

POUL MARTIN HERTEL

# GEORGE WASHINGTON MEMORIAL HIGHWAY

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THE NATIONAL ROAD



**George Washington Memorial Parkway**



# NATIONAL ROAD

## BUILT ON PATRIOTISM HONORING THE ULTIMATE PATRIOT

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### L'ENFANT

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As one of the nation's premiere parkways, the George Washington Memorial Parkway (GWMP) comprises 7,146 acres, and extends 38.3 miles in association with the Potomac River. The initial or southern section of the Parkway, (the Mount Vernon Memorial Highway, which opened in November 1932), extends 15.2 miles from the Arlington Memorial Bridge to the Gateway to President George Washington's home at Mt. Vernon. The Parkway commemorates the First President, preserves the natural setting, and provides a quality entryway for visitors to the Nation's Capital.

“One of the reasons [the] George Washington Memorial Parkway is nationally significant is that it is associated with a long and continuous planning effort for the Washington D.C. region. Though a direct linkage to L'Enfant's plan cannot be established, his plan laid the basis for subsequent planning efforts.”<sup>1</sup> The original map drawn up in 1790 was a document like no other; a design for the capital of a nation with the intent of drawing the world's attention to a new, more democratic order. The City would provide ample open space and vistas for the people<sup>2</sup>. “At Washington will be avoided the inconvenience found in so many modern cities, where not even an attempt has been made to give the wharves a regular form; where everything has been done by chance, and where things have been directed by the mistaken private interest-of individuals, whose particular advantages ought ever to be subordinated to the general interest.”<sup>3</sup>

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### THE NATIONAL ROAD...OUTLYING PARKS AND CONNECTION

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George Washington's residence at Mount Vernon and the city that bore his name could be dismissed as cultural icons if it were not for his importance to the American heritage. The two became intertwined, through not only George Washington, but also the road connecting

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<sup>1</sup> National Register of Historic Places Registration Form, United States Department Of Interior National Park Services; George Washington Memorial Parkway 1995 final nomination.

<sup>2</sup> In the History of the United States Capitol:" (Senate Doc. No. 60, Fifty-sixth Congress, first session.), GLENN BROWN writes “ Looking from the center open space across the park a continuous line of beautiful buildings was to have formed the background. They were not to have been deep enough to curtail either the artistic or natural beauties of the park or to encroach upon the people's right to an air space.”

<sup>3</sup> SENATE COMMITTEE ON THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA. PARK IMPROVEMENT PAPERS-NO. 9. ESSAY ON THE CITY OF WASHINGTON. [From the Washington Gazette for November 19, 23, 26, and December 7, 1796.] NOVEMBER 8, 1901.—Printed for the use of the committee. Page 173

the two. Thus, “every patriotic American who visits Washington makes a pious pilgrimage to the home and tomb of the Father of his Country.”<sup>4</sup>

“But haste was out of the question—for never was worse road extant than that to Mount Vernon.”<sup>5</sup> The road, from Alexandria went inland, rather than along the river as it does today. One got scarcely a glimpse of the scenic Potomac, instead one was required to traverse two large hills on a road in various state of disrepair.

The City of Alexandria fared no better, being described by many authors as a quaint, dilapidated little town where “no one wishes to linger”<sup>6</sup>. Nevertheless, the importance of Mount Vernon was growing in the national conscience with calls for the government to take it over. *I wish Congress would superintend the spot, and by requests and rewards get back as much as possible of what was once there*<sup>7</sup>.

George Washington had been a vivid advocate for a “National Road” connecting the Potomac River to the Mississippi throughout his life and in 1806, Congress agreed to start work on it. Even though the road was never completed, it did set in motion the move toward emphasizing outlying parks and their connections as witnessed by the following commentary by William V. Cox.

“In 1866, Congress unanimously enacted Bill (S. 549) to purchase Rock Creek Park. The Hon. B. Gratz Brown, who had introduced the Bill, which imbues the spirit of Rock Creek surroundings, most eloquently said:

There is no expenditure that can be made which shall add to the grandeur or adornment of the public buildings that fill so largely the eye of admiration of the world, or of the vast libraries that are accumulating so rapidly the treasures of all languages within our reach, or of the conservatories and gardens and cabinets that minister to your tastes, that will not freely be sanctioned by the people, for such in itself is the establishment of a nation's university, whither all may come to wonder and to learn, and in which all may feel a rightful patriotic pride. Only let it be worthy”.<sup>8</sup>

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4 Historic Buildings of America as Seen and Described by Famous Writers. By Esther Singleton; Dodd, Mead 1906 page 114 MOUNT VERNON ARTHUR SHADWELL MARTIN

5 The Family Magazine, 1837 Redfield& Lindsay page 283

6 THE POETRY OF TRAVELLING IN THE UNITED STATES. BY CAROLINE OILMAN. WITH ADDITIONAL SKETCHES, BY A FEW FRIENDS ; AND A WEEK AMONG AUTOGRAPHS, BY REV. S. OILMAN. N E W. Y O R K : S. COLMAN, 141 NASSAU STREET. 1838. page 18

7 Ibid.

8 Park Improvement Papers: A SERIES OF SEVENTEEN PAPERS RELATING TO THE IMPROVEMENT OF THE PARK SYSTEM OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA; , PRINTED FOR THE USE OF THE SENATE COMMITTEE ON THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA; EDITED AND COMPILED BY CHARLES MOORE, THE CLERK OF THAT COMMITTEE. WASHINGTON: GOVERNMENT PRINTING OFFICE. 1902. page 108

Although Alexandria had receded to the Commonwealth in 1846, the Citizens recognized the significance of a National Road connecting, Washington D.C. to Mount Vernon, and on September 18, 1887 formed the Mt. Vernon Avenue Association<sup>9</sup> to promulgate the **“patriotic enterprise”**<sup>10</sup> enacting the construction of a direct road. Although, roads existed to Mount Vernon, they were neither the original nor ones that lended themselves to contemplative or pleasurable drives.

The road was to be an “American Westminster Abbey”<sup>11</sup>, a “memorial joined to the charms of nature”<sup>12</sup>, running through Alexandria on Washington Street. Although, not laid out until 1749, the City had many ties to George Washington, it was argued. Furthermore, Alexandria, by virtue of less commercialization, had not changed much over 100 years, giving it a realistic character dating back to times of George Washington. Seeing buildings used by and seen by George Washington, especially Christ Church, made for an appropriate midway point.

“The pilgrim who travels through Alexandria over Mt. Vernon Avenue will, therefore, find here an interesting midway halting place, and can but carry away him many delightful memories.”<sup>13</sup>

The Virginia Legislature had vested the organization with considerable power and claims on federal moneys for the pursuit of the project, which was a sum of \$120,000.00 to be spent on an Avenue that, “when completed and adorned will be a beautiful memorial to the founder of Liberty’s First Empire”<sup>14</sup>.

By act of February 23, 1889, “Congress directed Colonel Hains to survey this historic area in search of an “appropriate National Road”<sup>15</sup>. However, “provided that nothing in the Act shall be construed to bind the Government of the United States to pay for any portion of the right of way for the Avenue contemplated by the Act”<sup>16</sup>.

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<sup>9</sup> Mayor John B. Smoot, Mayor of Alexandria was elected first president of the organization, but died before the organization received its charter from the Virginia legislature on March 8, 1888.

<sup>10</sup> Mt. Vernon Avenue, A National Memorial Highway from Washington to Mt. Vernon, by John R. Reavis; Mt. Vernon Avenue Association, 1888. page 3

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, Page 10

<sup>12</sup> Ibid

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, page 23

<sup>14</sup> Ibid, page 9, Memorial to Congress by Jeff Chandler, President, Mt. Vernon Highway Association.

<sup>15</sup> Worthy of a Nation, second edition, By Frederick Albert Gutheim, Antoinette J . Lee; JHU press 2006 page 97

<sup>16</sup> See footnote #8, page 104

“Since the boundary established in 1846 between the District of Columbia and Virginia was located on the Virginia shoreline at the high water mark, any reclaimed land along the Virginia shoreline would be under Federal Jurisdiction. Thus, of the three roads surveyed by Hains, one was along the river. That route can be viewed as a precursor to what became the George Washington Memorial Highway. Like Lake Shore Drive in Chicago, this also would be one of the major parkway projects constructed in America, symbolizing the conquest of space along powerful natural features. No matter which route was selected along the Potomac, Hains intended it always to be in the process of development and embellishment. Envisioned as having a monumental character, the proposed “National Road”, was a symbolic link between Mount Vernon Estate, the site so closely associated with George Washington, and the city that bore his name.”<sup>17</sup>

In 1898, the Centennial of the Nation’s Capital was impending, and a group of citizens approached President McKinley about a plan for celebrating the event. This eventually resulted in the creation of the McMillan<sup>18</sup> Senate Park Committee in 1901-1902, one of the most important committees in the nation’s history. Park enthusiasts, historians, and planners in Washington, D.C., often invoke the great and expansive vision of the McMillan Plan of 1901-1902 as the conceptual underpinnings of today's National Mall and Washington, D.C.'s Park System.

“Early references to a system of parks connected by parkways, in Washington, D.C., and surrounding area, laid the groundwork for implementation of the McMillan Plan proposed in 1902. Members of the McMillan Commission envisioned "drives along the palisades of the Potomac above Georgetown to Great Falls and down the River to Mount Vernon.”

“These drives had certain definitions: Parkway or ways through or between parks; distinguished from highways or ordinary streets by the dominant purpose of recreation rather than movement; restricted to pleasure vehicles, and arranged with regard for scenery, topography and similar features rather than for directness”.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid, page 98

<sup>18</sup> Senator James McMillan of Michigan, Chairman of the Senate Committee on District of Columbia.

<sup>19</sup> Charles W. Eliot 11, "Preliminary Report, PARK SYSTEM FOR DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA, Submitted in Accordance with Program of Work Adopted August, 1926," December, 1926, p. 1. National Archives, Record Group 79, Box 4

## THE MOUNT VERNON ROAD.

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THE great desirability of connecting Mount Vernon with the capital by an agreeable and dignified approach was recognized by Congress in 1889, when the Chief of Engineers was called upon for a survey and estimate for such a national road; and the resulting report of Colonel Hains (S. Ex. Doc. 106, Fifty-first Congress, first session) sets forth very clearly the various routes studied at that time.

Although such a road would lie wholly beyond the limits of the District, its importance as supplementing the park system of Washington requires that we should mention it and again urge upon Congress its great value. If it were desirable merely on account of the historic associations with Mount Vernon we might hesitate to refer to it in this connection, but as a matter of fact it would present such a series of beautiful views of the broad portion of the Potomac Valley as would give it a priceless recreative value for the future population of the District in addition to its sentimental value as linking the nation's capital with the home of its founder.

After a personal examination of the territory traversed by the routes discussed in Colonel Hains's report, we have no hesitation in recommending his line No. 6, with a few minor modifications, as affording opportunity for the most refreshing and delightful drive to be had in any direction from Washington, and not to be equaled at any great capital in the world. No one who has not climbed laboriously by steep hills, bad roads, and crooked, untraveled lanes to the crests along which this line sweeps can fully realize the grandeur of the views, but they may be suggested by those to be had from Arlington, from the ridge road beyond Fort Albany, and from Mount Vernon itself.

As stated in Colonel Hains's report, the lines were laid down subject to revision, and we have noted several points, especially near Shutters Hill, near Spring Bank Run, and at the two ends, where upon more

detailed study marked improved improvements could be secured. At the northern end the route would, of course, connect with the Memorial Bridge. The latter, crossing from the Washington side of the Potomac on a straight line for the Arlington mansion, would lead to a circle or plaza near the base of the hill, whence to the right would lead a drive curving up the wooded valley to the mansion on the height and to the left would reach off the Mount Vernon road.

The terminus of such a great national road at Mount Vernon ought to have the most careful and sympathetic study, for with all its tremendous historical associations Mount Vernon is not designed on the scale of a great public monument, but on the more delicate, domestic scale of a gentleman's country place, a character which has been most skillfully preserved by the Mount Vernon Association, and which does far more to bring to the visitor a feeling of the personal presence of Washington than the bald historical fact of his residence there. It will be no easy problem to design a terminus dignified and adequate for a broad national road of pilgrimage some 15 miles in length and to relate this terminus frankly to the Mount Vernon mansion as the main object of the pilgrimage without intruding a discordant public note into that place which should speak not of the statesman, but of the private gentleman of Virginia who there made his home.

At the time Colonel Hains's estimates were made the necessary land was reckoned at \$100 an acre, and formed a trifling part of the cost. Although in eleven years the land has risen somewhat in value it is still moderate in price, and we should therefore recommend that in those places where the line follows a hill crest commanding an exceptionally beautiful view sufficient land be taken upon the lower slopes, in addition to the regular width of the road, to preserve the view permanently from obstruction. The building of the electric railway since the submission of Colonel Hains's report has somewhat altered the situation, making it extremely probable that there will be further increases in the value of lands along the route and possible interference with it by new improvements in case all action is delayed for several years.

It therefore seems to us that while the construction of a great and costly highway might well be postponed till the population of Washington comes to feel its need more keenly, it would be the part of wisdom to secure the land for such a route without further delay.

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## LEGISLATION

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Congress set up a Bicentennial Commission in 1924, headed by the Vice President to commemorate the Bicentennial of the birth of George Washington, even though the event was some years in the future, 1932. After lingering since the McMillan Commission Report, the National Road regained prominence. As a result, in 1928, Congress authorized the building of a “suitable memorial highway on a route determined by the commission. In January 1929, the Commission determined that the “Potomac Route,” running through Washington Street, was preferable. Consequently, the City and the Federal Government entered into an agreement governing the disposition of Washington Street on June 20, 1929, commonly referred to as **the 1929 Agreement**. Some of the key elements include the following two provisions:

“to restrict the said street to residential and business development of such character and of such types of building as Will be in keeping with the Quality purpose and memorial character of said highway”.

“The City hereby agrees that it will enact any and all ordinances, and do any and all things necessary to carry into effect this Agreement and that it will enact no ordinance nor take into any other action which will be in conflict herewith or contrary to the purpose or intent hereof.”

The Agreement followed serious discourse in Congress. “In 1929, a Bill introduced in the House made its way to the Senate. In April 1930, the Senate Committee on the District of Columbia reported favorably on the Bill, specifying that certain details be changed, but that the "prime objects" of the legislation remain intact. The purpose of the parkway was to develop and protect "scenic values of the National Capital," which were threatened by encroachment of residential and commercial interests. Enactment of the Bill promised to "afford public control of the banks of the Potomac from Mount Vernon, where Washington lived, through the National Capital, which he founded, to Great Falls, where the old canal is a valuable relic of his work as an engineer. "Further, the parkway would "be a striking and suitable tribute to the Father of our Nation, and one in which the people of America will take just pride and enjoyment”<sup>20</sup>.

The initial or southern section of the parkway, Mount Vernon Memorial Highway, which opened in November 1932, extends 15.2 miles from the Arlington Memorial Bridge to the Gateway to President George Washington's at home at Mt. Vernon. Alexandria quickly began to stretch the Agreement to the point where the National Planning Commission began asking for a say in zoning issues.

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<sup>20</sup> National Register of Historic Places Registration Form, United States Department Of Interior National Park Services; George Washington Memorial Parkway 1995 final nomination

**In 1940**, a supplemental Agreement was reached with Alexandria reaffirming the intent of the 1929 Agreement. Alexandria acknowledged that the construction of the Mount Vernon Memorial Highway had proved a great benefit to the City, and agreed to limit development to be in keeping with the dignity and purpose of the highway. No building permit would be issued unless approved by the Board of Zoning Appeals, whose charge would extend to architectural character, style of all portions and any other characteristic that would, in the opinion of the Board, infringe upon the dignity, purpose and memorial character of the parkway. Furthermore, the Board of Zoning Appeals would not render decisions until it had received a report from the National Park Planning Commission upon matters bearing on the preservation of the dignity, purpose and memorial character of the Memorial Highway. .

“After World War II the Federal Government proposed an elevated freeway along Alexandria’s waterfront in order to divert traffic away from Washington Street, which they felt had lost its semblance of memorial character.”<sup>21</sup> However, the Park Services considered the condemnation of offensive properties deemed detrimental to the purpose of the highway.

In 1946, Alexandria agreed to create the BAR with the major charge of preserving the dignity and purpose of the Memorial Highway in order to placate the Federal Government. In 1958, the ordinance was readopted to conform to the State Enabling Legislation.

In the late Eighties, the City embarked on a comprehensive effort to create a Master Plan that in essence, tied together a series of Small Area Plans. Although efforts were brought forward to remove portions of North Washington Street from the BAR, thereby negating the 1929 Agreement, these were quickly rebuked. Instead, **the Washington Street Standards** were introduced in the revisions adopted in **1992**.

- (1) **Construction shall be compatible with and similar to the traditional building character, particularly including mass, scale, design and style, found within the Old and Historic Alexandria District on commercial or residential buildings of historic architectural merit.**

Despite being seemingly clear, problems quickly arose when the BAR refused to uphold these standards. They approved the Saul Centre and, more specifically, what is commonly referred to as the “First Old Colony Building Proposal” in 1999. The latter was a radical departure from the 1929 Agreement, both in architecture and scale; the architect described this proposed building to be a “21<sup>st</sup> Century Glass Warehouse motif.” The citizen hue and cry caused the City Council to set up a **Washington Street Task Force** to help diminish the uncertainty that was permeating the process.

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<sup>21</sup> Peter Smith , Historic Alexandria Quarterly, Summer 1999.

The first step was to get a clarification from the Federal Government, through the Park Services, as to what was the intent of the 1929 Agreement. The interpretations in the letter<sup>22</sup> submitted by the Park Service formed the foundation pillars for the subsequent recommendations submitted by the Task Force to the City Council<sup>23</sup> in **May 2000**. Subsequently adopted into the Zoning ordinance, the Revised Washington Street Standards set specific criteria regarding both architecture and mass and scale to ensure compatibility with the precepts of the dignity and purpose of the Memorial Highway.

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## CONCLUSION

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To conclude, the George Washington Memorial Parkway, is not a neglected stepchild but rather the genesis of the entire Historic District, and by inference, it is responsible for our place on the tourist maps. It inculcates a heritage that warrants sharing with the world as it makes a pilgrimage from Washington D.C. to Mount Vernon to pay its respects to the Father of this Country. The Parkway also represents a trust placed on the City by the Federal Government that we would maintain the highway for the purpose and dignity it that was envisioned to convey.

No person states this as well as did Caroline Oilman in 1838 : “indeed, it is a curious step from Alexandria to Mount Vernon; the one teeming with the most worldly associations, and the other sacred to the highest feelings of our nature”.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> See appendix 1

<sup>23</sup> See appendix 2

<sup>24</sup> THE POETRY OF TRAVELLING IN THE UNITED STATES.BY CAROLINE OILMAN.WITH ADDITIONAL SKETCHES, BY A FEW FRIENDS ; AND A WEEK AMONG AUTOGRAPHS, BY REV. S. OILMAN. N E W. Y O R K : S. COLMAN, 141 NASSAU STREET. 1838. page 18

## Appendix I

### What is the "Memorial Character" of the George Washington Memorial Parkway?

The George Washington Memorial Parkway serves as a memorial to our nation's first president. While the National Park Service has not attempted to precisely define the term, several guiding principles should be considered in evaluating what "memorial character" means. The principles outlined below represent those which have a desirable application to Washington Street in Alexandria:

- Inconsistent existing developments notwithstanding, and recognizing that the parkway has different "looks" depending upon where you are (north of the airport, through the city, south to Mt. Vernon, for example), there should be a public impression that Washington Street is connected in some way (physically, thematically, or in some other positive way) with the parkway.
- Use of streetscapes is a desirable connecting link with the natural characteristics of the parkway.
- There should be an emphasis on those elements of structural design which are consistent with historic buildings which remain on the street.
- New buildings should not, by their style, size, location or other characteristics, detract from, overwhelm, or otherwise intrude upon historic buildings which remain on the street.
- New buildings should be complementary to the historic structures in their design.
- It is desirable that buildings be designed to look separate and not give the impression of collectively being one massive unit. This can be accomplished through differing architectural designs, facades, setbacks and stylings.

Additional miscellaneous factors for consideration are:

- The Washington Street Guidelines are workable as long as the structures aren't spread out over too large an area or distance. The Guidelines also may not be appropriate when applied to larger buildings.

Facades of a building generally shall express the 20- to 40-foot bay width typically found on early 19<sup>th</sup> century commercial buildings characteristic of the Old and Historic Alexandria District. Techniques to express such typical bay width shall include changes in materials; articulation of the wall surfaces; changes in fenestration patterns; varying roof heights; and physical breaks, vertical as well as horizontal, within the massing. *[Page 5 of Guidelines at sec. (2) under "Additional requirements for approval of a certificate of appropriateness."]*

- A gateway into the city exists when entering from the north (memorial circle area in front of the Colony Inn) but there is nothing similar when approaching from the south. Perhaps such a concept is worthy of consideration though it is recognized that this may be complicated due to plans for the new Wilson Bridge.
- Some historic communities in Washington, D.C. (Woodley Park and/or Cleveland Park) have had an "overlay zone" created which reduces the maximum allowable FAR and imposes other restrictions for a specified distance (100' ?) on either side of impacted streets. *[Specific details not currently available].*

Michael D. Wilson  
Assistant Superintendent  
George Washington Memorial Parkway

## **Appendix II**

The revised standards, which are part of the zoning ordinance, are summarized in the Ad-Hoc Washington Street Task force report to City Council, May 23, 2000; on page 5 as follows:

- ◆ New construction shall be compatible with the character of historically significant buildings on Washington Street (instead of within the Old and Historic Alexandria District in general).
- ◆ Design elements must be consistent with historically significant buildings on Washington Street.
- ◆ New buildings shall be complementary to and shall not detract from/overwhelm/intrude upon historically significant buildings on Washington Street.
- ◆ Massing of new buildings/additions must closely reflect and be proportional to adjacent historic buildings.
- ◆ New construction larger than historic buildings on the street must be designed to not look more massive than the historic buildings. From the public right of way, buildings should appear to have a footprint no larger than 100 feet by 80 feet. It is desirable that large projects preserve or replicate mid-block alleys.
- ◆ Applications for projects larger than 3000 square feet or within 66 feet of residential use/zoning must include a massing study covering a minimum of six blocks.
- ◆ Massing and proportions of new buildings designed in a given historic architectural style must be consistent with the massing and proportions of that style.
- ◆ New or untried design approaches that have no historical basis in Alexandria or that are not consistent with the scale, massing and detailing of an historic style are not appropriate.
- ◆ Traditional fenestration patterns and solid/void relationships must be used on all facades visible from any public right of way, including the first floor.
- ◆ An applicant for a special use permit for an increase in density must bear the burden of proving that the proposed building/addition clearly benefits the historic nature and pedestrian-friendly environment of Washington Street.