

1934-1945 Green Vista

Significant redesign and construction characterized the National Mall and Union Square in the 1934-1945 period. This long awaited redesign, under constant urging of the Commission of Fine Arts (CFA), was guided by Frederick Law Olmsted Jr. and the National Capital Park and Planning Commission (NCCPPC) and was based on the McMillan Commission concept of 1901. The layout outline for this era (page 16) presents the as-built National Mall and Union Square in 1936 and 1940, respectively. The key source displayed for the 1934-1945 period is a 1936 planimetric aerial for the National Mall joined with a 1940 aerial for Union Square (page 16).

In the early 1930s, the terrain of the National Mall was varied and naturalistic with a general slope from south to north, toward the former Tiber Creek. Considerable ground disturbance was required to provide the desired, nearly level, appearance, as the existing naturalistic park topography was varied. The new grading of the National Mall was shaped with cutting and filling to achieve gradual and continuous grades of 1% to 2% slope that formed a wide, level plateau. The one exception was at the 14th Street frontage where a steeper, greater than 5% grade slope was shaped to face the Washington Monument. Central lawn panels with American elm tree panels to both sides were framed by four parallel drives and curbs with radius corners and edged by sidewalks extending the length of the National Mall. This simple, bold configuration provided a framed, green vista over the *topis verts* between the Capitol and the Washington Monument. This continuous repetitive pattern, between 3rd and 14th Streets, was composed of the eight lawn and sixteen parallel tree panels, traversed by seven slightly depressed cross drives. Depressing these drives heightened the presence of the green turf panels and made the drives visually recessive. These turf and tree panels aligned to city surround but were visually equal, ranging from 507 to 611 feet in length.

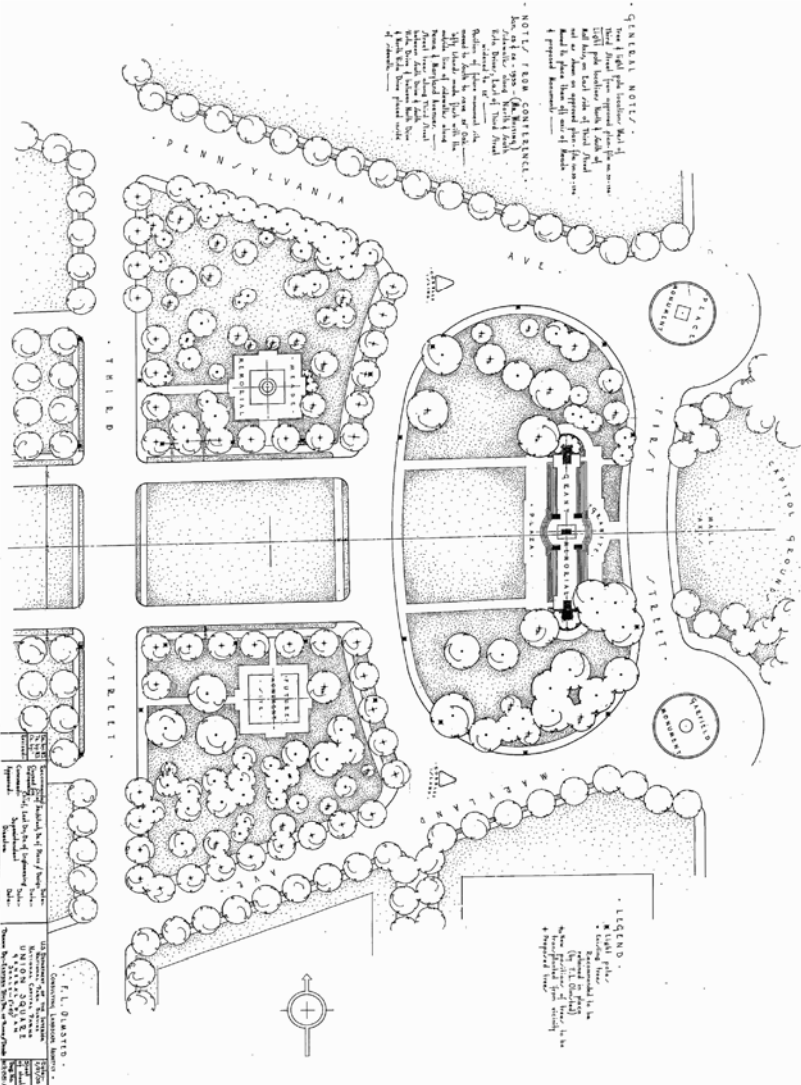
In addition to the overall grading, targeted grade disturbance was affected with the building of the inner drives and sidewalks, placement of lighting and electric supply, and adding signs, benches and other small scale elements. J. W. Gosling, of General Electric laboratories designed the Olmsted light, in a late Art Deco style. Lighting aligned with the elm trees on 100-foot spacing was installed in 1936 with excavation for below grade wiring.

Olmsted Jr. served as the landscape architect to prepare the general design for Union Square. He concluded that the additions to the area necessitated revisions to the McMillan scheme to espouse a more unified and integrated design. Rather than revise the curving western boundary of the Capitol Grounds, Olmsted Jr. developed Union Square as a formal public space with clear geometries relating to both the linear National Mall and the curving Capitol Grounds. His design pursued greater continuity between the adjoining landscapes by retaining trees in this transitional zone, thereby creating a defined space and reinforcing the continuous vista. The February 1935 Union Square General Plan (page 17) records this design approach.

Under Olmsted Jr. in coordination with the NCCPC, the drives through the National Mall, known as the Inner Drives or National Mall Vista Drives, were extended across 3rd Street into Union Square; 1st and 2nd Streets curved around a lima bean-shaped zone for the Grant Memorial. A component of this plan proposed removal of the angled Missouri and Maine Avenues at the east end of the National Mall at 3rd Street, adjacent to Union Square. The removal of these two streets realigned the eastern geometry of both Union Square and the National Mall. Within the bean-shaped precinct, east-west walks positioned west of the Grant Memorial extended on line with the Inner Drives, flanking a central grass panel. A walk was also positioned around the periphery of the bean-shaped area. Across 3rd Street from the Grant Memorial landscape, the western half of the Union Square was divided into three sections by the extension of the two Inner Drives to 2nd Street. Construction drawings for Union Square were mostly prepared by the National Capital Parks Branch of Engineering, and the Bureau of Public Roads oversaw road construction. New roads were nearly complete by November 1935. Tree moving for Union Square was complete by October or November 1935, and new planting took place in 1936, all of which is documented as constructed on the 1940 aerial photograph of Union Square (page 16).

The redesigned, axial, formal National Mall was substantially completed by 1936. A total of 333 American elms were planted in the tree panels in four regular rows in June, July, and August 1935. The remaining National Mall elms were planted over time, with the final tree panels planted with elms (except for replacements) installed by 1975. The trees on the National Mall were arranged in formal rows four deep, as indicated in the McMillan Plan. The lawn panels were seeded in March 1936, and the four National Mall roads were complete. In 1935, concrete sidewalks were built along the outer edges of the Inner Drives. Though most of the World War I-era "Tempos" were demolished after the war, several remained on the National Mall throughout this period and were subsequently removed. The combined composition of Union Square and the National Mall redefined the American commons as a monumental space connecting the principal elements of the core of Washington DC.

The context of changes around the National Mall and Union Square also transformed during the 1934-1945 period. In 1937, a large conservatory was erected at the new Botanic Garden site immediately south of Union Square. The National Gallery of Art was built between 4th and 7th Streets north of the northern Outer Drive. These construction efforts during this period contributed to an increasingly continuous composition of important public architecture along the National Mall and Union Square.



1935 UNION SQUARE GENERAL PLAN

Source: F. L. Olmsted, Jr., "Union Square General Plan", 1935. Courtesy National Capital Region, NPS. MMP–NCR–802\_89058–UnionSq–Olmsted–1935



1937 OBLIQUE AERIAL PHOTOGRAPH

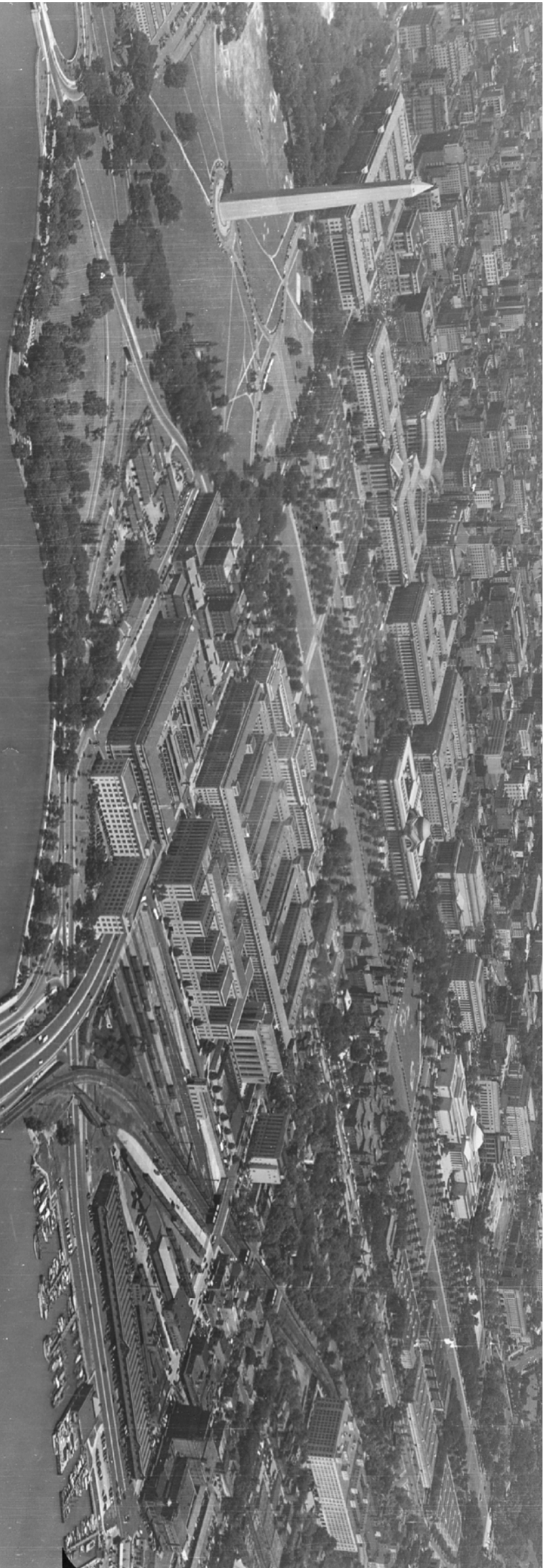
Source: National Mall Oblique Aerial, 19 December 1937. Courtesy National Archives. MMP–NAI–18–AA–151–6\_19Dec1937–Mall–detail

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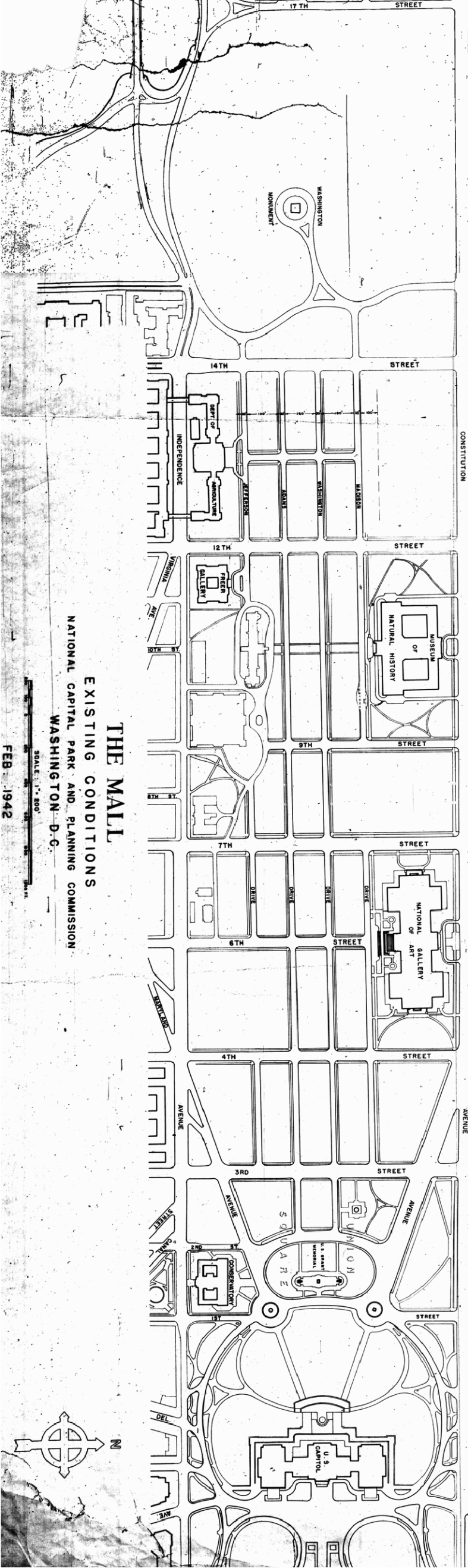






1933 OBLIQUE AERIAL PHOTOGRAPH

Source: Aerial Oblique Photograph, 1933. Courtesy National Archives.  
MMP–NAl–18–AA–146–6\_11Aug1947–Mail–detail



1942 EXISTING CONDITIONS PLAN

Source: NCPPC, “The Mall Existing Conditions”, February 1942. Courtesy National Capital Region, NPS. MMP–NCR–802\_80062–EC–1942

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