

Monumental Washington

“A Civic Rite of Passage”

Each year, twenty-five million visitors come to Washington D.C. For many the experience is a “civic rite of passage.” D.C. has hundreds of memorials, from statues of generals on horseback (of which there are dozens) to lesser-known memorials and fountains located on side streets or tucked away in small parks. But most visitors focus their visit on the “Monumental Core” of the National Mall, the geographic centerpiece of the capital city.

Washington D.C., like most national capitals, contains spaces for public assembly and ceremony, and stages for the enacting of the rituals of nationhood. In

Washington, D.C. these are almost exclusive to the National Mall. This is the Washington of postcard images and the evening news; this is the Washington most come to see. Those of you coming to Washington, D.C. for the 2010 AAG Annual Meeting will want to plan some time to see it too, especially if you’ve never been or haven’t been in a long time.

The National Mall is an expression of our democratic experience, and visitors “read” the Mall as a physical expression of national identity. Geographers have long referred to “place as text” to decode the landscape and to show that memorials and monuments are not merely ornamental features in the urban landscape, but are highly symbolic signifiers that confer meaning on urban space; they represent the politics of power.

Continued on page 10



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The Vietnam Veterans Memorial is one of many ritual spaces on the National Mall. See article at right. Washington, D.C. will be the site of the 2010 AAG Annual Meeting.

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L'Enfant's 1791 plan for the city and its subsequent evolution are replete with intentional symbolism and meaning. For example, the distance between the White House and the Capitol was used to signify the two distinct branches of the government. The placement of the Mall, what L'Enfant called the "Grand Avenue," was central to his design and served to balance the buildings of government with the open space and assembly area he felt was important to a democracy. L'Enfant's design called for the city to be the physical and symbolic embodiment of the democratic experience, and monumentality was integral to his plan.



Looking west from the Washington Monument, visitors gather on the grass to celebrate the 4th of July. Such public celebrations are an important role of Monumental DC.

CREDIT: LISA BENTON-SHORT

Today what gives the Mall its power is its long axis, anchored by three major elements – the Capitol, the Washington Monument, and the Lincoln Memorial (see map below). In the east is the Capitol, the "monument to democracy;" at the center is the Washington Monument, the "monument to freedom and independence;" and to the west is the Lincoln Memorial, the "monument to unity and equality." This axis represents a "national backbone" of the principles of democracy in both form (monuments

and memorials) and function (public space).¹ It may sound abstract but visitors pick up on it, turning back and forth to admire and visually connect to these key elements.

The National Mall serves important roles as a vast open space for recreation and contemplation and as a national stage for political protest and debates about democracy and citizenship.

The Mall is also a container for national commemoration: its memorials and monuments tell the nation what and who we should remember and why. It is an expression of national memory, a landscape that contains layers of decisions and non-decisions that mirror political debates in defining moments of American history.

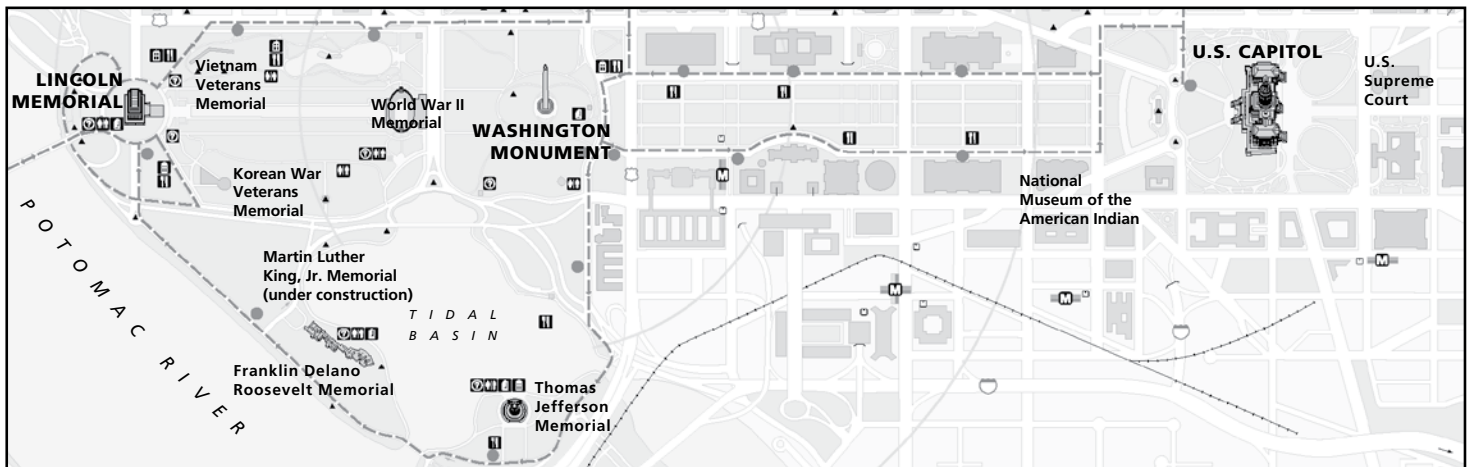
Monumental Washington may be a text, but it is a text that can take on new meanings. The Lincoln Memorial took on new symbolic meaning when it became the backdrop of several civil rights events: Marian Anderson's concert in 1939 and the 1963 March on Washington. The iconic image of Martin Luther King on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial, facing the Washington Monument and the Capitol, was

a deliberately chosen stage selected to highlight discrimination and inequality in a country that had promised equality and justice in its own Constitution. The recent addition of a bronze plaque on the stairs of the Memorial acknowledges the spot where Martin Luther King stood, and thus changed the meaning of the Lincoln Memorial. Today, the Lincoln Memorial stands for more than the man, or the Civil War; it stands for the struggle to expand citizenship and equality.

The Monumental Washington we see today is also the product of debate and controversy. Nearly every memorial or monument on the Mall, and in D.C., has a story rooted in conflict. Public debates surrounding the design, construction and location of memorials are significant for revealing more general discourses on cultural, social and political values. Debates about memorials thus provide a glimpse of competing interpretations of memory, as well as the power relationships that can ultimately determine its realization.

We take for granted the power and elegance of the Washington Monument, but it almost wasn't built. Following George Washington's death in 1799, there was sentiment to memorialize the first President, but Congress failed to appropriate money for the monument. In 1833 local citizens founded the Washington National Monument Society, solicited funds, and chose a design by noted architect Robert Mills. Construction began in 1848, but money began to run out and construction was suspended in 1854. The unfinished monument

Continued on page 11



The National Mall is over two miles long and is anchored by three key visual elements: the Lincoln Memorial, the Washington Monument, and the U.S. Capitol.

Monumental Washington continued from page 10

sat on the Mall for several decades before Congress decided to rescue the ruin. When it finally approved funds for its completion, Mills' original design was altered: the pantheon-like base and the series of fountains were considered too expensive and were dropped. The result is the simple, soaring obelisk completed in 1884. Today the Washington Monument soars as a symbol of the city, but its history reveals decades of Congressional indifference.

In 1902, the Senate McMillan Commission proposed that newly filled-in marshes west of the Washington Monument become the site for a memorial to Abraham Lincoln. Several years of bitter dispute followed in part because the powerful Senator from Illinois, Joseph Cannon, presented a formidable obstacle. He objected to the expense of the memorial, but also the opposed location, telling a colleague, "So long as I live, I'll never let a memorial to Abraham Lincoln be erected in that goddamned swamp." It took an act of Congress, which

passed the Lincoln Memorial Act in 1913, to override the protests and begin construction of the memorial in its present-day location.

Even the Jefferson Memorial generated controversy. When workers came to remove a row of cherry trees on the Tidal Basin in order to dig foundations for the Memorial in early 1940, they found a group of women conservationists chained to the trees.

The Vietnam Veterans Memorial, perhaps the most poignant of memorials on the Mall, was also bound up in bitter political controversy. Architectural student Maya Lin's design of a black granite wall generated fierce debate because of deep political divisions about the war, embodied in debates about the architectural styles of tradition versus modernism, and figurative versus abstract art. One critic (and Vietnam Veteran) called Lin's design a "black gash of shame and sorrow." The public controversy resulted in a behind-the-scenes political compromise that kept Lin's design but added a large American Flag (to confer patriotism) and a bronze sculpture of three infantrymen placed to the south of the Wall. Today, the bronze statue is often bypassed, while the powerful redemptive quality of the "Wall" beckons visitors to touch the names and leave gifts of remembrance. It has become one of the most beloved memorials on the Mall.

Finally, the most recently completed memorial, the World War II Memorial, dedicated in 2004, also generated controversy over both its design and location. Some critics argued the design was too large, busy and triumphant. Debates about the location focused on how the memorial would change the use and symbolic meaning of the National Mall. Many argued that the World War II Memorial would "interrupt the narrative of the axis" of the Monumental Core. Underlying these debates were also larger concerns about the accelerated loss of open space on the National Mall, how memorials change the meaning of the Mall, and about how public space should convey history and memory.

The National Mall has become the place for commemoration. Since the completion of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in 1982, five new memorials have been constructed on the Mall, including the Korean War Memorial, the Franklin Delano Roosevelt Memorial, the Museum of the American Indian, the George Mason Memorial, and the World War II Memorial. Three more memorials and one museum have been approved but not yet constructed: the Martin Luther King Memorial (currently under construction), the Black Revolutionary War Patriots Memorial, and the John Adams Memorial (still in the fundraising stage). The National Museum of African American History and Culture has been approved for the area just east of the Washington Monument, between 14th and 15th streets.

The pressure to develop more memorials on the Mall will not abate any time soon. While new memorials have the power to enrich national memory and national history, there is simultaneously tension over how to integrate the new and old national identity narratives. And, of course, the Mall is finite space. Some feel it's "full" and complete. Others covet its rich symbolism for their worthy cause.

While you're here for the 2010 AAG Annual Meeting, set aside a day or so to visit the National Mall (and wear good walking shoes – it's a 2 mile hike from the Capitol to the Lincoln Memorial). You'll want to undertake your own civic rite of passage and read the complex and contested national narratives contained in the public space and civic monuments of the National Mall. ■

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¹National Capital Planning Commission. 2003. *Extending the Legacy: Planning America's Capital for the 21st Century*. Washington, D.C.



CREDIT: LISA BENTON-SHORT

It has become tradition to interact with the Vietnam Veterans Memorial by making print rubbings of the names or leaving messages, gifts and other offerings. Interestingly, such offering are rarely left at any other memorial on the Mall.

Register for the 2010 AAG Annual Meeting at www.aag.org/annualmeetings.