THE MATCHING BEAUTY OF THE
NATIONAL CAPITAL

For each of us the National Capital holds a feeling of possession and of pride.

When the early Congress empowered President George Washington to select a site for the "New Federal City", he chose to avoid the contesting claims of New York, Philadelphia, Boston and other cities. He selected a site upon the banks of the Potomac River; a site lying partly within the State of Maryland and partly within the State of Virginia.

The Federal Government by act of Congress was authorized to move from Philadelphia to the new Federal City, Washington, upon "the first Monday in December in the year One Thousand and Eight Hundred." It seems remarkable today that authority of any nature should not originate within the Federal City.

My purpose is to review in as brief a manner as possible the history of the development of the "Federal City" from July, 1790, when President Washington appointed his commission of three to advise upon its site, down to our own time, the present day. This must be a much abbreviated record. Still, I wish to touch upon its essential periods and the imprint they have made upon its planning. It is interesting for us to remember that when George Washington was empowered by Congress to choose the site of the Federal City, he did so within
fifteen days and set a cornerstone upon it, marking it as Federal territory. We are given to delay in national affairs. Washington acted promptly.

We will find as we review the record of the fulfillment of the plan of Washington an amazing panorama, one which is full for the most part of dull intervals and of indifference to its meaning. We can feel in it the presence of a great scheme or order, existing in the initial preliminary plan as prepared by L’Enfant; and that this initial plan has possessed in rich measure the power to demand its own recovery, and survival and that the maturing beauty of our National Capital is more and more possible through the return to the broad spatial concepts of its early plan.

It was the late D.H. Burnham, in his enthusiasm for the replanning of San Francisco—after the fire— who said, "Make no little plans; they have no magic to stir men's souls."
Such is the record of the plan of Washington. Mumford speaks of it in a striking manner, thus:

"In Kanuda did Kubla Khan a stately pleasure dome decree."
This was the way it used to be done and one can be quite sure that that decree was carried out. There is an authority back of the words that is convincing. Some one was put in charge and saw to it the Kubla Khan got what he wanted."

"Now, it is a very curious thing, but President Washington made a pronouncement that was not unlike. He and Major L’Enfant walked over the ground and announced, "Here shall be the National
Capital. There shall be the Executive Mansion. Great avenues shall be extended thuswise to give vistas and views." They planned well, and for the future, but as this point the parallel breaks down. The decree was made but the authority to carry it out was in other hands. Such really is the story of Washington City. A plan was made and many plans have since been made. Every plan for the future of our Capital City exists upon sufferance only, so far as Congress is concerned."

In May, 1902, Montgomery Schuyler wrote in the Architectural Record: "Undoubtedly Washington had unique luck among American cities in its beginnings. It is the only one of them that was planned, and intelligently planned, with an eye to beauty as well as convenience."

Let us recall the plan of George Washington. In the language of Elihu Root, "so many pegs have been driven that the plan is now firmly established."

What was the historic background of this plan?

Most briefly we may account for it in this manner.

George Washington chose Pierre Charles L'Enfant, a French officer who came to America with Lafayette in 1777 as his adviser in laying out the Federal City. Jefferson, an American who turned toward the ancients, offered L'Enfant plans of foreign cities as his guide.

These plans included as far as we know accurately, the plans of Amsterdam, Bordeaux, Frankfort, Lyons, Marseilles,
Milan, Orleans, Paris, Strawburgh, and Turin. What L'Enfant found in these plans is debatable. One feels he used very little from them.

The record shows that in April, 1791, President Washington criticised the plans of L'Enfant, that is, the two sketches he had sent to the President. One embraced ideas Washington held for his Federal City. The other was probably influenced by Jefferson—and followed the rectangular plan of Richmond, Virginia. The acceptance of opinion is that Jefferson's rectangles were harmful to the plan of L'Enfant.

If we wander back a century or two, we find several historic plans which had been conceived long before the birth of L'Enfant. The first had been the plan for the opening of the vistas of the Rome of the Renaissance. San Gallo had opened a vista to the capital with a plan spreading back into the Campo Marzo; a brilliant addition to the congested plan of Rome.

Again at Versailles, a plan with vistas and ascents had been expressed, with radials converging upon the Central palace and with vast avenues of verdure extending beyond it.

In each case the radial avenues had been essential. Distance and centralising of the object of monumental importance had been primary.

Let us return to the America of George Washington. New York had a messy plan, Boston was a city of cow paths. Philadelphia had an orderly plan—the plan of Penn, and his rec—
tangles with its central park or civic center and four (4) secondary parks.

We find L'Enfant faced with the problem of compromise. His great axes and radials must accept in addition, a rectangular city division. Such a compromise he gave us. The gridiron of America and the wide vistas of Renaissance Europe merged. The distances of Versailles were retained in almost exactly like dimension, even though in infant America its Federal City could hardly hope to connect them.

Fortunately for us, Washington planned a city of distance though it was for a long time a city of mud and of shacks. The early visitors in the opening decades of the nineteenth century tell of a Federal building upon a highland with a marsh of mud dotted with frame cottages stretching away toward the President's House.

Let me take you back to L'Enfant's plan. The Capital was to be a massive pile, to be built around a court. This court was to extend to the east in a second court like that of Versailles. Business and shops under an arcade were to extend eastward. Even down to this day, business in Washington has never been located east of the Capital but has extended eastward. The lines of houses, L'Enfant visaged along the diagonal to the Executive Mansion and along the borders of Second Avenue, as he named the Mall, first became shacks and then later a strange confusion of hotels--saloons and worse. Finally, more than a century later, under President Coolidge, the diagonal, Pennsylvania Avenue was
declared to have a sensible meaning and its bizarre nature was made obsolete by the demolition of many of these unsightly buildings. This is one of the major solutions at the present time.

Now as to the criticism of the L'Enfant plan. Its great and idealistic merits are these. It was a plan of two axes. It had a very strongly marked accent of these axes. From the Federal Building a long avenue of verdure was to extend to the Potomac River. From the Executive Mansion, located to the right from Capital House on a broad diagonal avenue, another axis at right angles to the major axis extended again to the Potomac River in a southerly direction. From the Federal Building, and from the Executive Mansion radial avenues were extended to all sections of the district. This was a fair concept.

In addition to this scheme a prevailing colonial concept held to a different plan, that of gridiron cities: Penn’s Philadelphia, Jefferson’s Richmond. So we find this concept joined to L’Enfant’s plan.

After Sir Christopher Wren had laid a plan for New London, it was given to Sir John Evelyn to revise and direct its consummation. Wren studied plans in radial and in gridiron pattern but could not accept an admixture in which both were concerned. Evelyn’s plans did accept such a compromise.

L’Enfant’s Washington is such a plan. The gridiron of Penn and the diagonal of Versailles are the plan of Washington.

I need not recall to you the confusion. Pennsylvania Avenue abounds in little islets, tiny triangles, left over from the intersection of the gridiron streets, hitting it at angles of 15 degrees
or 35 degrees. Go through the city and you find these strange odds and ends everywhere. They can not all have statues and trees; many are much too small to have any dignity. Often they are destructive of traffic directness. They give confusion rather than direction with impressive vista.

Let us go no further with the criticism of a purely preliminary plan. Let us look to its bigness of conception. Rather let us see how a century passed before its bigness became more than a subject of ridicule, and how today Washington needs its distances but for them would have grown beyond a possibility of recoverable order. Let me give you some names and dates.

L'Enfant was dismissed after a year. Jefferson, with his continental experience had declared, "a director from France would consider himself a director of the state also." William Thornton, a doctor by profession and an architect on the side, won the competition for the Federal Capital. Fortunately, Benj. H. Latrobe, an architect who had been well trained in England, became Surveyor of Public Buildings in 1801. He worked with Thornton. After the British destroyed the old Federal Building as well as the Executive Mansion, the War office, and other buildings in 1812, Latrobe rebuilt them. Later, from his office came Robert Mills in the succeeding generation to begin the monument to Washington and to build the Treasury Building in its simple, though dull, solidity of granite, subdued to a serene sadness.

At the time of the Civil War, the records show that few streets were lighted. Few streets were paved, and many were not even graded. The Mall was not yet improved. It was a lowland, and on
on to a swamp. Its meaning had been forgotten and a railroad station built in the middle of it. The Mall was L'Enfants major axis of the city, the avenue of verdure, to be simple and clear in its open width of sixteen hundred feet and its two miles of length. "Make no little plans, they do not have the magic to stir men's souls". The Washington Monument after reaching a height of 175 feet had stood abandoned for a quarter of a century, and was finally completed in 1884.

If I may depart from my subject for a moment. We are approaching an anniversary of great meaning. Texas seeks to ask the Nation to recall the history of the founding of the Texas Republic. It has good cause and worthy right to the claim it makes for National interest.

On June 11, 1878, more than 100 years after America declared its independence, Congress authorized the Federal District to be governed as a Federal territory, thereby securing a recognition for the first time on the part of Congress of its obligation toward the development of the National Capital City. Progress in the first one hundred years of the Republic had been very slow indeed in the city of Washington.

Again we pass on for a quarter of a century. We come to the year 1900, the anniversary year of the Federal City. Popular attention was drawn to its history. Theodore Roosevelt was president. We find a renaissance of building and with it a search for meaning and light.

This results in the so-called McMillan Commission, with power
to consider "the development and improvement of the entire park system of the District of Columbia."

At that time the Pennsylvania Railroad was ready to place a great station amid l'Enfant's avenue of verdure, the Mall, at Sixth and B Street. (We now know B Street as Constitution Avenue.) Fortunately Mr. A.F. Cassatt, President of the railroad willingly co-operated with the members of that commission. Its members were men of vision; Charles Follen McKim, Daniel H. Burnham, Augustus St. Gaudens and Frederick Olmsted.

At the time the Commission began its work Congress felt the historic plans of Washington were too elaborate, too wide, too all inclusive.

Potomac Park, the western end of the Mall, was not yet recovered from the waters of the River. At the end of this park and on axis with the Capital and the monument to Washington, a monument to Lincoln would settle and fall in such a location. In the opinion of Congress "a monument so located would shake itself to pieces with loneliness and ague."

Let us see what the McMillan Commission recommended.

A. That only Public Buildings face the Capital Grounds. (This certainly did not permit a railroad terminal to the Mall)

B. That new department buildings may well face Lafayette Square. (The square to the south of the Executive Mansion)

C. That buildings of a semi-public character may be
located south of the Corcoran Art Gallery fronting on the White Lot and extending to the park limits. (Witness the Bureau of Pan-American Republics, the building of the Daughters of American Revolution, the Museum of Physical Science, and the National Red Cross Building), all of which have been located in accord with the Commission's recommendation.

D. That the Northern Side of the Mall may properly be used by Museums and other buildings containing collections in which the public generally is interested, but not by departmental buildings. (Witness the Museum of National History)

E. That the space between Pennsylvania Avenue and the Mall should be occupied by the District Building, the Hall of Records, a Modern Market, an Armory and structures of like Character. (This area more directly between the Capital and the White House has become the site of department buildings rather than the less convenient area about Lafayette Square.)

I wish I could take the time to enlarge upon this report. It was one more peg in the old plan. One more record of faith.

However it was met with dissention, indecision, and delay. The terminal station was located off the Northeast of the Capital, completely away from the Mall and beautifully built by D. H. Burnham. Little else was accomplished, for more than a decade.

The report was the basis of an act of March 8, 1901; which
further recommended the removal of the trees, planted in confusion years before, between the Capital and the Washington Monument. The avenue of verdure was not a reality in 1902, is not a reality yet. A village park, laying upon the slopes of our magnificent Capital has been America's solution of the fine historic plan of President Washington.

Possibly a story, attributed by his friends, to the late Hall Gilbert will give the clearer picture of the attitude of those in Congress to the meaning of the Plan of Washington.

The McMillan Commission had made its report and passed into history. Its report, as Elihu Root said, "pegged more and more a great plan."

The recovery of Potomac Park, which is the extension of the Mall for some 3000 feet beyond the Washington Monument was to become an important part of the Park System.

At the eastern end was to be a great memorial, an extension of the axis of the Capital and its dome, through the monument to Washington, the great axis of L'Enfant's plan.

The Gilbert story is of 1912, more than a decade after the McMillan plan had been completed. The National Memorial to Lincoln had been awaiting location. There still was congressional uncertainty and delay.

The correct location as set by the plan of the Commission was being ridiculed; it was only a recovered marsh amid which the monument would be very lonely indeed.

The Speaker of the House, Uncle Joe Cannon, looked hopefully toward the rising hills of Arlington across the Potomac. There
rested a firm foundation and a fine setting. The Mall could terminate in dullness and emptiness, the plan meant little, it was only a bit of paper.

Under the cordial good-humor of President Taft, and his sincere love of order, the architects of the Commission were encouraged to hold firm for their faith in the controlling motive of this expression of the L'Enfant plan, and its extension in the McMillan plan. The word was cautiously spread about the House of Representatives that it was inappropriate to plan a memorial to Lincoln, which should be located south of the Potomac.

When the day and the hour of meeting came, it was held in the White House. President Taft presided. The decision means much to the future of the Federal City.

The President asked the expression of the Committee, and Mr. Gilbert emphasized the importance of the fulfilment of plan of the Mall—the historic plan. His masterly presentation won nearly universal acceptance. The President turned to Uncle Joe. Before he could tell of the preference for the hills beyond the Potomac, Mr. Gilbert said he had heard that some Congressmen favored the hillside location, beyond the river, but it was inappropriate to consider a location south of the Mason and Dixon Line, as well as to give up the plan importance of the location recommended; in Potomac Park.

While Uncle Joe coughed and hesitated, President Taft laughed heartily and long—and then asked for the vote.

So the Lincoln Memorial was located according to plan.
The story continues. Mr. Gilbert was happy in the solution of a long vexing problem. Within an hour or two he took the train for his home in New York. He had been dozing a while, and the train had passed through Baltimore. He was quite a long way north out of Washington and thinking of the successful outcome of his efforts, when looking out of the window he had a startling surprise as he saw a large sign board marking the historic boundary of Maryland and Pennsylvania and read in large letters the words "Mason and Dixon line." He wondered then, and for years after, whether President Taft's laughter had been a matter of rare courtesy to him or only a happy interval which interrupted Uncle Joe Cannon's memory of history.

After all, let us still hold to the precept—"Make no little plans"—they can not inspire worthy and adroit defenders.

The McMillen plan had the effect of still further enlarging the width of the central area as well as of extending the Mall—beyond the Monument and on to the Lincoln Memorial.

Originally L'Enfant's Grand Avenue extended from the Capital to the waters of the Potomac flats—a point near the site of the Washington monument. The form of the plan was T-shaped—the top of the T being the minor axis extending from the Presidents House to the south at the Potomac.

The entire area at the extension of the axis was low, swampy and awaited the development which could bring to it the reality of Washington's vision.

L'Enfant had imaged lines of homes bordering the Avenue. It
was to be an avenue lined with stately trees. Its width was several hundred feet greater than the width of Champs Elysee at its widest spread, near Place de la concorde. Along this Grand Avenue, the stately processions, and the inaugural parades were to pass from the Capital to the Executive Mansion.

Under the McMillan plan, the primary clear needs of recovery were shown well. The Mall existed as an indefinite theory—a rustic park. Its length had been ignored. The trees were hopelessly scattered over it. No view from the Capital to the Monument was possible, except to see the top of the obelisk as an isolated shaft without a trace of orderly placement.

The Commission proposed the recovery of the meaning of the early plan. Simple as this appears, with plans, models, drawings, and photographs galore, it still has not been accomplished.

To either side of the Mall the McMillan Commission recommended the recovery of the privately owned, and poorly built-up areas to federal ownership. All around the Capital site it proposed Federal buildings.

The Library of Congress alone had been built. The Senate, and the House office buildings have since been built. The Supreme Court building is nearing completion.

Upon the triangle bordering Avenue B, now named Constitution Avenue, and reaching along Pennsylvania Avenue from Fifteenth Street as far as the intersection of Pennsylvania Avenue with Constitution Avenue, a unified group of great departmental buildings is nearing completion.
Upon the opposite side of the Mall it is proposed there shall be a group of nearly as impressive dimension between the Mall and Maryland Avenue. This site has been recommended for the location of the department of the Army and the Navy.

The completion of the minor axis at the southern end, terminating the White House axis, was set apart for the Monument to the Founders of the Republic.

In this manner the great central design of the City of Washington, with its accents planned to clearly emphasize the Capital itself and its splendid dome, was recorded.

Work on the Lincoln Memorial was delayed by the World War. New projects of permanent meaning were left for the post-war period. The Mall became a vast aggregation of temporary one-story shacks, whose discordant character and confusion still clings to its western end. These buildings, covering areas were but a part of the very general evidence of the degree to which the Federal Government's business had expanded, far, far beyond its facilities to house them properly or with dignity and convenience.

Many buildings, former homes, shops and commercial buildings became part of the vastly scattered and disconnected arrangement of the forces in governmental departments.

Anyone of us who have found the activities of the Government housed in the buildings such as are depicted in this collection of views feels that their proper and orderly housing within a single and adequate departmental building, not alone effects an economy, but leads to better efficiency but also to a greater order
and discipline. Of such elements was the McMillan plan composed. For an orderly as well as a beautiful Capital City, the departmental buildings must be of adequate area—and in a convenient location.

The major building operation of recent years, and the one making the most visible improvement in the city, has been the "Triangle Development". The Triangle as it is known is that area bounded by Pennsylvania Avenue, Fifteenth Street, and Constitution Avenue. It lies North of the Mall and extends from the Treasury to the Capital. In this area were the old City Market, the old Post office, and many small hotels and homes which had declined to the condition of nearly a slum area.

All of these have been demolished—except the Post Office and the District Building—which await for new facilities before they too can be removed.

An act of Congress dated May 25, 1926 authorized the construction of buildings for the Department of Commerce, for National Revenue Bureau, and for National Archives Building.

For years the triangle area had been composed of buildings which has become obsolete, a backwash in the passage along Pennsylvania Avenue. A comprehensive plan for placing the authorized departmental buildings led to enthusiasm for a more complete utilizing of the entire area. Such a plan would create a unity of desirable nature along the South Side of Pennsylvania Avenue from the Capital to the Executive Mansion; it would make of B Street a—avenue (it has been renamed Constitution Avenue).
which would lead along the Mall from the Capital to the Lincoln Memorial and on by way of the Memorial Bridge to the National Shrine on the hills of Arlington.

The plan was sufficiently interesting to lead the following Congress to embrace it in its entirety. The Department of Justice, the Department of Labor, the Interstate Commerce Bureau, and the Post Office Department were added to those of Commerce, Internal Revenue and National Archives, and so combined formed a development of the entire area.

Between five and six million square feet of working area was to be created and the responsibility for the execution of the plan was placed upon Secretary Mellon.

The Triangle embraces seventy-four acres of land. It has been designed to a uniform height. Each building is six stories above the ground. Each building has a similar height of base stories and of cornice level. A variation of individual character occurs in each building, but this is never sufficient to interrupt the continuity and unity of the group.

The Triangle is planned with its base in the Department of Commerce Building on Fifteenth Street, measuring one thousand feet in length. This building faces upon the Great Plaza, an open court, seven hundred and sixty feet in length and six hundred feet in width. The Plaza terminates with the hemicycle of the Post Office Department Building. To the right the vast Departmental Buildings of Labor and Interstate Commerce are now completed. Beyond the Great Plaza, Twelfth Street passes through the Triangle from Penn-
sylvania Avenue to Constitution Avenue. Here the Circular Plaza, nearly 400 feet in diameter reminds us of Place Vendôme, Paris. To the east of the Circular Plaza lies the immense building devoted to Internal Revenue, and beyond it lies the Department of Justice. Still further eastward, toward the Capital lies the National Archives Building, the most distinguished of the entire group, and finally, at the apex of the Triangle—the Apex Building, devoted in large part to the permanent boards of Parks and Planning of the City of Washington.

The entire development is one of recovery of the vast plan which President George Washington laid for the "Federal City". By the building of the Triangle, much of the disfigurement of Washington, between the Capital and the Executive Mansion, has been blotted out. It rests for private initiative to recover in some modest manner the dismal disorder which marks the properties which bound the North side of Pennsylvania Avenue from the Capital to the Treasury Building.

(I pause to explain the extent of this work in greater detail, for it is the major Government Building work of the past generation, and now is nearing its completion. It has not been extended under the present administration. Its provisions were set by Congress prior to 1929 and have been carried out well within the estimated expenditures and appropriations. Only the Apex Building awaits authorization and this has been repeatedly delayed during the past two years.)
The American people in the past two years have come to know their National Capital more intimately. Men and women in unprecedented numbers have come from every section of the country and from every activity in which the country is engaged, to visit Washington and to see it in a manner very different from the former manner of the tourist. May we hope this will lead eventually to the fuller sense of both pride and possession—and of the permanent meaning of the "Federal City" in our Nation's life.

A maturing beauty has gradually been arising in our National Capital. A city such as President Washington planned for has been developing through many a trying vissitude and has survived by a firmly holding to the faith. Possibly we have all accepted the beauty of the Capital itself without recognizing its right to sustaining beauty, balancing and emphasizing its, the embodiment of the powers of government. From childhood each of us has learned of the beauty of Washington. We have been taught of it as a model of city planning and of civic beauty. The tremendous efforts and the sustained faith which have been required on the part of those who have made this possible have been little heard of or known. Much has been done in the past which had to be redone or undone in order to preserve the vision of President Washington for those who shall come in later generations. May the course be sustained which holds his plan worthy of fulfillment.

Such a course meets today and shall continue to meet in each successive age—the criticisms and the suggestions which would place the individual's taste or the unrelated monument.
into appropriate prominence or position. However the pages have been extended further and further to mark the fineness of the original plan--and these monuments, one after another, serve as further guardians of an orderly future.

For the moment the departments, as yet unprovided for in permanent quarters, seek rather noticeably to move from the locations of the McMillan plan--and its buildings near the Capitol. They seek locations to the west of the Executive Mansion. An extension of department buildings beyond Seventeenth Street and following Pennsylvania Avenue, away from the Mall--and farther and farther away from the Capitol is a temporary expression of this desire to achieve a healthy Executive Mansion. Were this desire to become a reality it would quite obviously distort the plan abnormally toward the Northwest and leave to the south of the Mall little possibility of balance. The major symmetry and meaning planned for the "Congress House" would become mutilated and nearly lost.

The devotees of a new and technological architecture may impose their buildings upon the otherwise growing orderliness of the architecture of the Nation's Capital. Such has been done before. The rustic Norman of the Smithsonian should be adequate example to caution us against such liberty--and fortunately the old horrible Richardsonian Post Office will soon be a thing of the past. The State, War, and Navy Building with its littleness of scale and ignorant repetition of small orders--for two generations declared its unfitness and it is now being refused to a simple dignity like that of its balancing building, the Treasury Building.
we can not look with certainty along the path the Federal City shall take as the generations come—yet I feel we have a record which shows clearly: Just that we have held to a fine conception which was begun by President Washington; and second, that that conception has had power to recover its meaning—even after such meaning seemed lost or forgotten—and finally the pages have been driven deep enough, and well enough to let us see that much that is right has become firmly established.

May we continue to make no little plans; but rather to make those plans which have the magic to stir men's souls.

by Wm. Ward Watkin