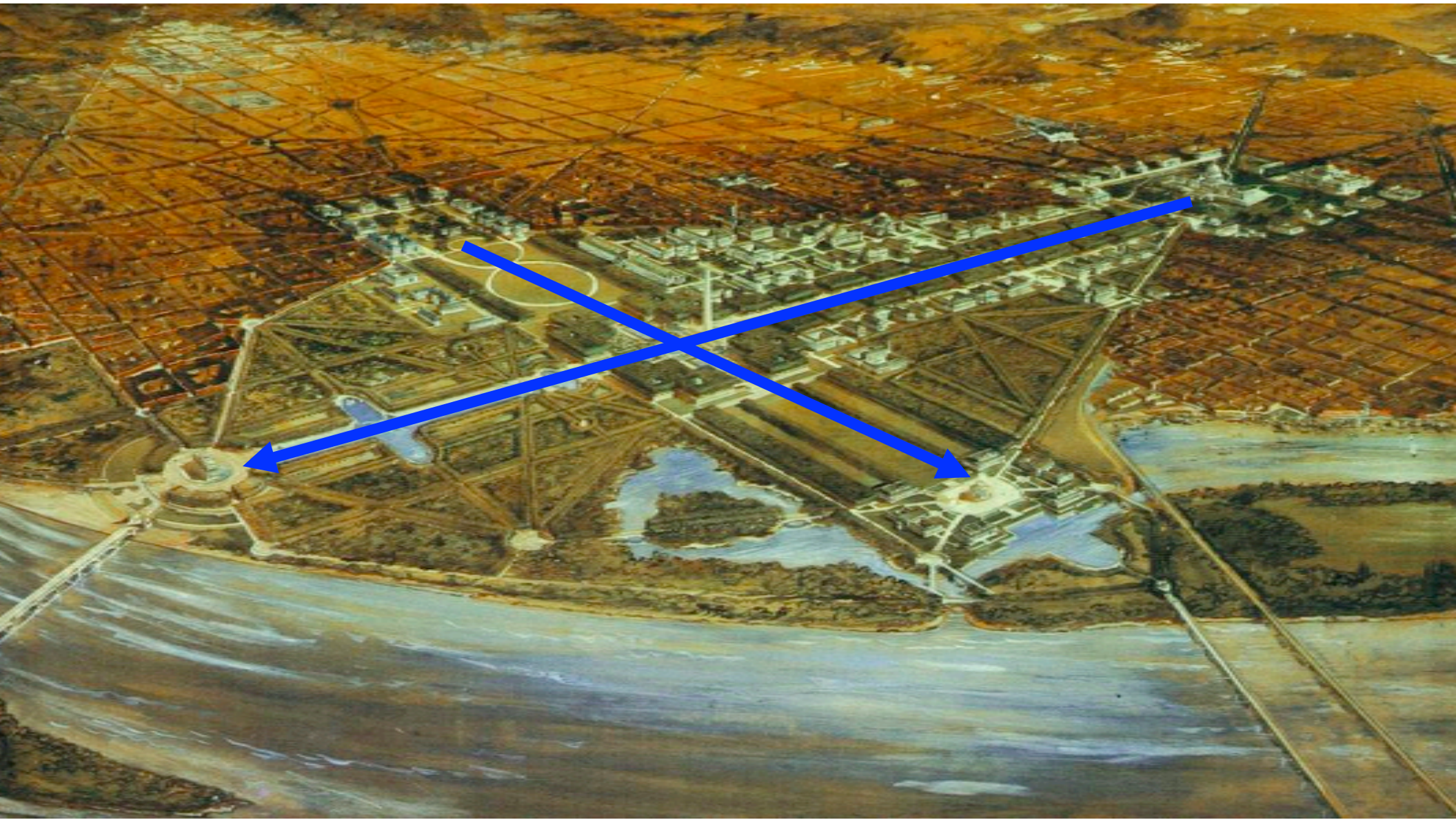
that more than doubled its size by expanding onto landfill dredged in the 1880s and 90s from the Potomac River by the Army Corps of Engineers.



This new plan provided a site one mile west of the Washington Monument for the Lincoln Memorial,



and to the south a location for what became the Jefferson Memorial. The Lincoln Memorial added an important new chapter to the story told on the Mall, of American government preserved in the Civil War.



The Washington Monument grounds gained new prominence as the centerpiece of the Mall's expanded geometry.



“the gem of the Mall System”

The grounds were to be the “gem of the Mall system.”

The Washington Monument itself was the key challenge in the eyes of the designers.

They wrote: “No portion of the task set before the Commission has required more study and extended consideration than has the solution of the problem of devising an appropriate setting for the Monument...Taken by itself, the Washington Monument stands not only as one of the most stupendous works of man, but also as one of the most beautiful of human creations. Indeed, it is at once so great and so simple that it seems to be almost a work of nature...”

(*The Improvement of the Park System of the District of Columbia* by the Senate Park “McMillan” Commission, 1902.
Download the entire report at <http://www.nationalmall.net/resource/mcmillan.html>)



The McMillan Plan proposed an elaborate European-style formal garden filled with reflecting pools, fountains and sculpture, and ordered plantings of trees, approached down a grand staircase.



A round pool would mark L'Enfant's intended location for the Monument.



But this grand vision was doomed. In the 1930s, new concerns about the stability of the Monument, and worries that cutting into the soil could undermine the foundation, caused Congress to abandon the McMillan concept.



So while much of the National Mall developed throughout the 20th century along the lines intended by the McMillan Commission, the Monument grounds at its center remained unfinished. The grounds instead were put to various uses.

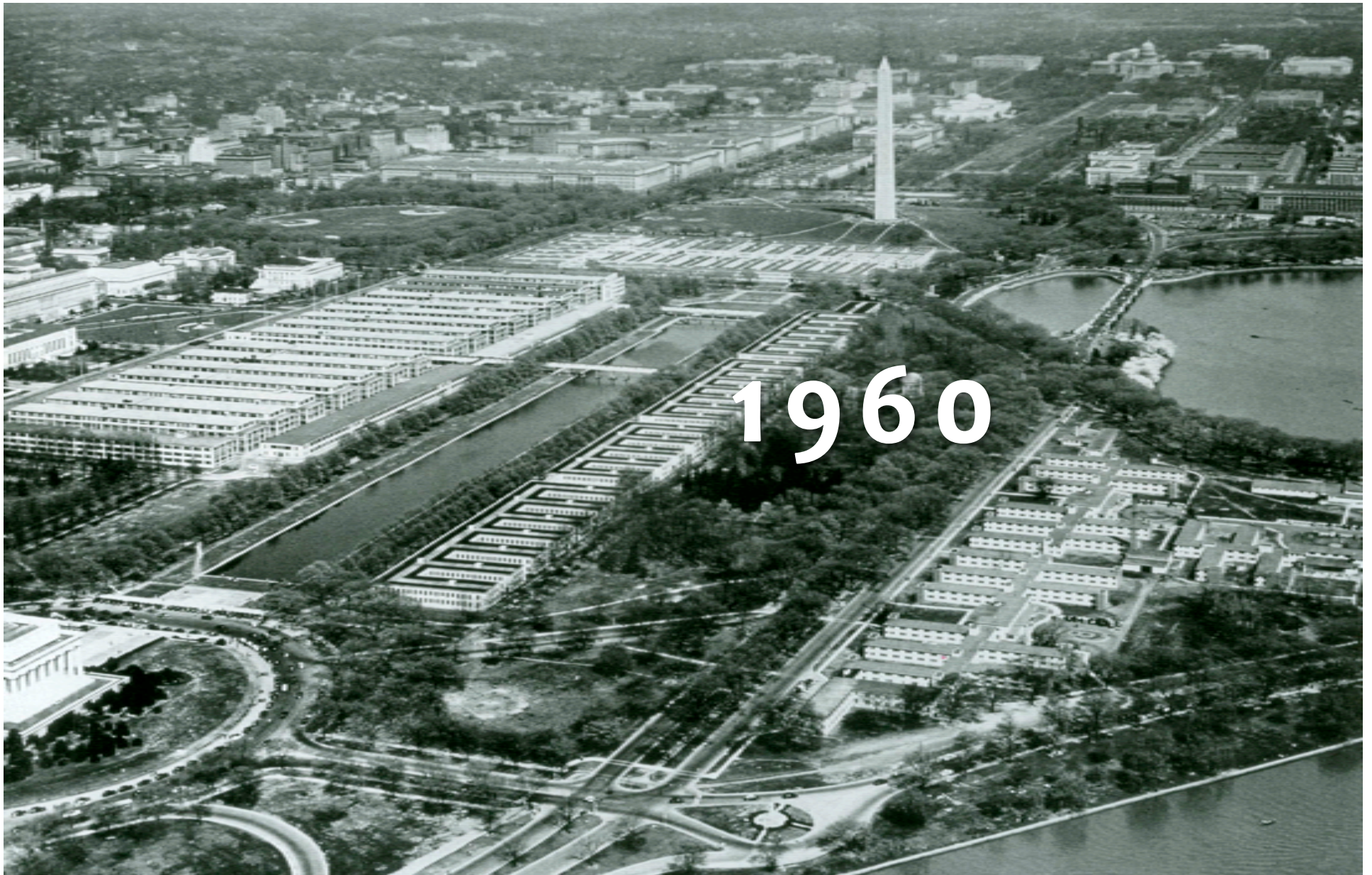


For 25 years there
was a swimming pool
northwest of the
Monument;

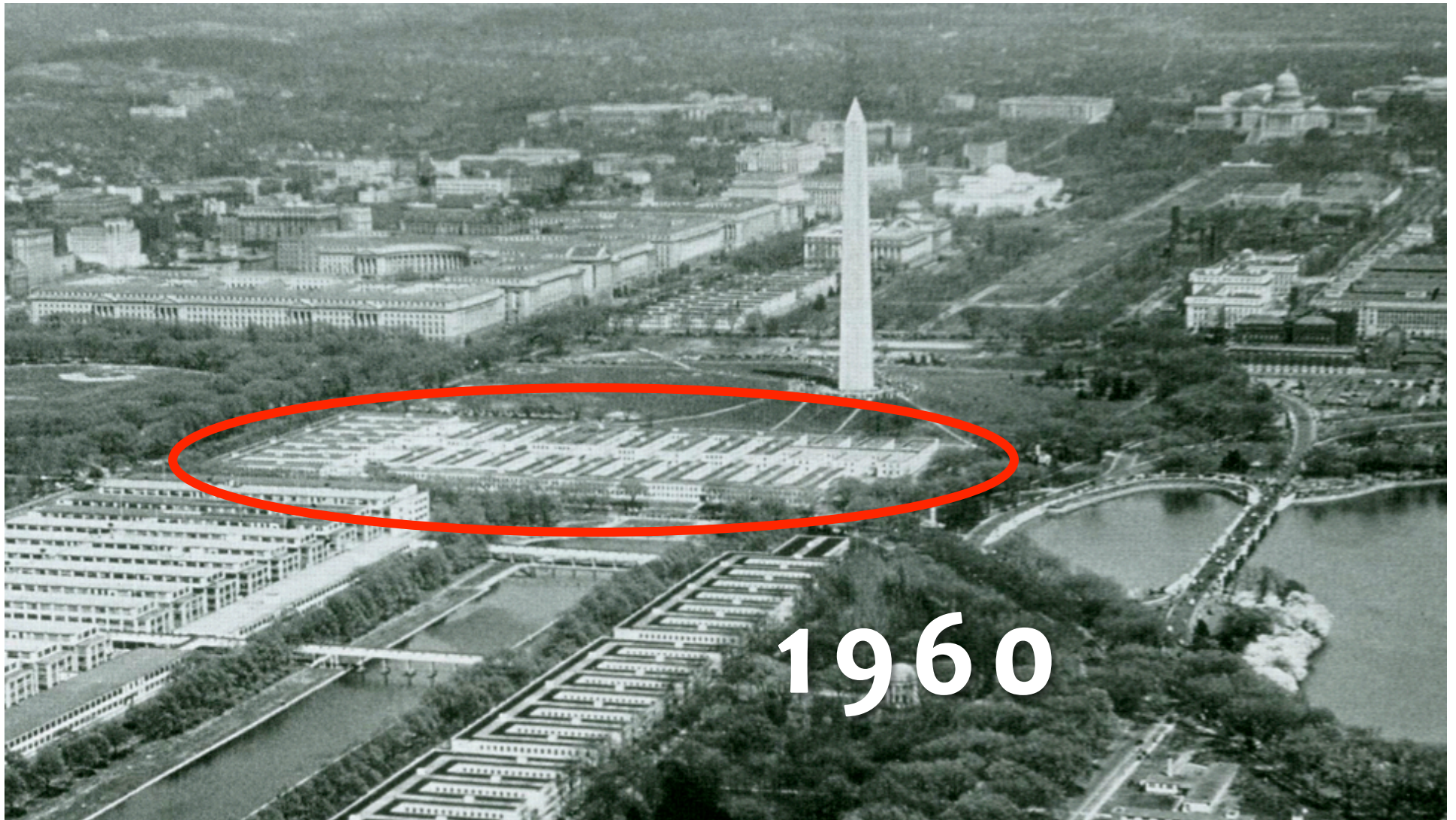
1919 Sylvan Theater



On the southeast corner, the Sylvan Theater was the setting for civic events and theatrical and musical performances. The original open-air stage was replaced in the 1940s with a wooden structure.



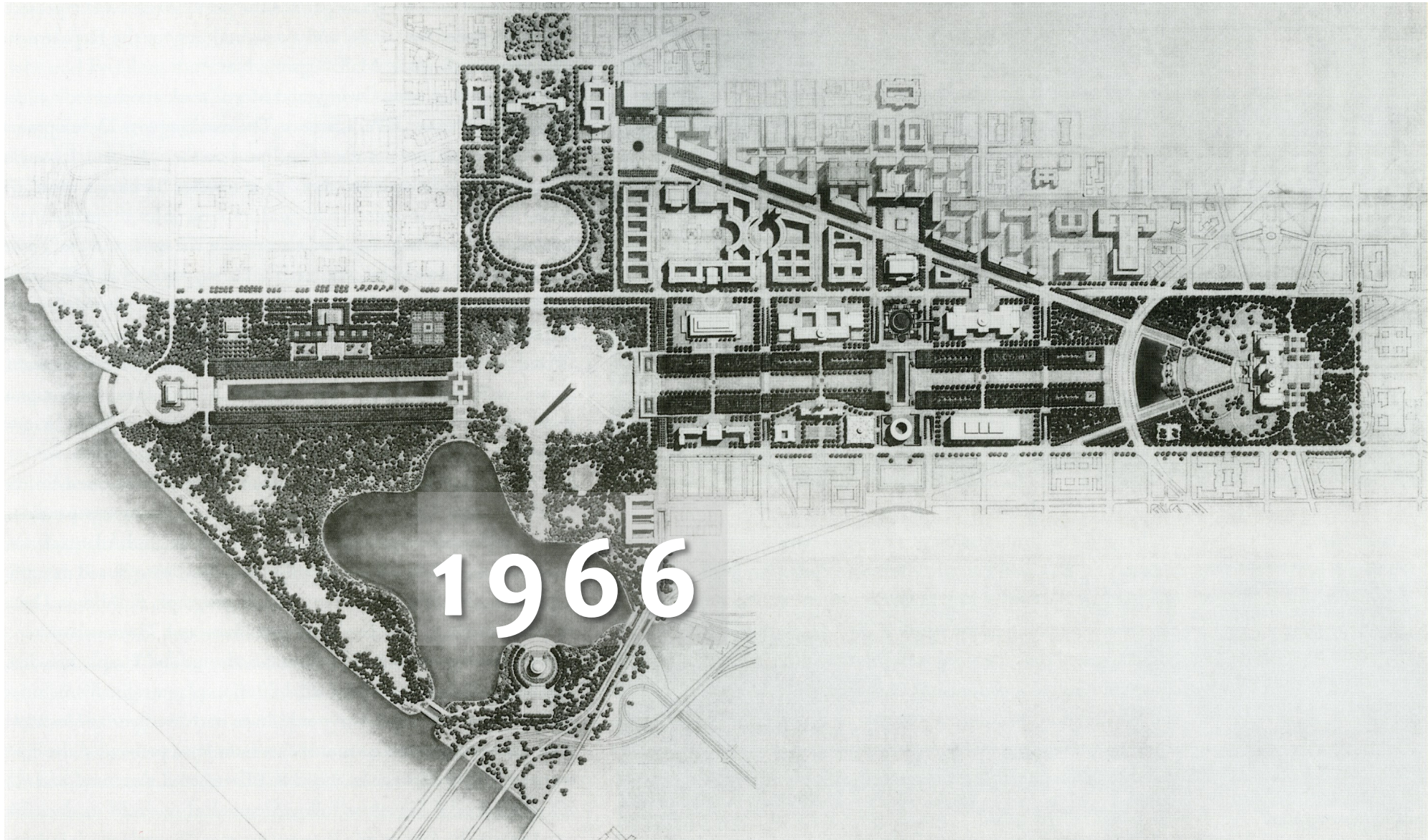
From World War II until the 1960s, temporary government buildings occupied the entire western portion of the National Mall,



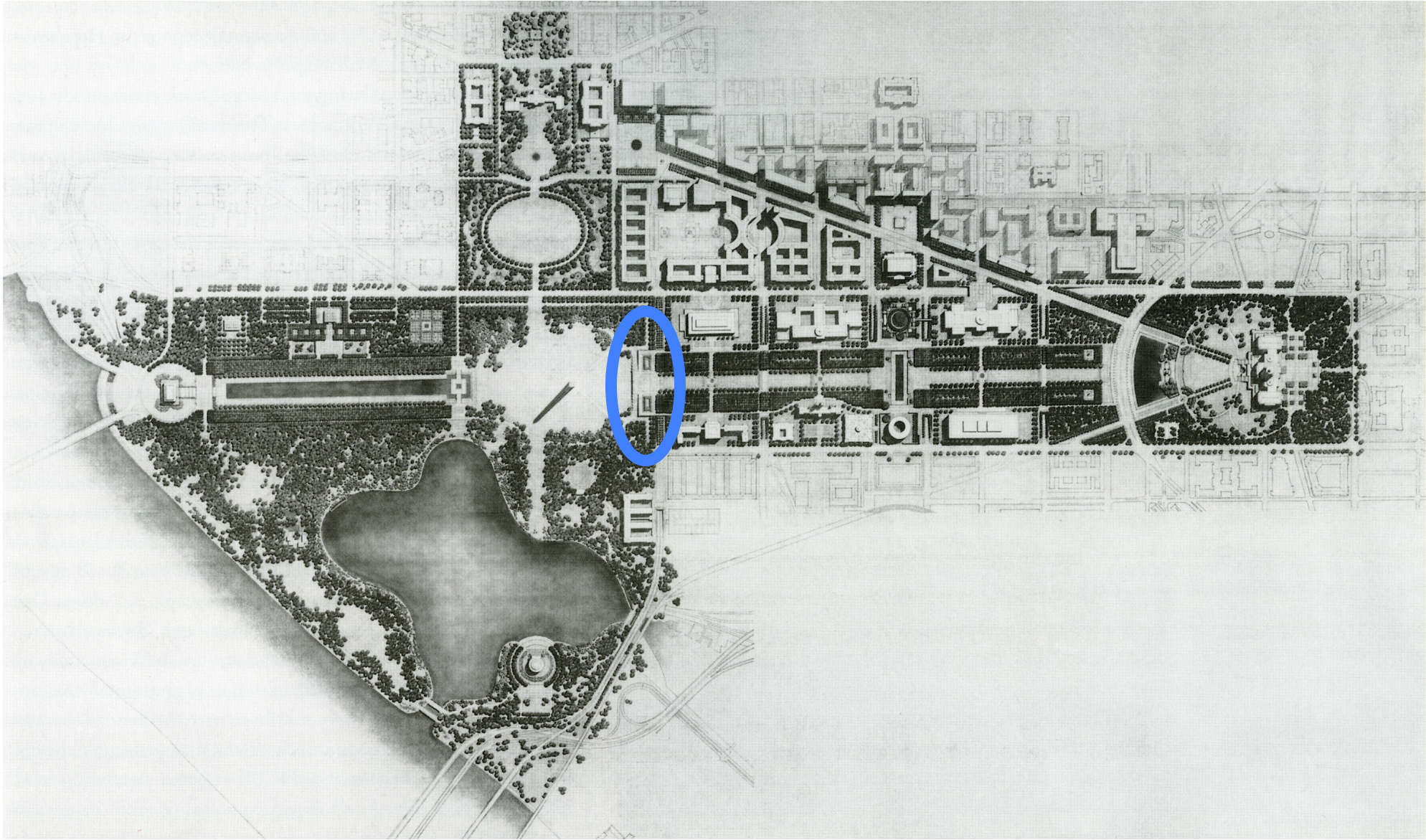
Including a large section of the Washington Monument grounds.

Baseball diamonds nearby were popular with government workers.





After the temporary buildings were removed, the National Park Service developed a new Mall master plan that proposed burying Mall roads in tunnels, tripling the number of trees, including on the Monument grounds,



and adding an elevated viewing terrace at 14th Street – another idea never realized.



The 2001 security design for the grounds *also* proposed an informal planting of trees around the perimeter of the grounds, though this has not been carried out.

1985 Leon Krier



A dramatically different idea was proposed in 1985 by architect Leon Krier who envisioned a narrow Grand Canal down the spine of the Mall, and in place of the Monument grounds a much-enlarged Tidal Basin linking the Washington Monument, Lincoln Memorial, and Jefferson Memorial.

(See Iris Miller, *Washington in Maps*, pp. 162-165)



Today, however, the Washington Monument grounds show little evidence of any of the numerous ideas proposed over two centuries by Washingtonians, government agencies, and professional designers.



The symbolic location intended for the Monument, and Jefferson's choice for prime meridian,



is all but forgotten -- a small granite marker



blocked off behind the new security walls.



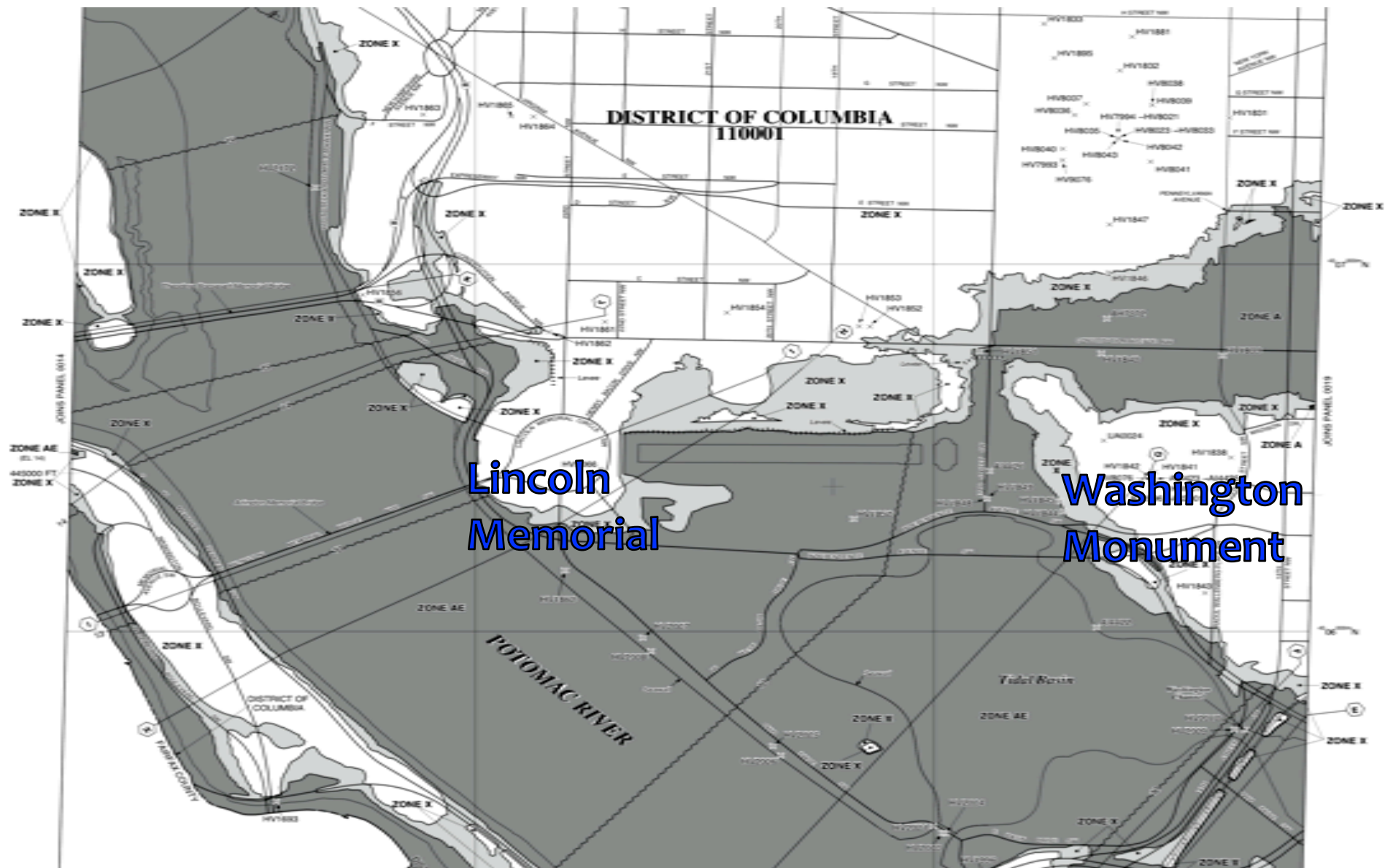
Current planning is project-based but not concerned with the larger picture of the Monument's role as the centerpiece of the National Mall.

The new 17th Street levee will respond...



1933

... to a long history of
flooding in this area

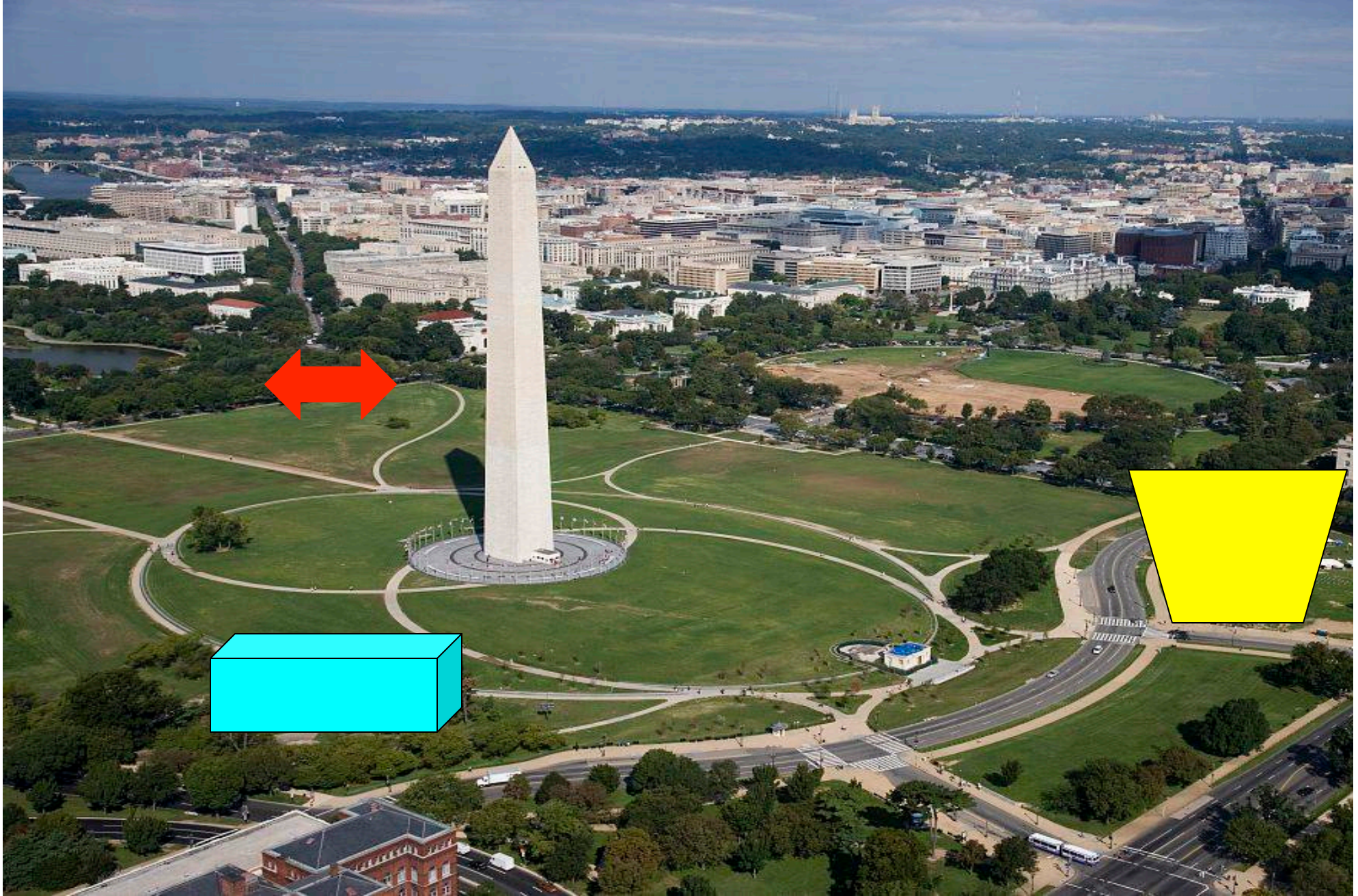


and to new FEMA regulations for flood control management for the 100-year flood plain, shown here in grey to encompass large portions of the western Mall and Monument grounds.

(For more on floodplains, see <http://www.h-net.org/~dclist/flood>)



The new Museum of African American History and Culture will draw unprecedented visitors to this portion of the Mall



So too could a....



...renovated Sylvan Theater.

How could the grounds of the future take advantage of these new attractions and visitors?



The Olin Studio has brought an unprecedented elegance to security design.



Yet visitor screening still takes place in a...



...makeshift temporary structure.



The visitor to the Washington Monument grounds today gains little understanding of the Monument's role as the centerpiece of the National Mall, or of the role of George Washington and other chapters of our country's history in this uniquely American symbolic landscape. Instead of lush shade trees and lively water elements, visitors encounter an unformed expanse.

In many ways, the Monument grounds are a blank slate.

The unfinished condition is an opportunity to imagine a future that both responds to modern needs and anticipates the grounds' evolving role in American democracy.

How can this landscape continue to tell our American story into the future?

How would **you** shape history with creative ideas?





NATIONAL

Ideas Competition

Washington Monument Grounds

Shape history with
creative ideas.

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and up

register

online by october 31, 2010

information

www.wamocompetition.org

Photos courtesy of: Albert H. Small
 Carol Highsmith
 Nicholas Tom
 Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division

Narration of online video: M. Kay Murphy

Historical Resources:

The City of Washington: An Illustrated History, Junior League of Washington, 1992

The Mall in Washington: 1791-1991, ed. Richard Longstreth, 1991

The National Mall: Rethinking Washington's Monument Core, ed. N. Glazer & C. Field, 2008

Iris Miller, *Washington in Maps 1606-2000*, 2002

Peter R. Penczer, *The Washington National Mall*, 2007

John Reps, *Washington on View: The Nation's Capital Since 1790*, 1991

Kirk Savage, *Monument Wars: Washington, D.C., the National Mall, and the Transformation of the Memorial Landscape*, 2009

Commission of Fine Arts:

Designing the Nation's Capital: The 1901 Plan for Washington, D.C., 2006

National Park Service:

Cultural Landscape Inventory, The Mall

Cultural Landscape Inventory, Washington Monument Grounds

A photograph of the Washington Monument Grounds. The Washington Monument is a tall, white, obelisk-shaped structure in the center. In front of it is a large, green lawn. To the left of the monument, a line of flags is visible. In the background, the U.S. Capitol building is visible. The sky is blue with some clouds. A few people are walking on the lawn.

NATIONAL IDEAS COMPETITION WASHINGTON MONUMENT GROUNDS

**Register by Oct. 31, 2010
Submit by Dec. 18, 2010**

More at www.wamocompetition.org

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Washington Monument Grounds**